

Comment

The Myth of the Mandrake, the ‘Plant–Human’

Thierry Zarcone

There is no plant that embodies the encounter between humans and plants better than the mandrake, whose myth, as Arlette Bouloumié writes, ‘has the cosmic sense of a profound correlation between nature and humanity and the possibility of their merging’.¹ The plant, which was already known to doctors in antiquity and ancient China for its narcotic and anaesthetic qualities, had the reputation among magicians and sorcerers of arousing love due to its aphrodisiac characteristics and of curing sterility in women. Its origin is biblical: Lea, Jacob’s wife, is cured of her barrenness thanks to the mandrake’s qualities (Genesis 30, 14). However, the mandrake’s magical nature comes chiefly from the shape of its root, which vaguely resembles the human body: it has two ‘legs’ and its rootlets are reminiscent of hairs. This explains why, among the many names given to it throughout history and in various parts of the world, all of them normally refer either to love or to its human shape.²

Here it is the plant’s ‘human’ character that interests us. The Greeks used to call it *anthropomorphos* or *mandragoras*, but the origin of the latter word remains obscure. In his *Dictionnaire étymologique des noms grecs de plantes*,³ Albert Camoy takes the view that *mandragoras* is adapted from a foreign word and is related to the similarity to its Persian equivalent *mardum-giyah* (plant–man),⁴ which he thinks could be a version of the old Persian (Avesta) *gayo mertân*, the name of the first man. Berthold Laufer asks an even more pointed question: might it be possible that the Sanskrit word *mandâraka* – which denotes a member of the *Solanaceae* family like the mandrake – and the Greco-Latin *mandragora(s)* were related in the distant past and come from a common root?⁵

The hybridization of human and plant in the mandrake is thus an ancient theme that became widespread in Judeo-Christian and Muslim cultures, both influenced by Greco-Latin civilization. The Arabs in particular, who we know played an important

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part in transmitting Greek scholarship to medieval Europe, left manuscripts in which are described the mandrake's properties and even the ritual for gathering it. For instance, we find in the *Wonders of creation (Ajâ'ib al-makhlûqât)* by the Persian geographer Zakariya al-Qazvîni (13th century) an engraving showing a man in a turban pulling up mandrake assisted by a dog, just as age-old tradition advises; the plants appear as bushes on legs. The action seems to be taking place in the Ferghana valley in central Asia bordering on China.⁶ And so Muslim Persians and Turks carried the legend of the mandrake to the Asian interior. Called 'plant-man' (*mardum-giyah*) among the former, it was given the same name by the latter, who used a Turkic-Arabic composite word: *adamotu* or *insanotu* (*insan* or *adam* = man; *ot* = plant). As for the Turkic-speaking people of China, the Uighurs, they put together an Arabic-Persian composite: *adâm-giyah* (*adam* = man; *giyah* = plant). None of these peoples was unaware of the magical traditions associated with the plant and they shared with Christians Greek knowledge about it. In addition this Greek knowledge was not unknown to the Chinese, who had read it in the 13th century among Muslims and had borrowed the plant's Arabic name, *yabrûh*, as *ya-pu-lu*,⁷ but without confusing it with their famous *ginseng*.

According to legends and traditions continued in the countryside, which have in fact been constantly elaborated over the centuries, the mandrake does not only look human: it can moan, scream, sob, speak and sing as well. Magicians and sorcerers even knew how to perfect its human form and make it look like a 'little person' (*homunculus*). Literature, and especially romanticism (Théophile Gautier, Ludwig Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Achim von Arnim, Charles Nodier), found in the plant a literary theme out of the ordinary, which made them question the connections between humans and nature. In our times Michel Tournier, in his *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967), makes the mandrake a stage in the process of his Robinson's dehumanization that brings him closer to the plant kingdom.⁸ And quite recently the cinema has contributed to the revival of the plant-man myth by showing the sorcerer's apprentices, in the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (based on the book by J. K. Rowling), being initiated into pulling up mandrakes and learning to protect themselves against their deadly screams. Is the myth of the plant-man, which had been forgotten, re-emerging in new forms?

The text extracts assembled below are classified under three headings:⁹ (1) ancient documents in which legend and scholarship are mixed in varying degrees; (2) contemporary scholarly studies; (3) literary texts.¹⁰

Thierry Zarcone

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Sources

Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* [AD 78], Book VII, trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1928, p. 557–9.

