The Mythology of Plants: Botanical Lore from Ancient Greece and Rome

Annette Giesecke

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Giesecke reveals the deep roots of humans’ connection to plants and highlights the Roman and Greek belief that all life, from people to poppies, contains the divine.

Why does myrrh weep a sweet-smelling sap? According to classical myth, a crying daughter asked the gods to turn her into a tree after regretting sneaking into her father’s bed. Classics professor Annette Giesecke artfully reveals the legendary lust, blood, and vengeance behind such common greenery in The Mythology of Plants: Botanical Lore from Ancient Greece and Rome.

The book might have been an unwieldy encyclopedic catalog of the many flora that appear in mythology, yet Giesecke focuses on plants featured prominently in Metamorphoses, Ovid’s epic poem that is considered the primary source of Greek and Roman mythology. Giesecke should be commended for her restraint in scope. By using a single text and discussing only those plants that play a central role in the gods’ and mortals’ blinding lust, greed, and vengeance, she is to able to devote ample coverage to each flower, shrub, and fruit.

The chapters are thoughtfully grouped by theme—gods in love, hubris and human excess, piety and devotion, and humans in love—and then by plant. For each, Giesecke pulls from botany, ancient medicine, and classical literature to introduce the plant’s physical properties and medical uses. She then provides an original translation of Ovid’s Latin text to present just how the plant played a role in classical mythology.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, readers learn not only that, for example, black mulberry juice was used for everything from snakebites to rogue, but that the berries are fabled to get their color from the blood spilled when love-struck Pyramus fatally stabs himself after mistakenly believing his lover, Thisbe, to be dead.

After providing substantial profiles of eleven plants, Giesecke gives brief attention to over a dozen additional plants and fungi in the book’s final section, “A Guided Walk through Ovid’s Garden.” For instance, she writes that lilies often appear in myths involving rape and abduction because their short-lived blossoms were associated with the impermanence of virginity.

Adding to Giesecke’s smart research and translations are beautiful images such as rich botanical illustrations, Greek painted vases, Pompeian gardens, Roman frescoes, and European paintings. To further orient the reader with such historical material, Giesecke provides a map of the ancient Mediterranean region and a lengthy glossary of key names and places. While her early chapter on the layout of Roman gardens will entice only the most devout fans of gardening or ancient culture, The Mythology of Plants as a whole will delight a variety of readers.

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