In the ravine which encloses the town [Machaerus] on the north, there is a place called Baaras, which produces a root bearing the same name. Flame-coloured and towards evening emitting a brilliant light, it eludes the grasp of persons who approach with the intention of picking it, as it shrinks up and can only be made to stand still by pouring upon it certain secretions of the human body. Yet even to touch it is fatal, unless one succeeds in carrying off the root itself, suspended from the hand. Another innocuous mode of capturing it is as follows. They dig all round it, leaving but a minute portion of the root covered; they then tie a dog to it, and the animal rushing to follow the person who tied him easily pulls it up, but instantly dies – a vicarious victim, as it were, for him who intended to remove the plant, since after this none need fear to handle it. With all these attendant risks, it possesses one virtue for which it is prized; for the so-called demons – in other words, the spirits of wicked men which enter the living and kill them unless aid is forthcoming – are promptly expelled by this root, if merely applied to the patients.

Il giardino magico degli alchimisti. Un erbario illustrato trecentesco della Biblioteca Universitaria di Pavia e la sua tradizione [The Alchemists' Magic Garden. An Illuminated 14th-Century Herbarium from Pavia University Library and Its Tradition], edited and commented by Vera Segre Rutz (2000), Milan, Il Polifilo

To heal wounds without ointment take some of the plant's leaves and crush them. After they have been applied to the wounds for three or four hours any wound will heal. Similarly, if a woman cannot conceive, take this mandrake and give her some of its young shoots to eat with salt as if it was a root. After eating this she should lie with her husband three times: she will get pregnant by virtue of this plant if it is gathered on the third day of the May moon. It should be dug up with the help of a dog or other animal, or in some other way, taking care not to touch it as it is pulled up. You have nothing to fear if you see the hands and feet, but use a dog at once, tying it to the mandrake's foot, and stand far off so as not to hear the mandrake's scream which will burst forth so loud that the dog will die straightaway.

The mythography relating to the mandrake is extremely extensive and has been the subject of various monographs and many articles.¹¹

The text devoted to it by our herbarium is relatively succinct, both on the properties attributed to the mandrake or on the gathering ritual. The manuscript from the Fermo municipal library describes another more specific characteristic but using a new vocabulary compared with the preceding text, which enables us to identify the latter as an addition to the original core also given by other codices.

Dioscorides distinguishes two types of mandrake (male and female) but attributes the same virtues to them: anti-insomnia, to reduce sensitivity to pain and send

people to sleep during medical procedures. The mandrake's juice is also alleged to have anti-inflammatory properties for the eyes and to regulate the menstrual cycle. Dioscorides does not mention the ritual for gathering the mandrake, while the older representation of the dog sacrificed to gather the mandrake can be found at the start of the codex of Dioscorides of Anicia Juliana (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. Gr I). Buberl's research has established that this image comes from the Krateuas illuminated herbarium.¹² Then the herbarium by Pseudo-Apuleius is thought to have spread the legend of gathering the mandrake by tying it to a dog's neck.¹³

In the tradition of the alchemist's herbarium the plant's aerial parts are illustrated by an effective synthesis of the natural appearance of the leaves and berries. The representation of a man's body for the roots is drawn with a pen and lightly shaded in with watercolour. The figure of the dog tied to the foot of the humanized root is very lifelike and well shown in codex A. On to this tradition there is grafted the image of the master kneeling and stopping his ears so as not to hear the mandrake's fatal screech, and also wearing hose, a tunic and a hat whose matching colours vary according to the different codices. Beside the figure we see a pick placed on the ground, a unique and exceptional image in the whole series. It is interesting to note that the iconography of the person does not match the many variants given by the iconographic traditions of the Dioscorides or Pseudo-Apuleius herbariums, where the dramatic scene is often enriched with drawings of *rhizotomoi* and has an illustrious forebear in Rabanus Maurus' Codex 132 (Monte Cassino), written in the time of the priest Theobald (1022–35). This image is also reproduced in the Redi 135 manuscript in the Mediceo-Laurenziana Library, whose points of contact with the traditions of the alchemist's herbarium have already been indicated.

The hermetic tradition sees the mandrake as a magical plant of the zodiac associated with the sign Cancer.¹⁴

The mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum* L.) is a plant from the family *Solanaceae* whose roots are rich in alkaloids; allopathic medicine considers it to be dangerous rather than beneficial; however, homeopathy exploits its narcotic and analgesic properties.¹⁵

This text based on the Thackeray translation

Laurens Catelan, *Rare et curieux discours de la plante appelée Mandragore; de ses espèces, vertus et usage. Et particulièrement de celle qui produit une racine, représentant de figure, le corps d'un homme; qu'aucuns croient celle que Iosephe appelle Baaras; et d'autres, les Teraphins de Laban, en l'Ecriture sainte* [Rare and Curious Discourse on the Plant Called Mandrake; Its Species, Virtues and Use. And Especially the One that Produces a Root Representing an Image of a Human Body, Which Some Think Is the One Josephus Salls Baaras; and Others the Teraphins of Laban, in Holy Scripture], Paris, 1638

[The mandrake], which has its root so cleverly shaped, resembling the human figure, and a man's rather than a woman's because, apart from all the parts of the body that are common to both sexes, the particular circumstance can be noted that, at the point where the chin is and at the base of the nose close to the nostrils, there are strong little threads similar to beard and moustache hair, *mandragora radicem habet, qua tenet similitudinem formae hominis*, which encouraged Columella, following Pitagoras, to call the plant *antropomorphos*, that is, *hominis imago*, hence the Germans took it into their heads to say that the name Mandrake was taken from their language, that is, from *man* meaning man and *dragen* meaning to bear, to say *figuram hominis gerens*, representing or bearing a man's shape.

According to some, the plant does not come about via transplanting or seeds like other plants but in a very strange way and from unusual origins. That is, from the sperm of men hanged on the gibbet or crushed on the wheel, as Daleschamps in his great herbarium, following *Leuinus Lemnins*, reports, which liquefies and runs with the fat, falling drop by drop on to the earth (which probably, because of the frequency of hangings, must be fat and rich like that in a graveyard) and so produces the mandrake plant, a man's sperm doing the job and having the effect, in this encounter, of a seed to produce the plant: *semen et seminatum producit sibi simile*; which could not happen, I think, from a woman's body, even if she was strung up or crushed, because the female sperm cannot be prolific on its own like the male. . .

Scholarly research

A. Delatte, *Herbarius. Recherches sur le cérémonial usité chez les anciens pour la cueillette des simples et des plantes magiques* [Research on the Ceremonial Used by Our Ancestors for Gathering Simple and Magical Plants], Paris, Librairie E. Droz, 1938

As early as late antiquity people pulled up the mandrake using a dog. The mandrake is a magical plant whose devilish nature has grown progressively.¹⁶ And we know it was thought to have a human form: one of its Greek names is *anthropomorphos* and Columella calls it *semihomo*. People also say that it shines at night like a lantern, that it makes off when the herbalist approaches and that it is necessary to 'surround' it to stop it. The ritual for pulling it up is described by interpolations in Pseudo-Apuleius (131). As soon as the root has been revealed using an ivory spade and the mandrake's 'feet' and 'hands' have appeared, a new rope is tied around it; this is attached to a hungry dog, who pulls the plant up. But its 'divinity' is such that immediately the dog

falls down dead. To avoid this disastrous event another stratagem may be devised. When the plant is exposed it is tied to the end of a pole stuck in the earth some way off and bent towards the ground. By righting itself the pole pulls out the plant without doing any damage. In the last century these two methods of pulling were still in use in Italy¹⁷ and folklorists have observed the second in various Germanic countries. The belief is also recorded that the plant lets out a terrifying scream just as it is being pulled up, and that the dog dies hearing it.¹⁸ The herbalist escapes the same fate by blocking his ears with wax or pitch or by going very far away.

Arlette Bouloumié, 'Deux thèmes chers au romantisme allemand: la mandragore et la harpe éolienne dans *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* de Michel Tournier' [Two Themes Dear to German Romanticism: the Mandrake and the Aeolian Harp in Michel Tournier's *Friday*], in *Recherches sur l'imaginaire*, Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 17, 1987

Mircea Eliade, who wrote an article on 'The mandrake and myths of miraculous birth', indicates in fact that it was often the blood or sperm of a god or primeval giant who died violently that, according to legends, brought about the appearance of mandrakes. He quotes the myth of Gajomard, the primal Iranian man who can be compared to Adam and was killed by the spirits of evil: 'when he died, a drop of sperm dropped from his groin, fell into the earth and remained there for 40 years before giving rise to a plant *rivâs*, which in turn became a human couple.'¹⁹

The mandrake follows in the tradition of all the myths that mention the birth of humans from the earth at the beginning of time.

...

The mandrake . . . is thus a myth that seems to retain the memory of the powers of the earth, at the dawn of time, to create human beings directly when pagan gods or great ancestors fertilized it. Then distinction was not made between people, animals and plants.

...

It was German romanticism, copied by French romanticism, which turned the mandrake of the occultists into a literary theme.

...

German romanticism gave it the persuasive force of a poetic myth. In Ludwig Tieck's *Runenberg*, young Christian, alone and full of melancholy in the twilight forest, 'pulls from the earth a root whose head was flush with the ground and suddenly heard, to his great terror, a low moan that spread through the earth in plaintive sounds and died away in the distance'. The danger courted by someone who incautiously pulls up the mandrake is evoked. And we might think that all the hero's misfortunes start there. But it is the whole earth, like an obscure and sensitive organism, that is complaining. An underlying cosmicity is expressed in this image and also in Michel Tournier's text *Friday*, where the earth appears as living, like flesh. Tieck thinks he hears the voice of nature: 'the accents of that plant affected him to the bottom of his heart and gripped him as if it had touched the wound from which the failing body of nature was going to die in pain.'²⁰

Though Hoffmann describes in humorous mode, in *Little Zaches, surnamed Zinnobe*,²¹ a little root-man scarcely two hands tall, with little legs as thin as a divining rod and looking like a large split radish, and though he reuses the theme in *The Golden Pot*, whose hero Daucus Carota the First is, as his name indicates, a root who wants to take on human form, it is above all Arnim, in *Isabella of Egypt*, who gives the mandrake back all the dramatic prestige burnishing its legend, to which Tournier's text briefly alludes. The father of Isabelle [Bella], the gipsies' spiritual leader, is hanged for a theft he did not commit. To save her people from the persecution they are suffering, his daughter uses magic recipes from her father's old books of magic. She goes to gather mandrake – which has the power to make all wishes come true for the person who owns it – at the foot of the gibbet, where the hanged man shed 'bitter tears onto the ground at the thought that he, the last male heir of his noble house, had to be so shamefully and innocently killed'.²² The words here are the euphemistic form of the sperm of the hanged man, who, as we note, is innocent like Christ. Bella has to take all sorts of precautions so that the scream of the root as it is pulled does not kill her. So it is her black dog that is sacrificed. Then Bella acts like a mother to the incomplete little being. She raises like a child the creature who is soon called Cornelius Mepos and, given his talent for discovering treasure, becomes finance minister to Charles V, then his damned soul.

None of the texts from French romanticism about the mandrake has the symbolic depth of Arnim's and Tieck's, be it Nodier's *La Fée aux miettes*²³ or Théophile Gautier's *Le Club des hachichins*.²⁴ Nodier strips the mandrake of its devilish horror and retains only an image of perfection. Here the plant is linked to the quest for immortality. The hero Michel is a young carpenter thirsting for the absolute, who asks the mandrake for salvation. His initiation quest takes him to a more elevated level than the human in the hierarchy of beings. But as Michel is detained in a lunatic asylum we might imagine that, in Nodier's view, the plant helps lunatics to pursue their illusory projects without anguish. Under the effect of hashish, in Gautier's tale, Daucus Caroto appears with his demoniac energy and legs the shape of mandrake roots.

The mandrake is a kind of plant monster, just as the innocents of *Gemini* [*Les Météores*] – the 'child siren' or the 'child cyclops'²⁵ cared for at Sainte-Brigitte – are monsters, survivors from the primeval teething stages. In Michel Tournier's pantheon it is, like them, a hybrid, the realization of a presumed primal moment, a fossil plant, associated with the memory of the earthly paradise. Just as the simple creatures from *Gemini* are called innocents, the plant that is diabolic only because fallen humans have abused its powers and whose scream in fact expresses nothing but their guilty feelings, is returned here to its original innocence in an Eden-like climate.

The mandrake motif in *Friday* thus underlines the mythological orientation of Michel Tournier's imagination. He updates humanity's ancient forgotten dreams. German romanticism confirmed and encouraged him in that search. The mandrake myth was developed in particular by Germanic literature, which more than any other has the cosmic sense of a profound correlation between nature and humanity and the possibility of their merging.

Ali Haydar Bayat, 'Mandragora [Adamotu]' [The Mandrake, or the Plant-man], II. *Lokman Hekim ve Tıp Tarihi ve Folkorik Tıp Günleri*, Tarsus, 2001

In the Muslim world

The mandrake was the one of the plants used in Muslim medicine following the translation into Arabic of Greek books on medicine. It is known by the name *yabrûh*, a word of Syriac origin, and *sirâj al-kutrub*; its fruits are called *luffâh*. In Damascus and its surrounding area the mandrake root is known by the name *lu'be* and its fruits as *tuffâh al-jin*, *tuffâh al-majanîn*. The Persians call it *mîhr-giyâ* / *mîhr-giyâh*, meaning 'love plant'. According to Ibn Sinâ's (Avicenna's)²⁶ *al-Kânûn fi'l-Tib*, it is called *yabrûh* 'because its root resembles a man . . . it arouses the feeling of love; it is an aphrodisiac . . . There are two species; one, thought of as female, the *riyûkus*, is black in colour . . . The other, thought of as male, is called *mûriyûn* . . . Shepherds use it to bring sleep.' According to Birûni's²⁷ *Kitâb al-Saydana*, the mandrake is called *yebrûjâ* in Syriac and *sâbizej* or *seyh-sîbek* in Persian. Its fruit is called *luffâh*. In the book by Hamzah – *Kitâb al-Vazânah* – we note that it has the name *yamru* and that its root is called *luffâh*. If you cut it in two, one of the parts resembles a woman and the other a man. That is why it has a name that refers to its male and female forms: *yamru* = *yam* (form) + *rû* (face).

In Turkish medicine

In Turkish books on medicine since Hekim Berke/Bereke (12th century) the mandrake appears with the names *yebrûh*, *lüffâh*, *yebrûhu's-sanem*, *lüffâh-i berri*, *abdüsselâm*, *ebîselâm*, *cinelmasî*. On the other hand it also has the name *sigîn* in the *Divânî Lûgâtî't-Türk* (I/409–23),²⁸ and in local languages the names *hacîlarotu* [pilgrims' plant], *sevgiotu* [love plant], *adamotu* [plant-man], *hüngürük kökü* [sobbing root], *at elmasî* [horse apple], *insanotu* [plant-man], *kankurutan* [that protects the blood], *köpek-elmasî* [dog apple], *köpektashagi* [dog's testicle], *toska-fakavunu*, *yer-elmasî* [earth apple], *yer yenidünyasi* [new world of the earth], *sheytan shalgamî* [Satan's turnip].²⁹ The Turks from Cyprus give it the names *beshtamar otu* [five-veined plant], *hastalik otu* [sickness plant], *kortongolo*, *bendavleo*.³⁰

Berthold Laufer, 'La Mandragore', *Toung Pao*, 2nd series, Paris, 1917

Chou Mi (1230–1320), a famous writer from the late Song, passed down to us a most curious tradition in his works *Kwei sin tsa shi* and *Chi ya t'an tsa ch'ao*.

Neither text seems to be in perfect condition, but the *Kwei sin tsa shi* (A) is certainly the better and more complete. It is the basis for the translation below, while the discrepancies in the writing of the *Chi ya t'an tsa ch'ao* (B) are added between square brackets.

A few thousand *li* to the west of the Mohammedan countries the ground produces an extremely poisonous thing that is overall similar to the figure of a man; indeed it has the appearance of the ginseng. People call it *ya-pu-lu* (*ya-pou-lou*). The plant grows in the earth to a depth of several yards. If someone stumbles against the plant accidentally they will receive its poisonous emission and must die. [B. When it is bruised its skin shines; the poison from the emission penetrates the person who dies immediately.] This is the method for gathering the plant. First on all four sides (round the root) a hole is dug large enough to take a man . . . Then the plant is tied with a leather strap whose end is attached to the paws of a big dog . . . With a stick the dog is hit and chased and it runs off dragging the root with it. Overcome by the emission of poison the dog perishes at once.

The plant described by Chou Mi can be identified without difficulty with the mandrake on the basis of the transcription *ya-pu-lu*, which corresponds exactly with the Arabic-Persian *abruh* or *yabrûh*, the name for the fruit of the plant. The plant itself is called in Arabic *toff'âh-el-jenn* [apple of the spirits] or *sirâj el-kotrob* [elves' lamp], also *la'ba* and *beid al-jinn* [egg of the spirits]. In Aramaic the fruit is called *yawruha*; and the form *jerabûh* is usual in Syria. This Semitic name seems to be relatively ancient: at least we find in Dioscorides a so-called Egyptian word with the form *apemoum*, which seems to be related to the Arabic *abruh*: maybe this word should be corrected to *aperoum*.

...

We have seen that Chou Mi compared the mandrake to ginseng (*panax ginseng*), the famous panacea from his country. And the new Oxford English Dictionary records the term 'Chinese mandragoras' in the sense of ginseng, while the Steingass Persian-English dictionary gives this definition for the expression *mardum-giyâ*: 'a plant, the produce of China, said to resemble a man and woman, and to which many wonderful effects are attributed; mandrake, colocynth.' In this way the Persian word designates the mandrake as well as the ginseng of Chinese origin.

...

Like the mandrake, the ginseng is anthropomorphized and gifted with language by the Chinese. The ancient book *Pie Lu* says that its root is like the figure of a man and has divine qualities; and the *Wu pu p'en ts'ao*, written in the 3rd century, attributes to the root hands, feet and eyes, just like a person and classifies it among spiritual things. Then the ginseng is able to scream. The most ancient document I know in this regard is contained in the Annals of the Sui dynasty, where we read:

There was a man in Shan-tan behind whose house a man's voice could be heard every night. People looked for him without finding him. Going a *li* from the house, all they could see was a ginseng plant with branches and leaves that were tall and well developed. They pulled it up and found that the root was more than five feet long and that the whole of its shape imitated a man's body. From that moment the cries ceased.

...

When these coincidences are noted, the similarities between the traditions of the mandrake and the ginseng are exhausted, and the differences, on the other hand, are more numerous and fundamental. The ginseng is not a poisonous plant, it restores life and never causes death like the mandrake. It is not dangerous or fatal to gather

ginseng, which has not become the subject of magic. Its cry appears to be a logical development of its anthropomorphic nature and furthermore does not send a person to the grave. Indeed the Chinese have not borrowed any of that from western peoples; a theory like that would come right up against chronology. The ginseng's anthropomorphism and ability to speak are older in China than similar ideas about the mandrake in the west; and it appears that knowledge of the mandrake did not reach China before the Song period. But if it is true that the ginseng was traded from China to Persia, the question arises as to whether the mandrake's scream, which began in the Middle Ages, is not the direct result of Chinese tales about the ginseng.

In literature

Charles Nodier, *La Fée aux Miettes*, 1832, reprinted Paris, Garnier Flammarion

I was thinking about this while sizing up a large plot of mandrake that had been almost completely cut down to the root by human hands and on which all the mandrake were lying withered and dead with no one having taken the trouble to collect them up. I doubt whether there is anywhere in the world where more mandrakes can be seen. As I suddenly recalled that the mandrake was a powerful narcotic able to dull the pain of the wretched people who vegetate beneath those walls, I pulled one up from the part of the plot that was so far untouched and exclaimed, as I studied it closely: 'Tell me, powerful solanacea, miraculous sister of the belladonnas, tell me by what privilege you make up for the powerlessness of people's moral education and political philosophy by bringing suffering souls an oblivion sweeter than sleep and almost as impassive as death. . .'

'Did it answer you?' . . . asked a young man who stood up by my feet. 'Did it speak? Did it sing? Oh, I beg you, sir, tell me if it sang the mandrake's song:

*'it is I, it is I, it is I!
I am the mandrake
the daughter of summer days waking at dawn,
and singing for you!'*

'It has no voice,' I replied with a sigh, 'like all the mandrakes I have gathered in my life . . .'

'Then,' he went on receiving it from my hand and letting it fall to the ground, 'it is not yet the one!' While he remained plunged in painful thought seized by regret, inexplicable to you and me, at not yet having found a mandrake that sang, I took the time to look carefully at him, and I felt the interest grow and grow which his tenderly accented tone of voice and the innocent, naïve nature of his alienation had first aroused in me.

. . .
'Ah! Could it be true, Michel, that I forgot to tell you its name? It is the singing mandrake!'

'The singing mandrake! You say so. Do you think, Crumb Fairy, that there are mandrakes that sing other than in the crazy ballads of schoolchildren and Granville workmen?'

'Just one, my dear Michel, only one, and its story, which I will tell you one day, is one of the loveliest in the east, because it can be read in one of the secret books of Solomon. That is the one we must find.'

'Never-ending goodness of heaven!' I exclaimed, 'please help me in this lamentable extremity! How can we find in six months the singing mandrake of which the Crumb Fairy said just now she did not know where God's wisdom had placed it, and which has been sought in vain since Solomon's reign?'

'Do not take fright at that difficulty. The singing mandrake will appear of its own accord to the hand made to gather it, and if you reach the last moment of your generous exile without success, and the last ray of St Michael's sun is about to expire into the dusk on the most distant horizon of the world that your journeying takes you to, as far as the polar ice where a flower has never opened to the heavens' brightness, the singing mandrake will bloom fresh and crimson beneath your fingers.'

...

Before the immense advances achieved in our times by philosophical and rational medicine, it was thought that the mandrake formed plaintive cries when it was pulled from the earth, and that is why those who attempted that perilous operation were advised to stop their ears carefully so as not to be moved; which would seem to indicate the truth that those cries appeared to be modulated in accordance with the rules of harmony.

Achim von Arnim, *Isabella of Egypt, Emperor Charles V's First Love*, in Achim von Arnim, Freiherr von, *The Novellas of 1812: Isabella of Egypt, Melück Maria Blainville, The Three Loving Sisters and the Lucky Dyer, Angelika the Genoese and Cosmus the Tightrope-Walker*, trans. Bruce Duncan, Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen Press, 1997

So one week passed into the next, until one night she came, exhausted, upon a lengthy description of how to obtain mandrake roots and how they could, with thieving, unerring cunning, lead one to money or anything else that a profane heart might desire. With what difficulty were they to be obtained! – yet this was the easiest of all forms of witchcraft. Sorcery requires the strictest discipline of all. Whoever masters it can, without resorting to secrets, appear to use magic in the most ordinary of activities. Is there anyone today who does not know the conditions required for obtaining a mandrake root, yet is there anyone who would still like to submit to them, who could fulfill them? A girl is required who loves with her whole soul, without the carnal desires of her sex, for whom her beloved's mere proximity suffices: a primary, essential condition, perhaps for the first time truly realized in the person of Bella, because all the Gypsies she had met until now had treated her like a higher being, and she recognized herself as such. The apparition of the prince had been so sacredly pure, like the monstrance at mass, and had passed by too quickly to awaken her desires. In such a girl, whose sails billow with the powerful winds of imagination, must also dwell the more-than-manly courage to go with a black dog to

the gallows in the eleventh hour, where an innocently hanged man has shed tears upon the grass. There she must carefully stuff her ears with cotton and search with her hands until she finds the root and then – in spite of all the cries of the root, which is in no way natural, for it is the child of the hanged man’s innocent tears – lay bare its head, lay a noose of her own hair around it, hitch that up to the black dog, and then run away, so that the dog, in its desire to follow her, will pull the root from the ground, and, in so doing, will inevitably be struck down in a flashing convulsion of the earth. Whoever at this moment – the most crucial one – has not properly stuffed her ears can be driven mad on the spot by the screaming.

...

She would have forgotten everything at the sight, even the dry bodies of the hanged men swaying above her, who seemed to bump together questioningly, had not the black dog begun to dig on his own under the tripod. She felt what he had found and held in her hands a small human figure, which, however, still had both legs rooted in the ground. This was it, the secret Mandragora, the mandrake. She had located it without difficulty, and in a flash she laid the noose of her hair around it and next harnessed it to the black dog’s neck. Then, terrified by the root’s screams, she ran off. She had forgotten to stop up her ears and ran now as fast as she could, with the dog after her; he tore the root from the ground, and a horrifying thunderbolt knocked him and Bella down. But her sure, fleet running had carried her fifty paces beyond him.

That had saved Bella’s life, yet she remained unconscious for a long time. . .

...

As she awoke, she did not know how she had gotten to this place, which she no longer recognized. Weakly she sat up and in the first light of dawn saw her dead Sampson. She recognized him, gradually recalled why she had come, and, on the braided hair that she now removed from the dog, found a human-like being, a kind of flexible form from which the noble senses have not yet emerged, like the chrysalis of a butterfly: such was the mandrake, and it is nothing short of miraculous how she on the one hand thought no more about the prince, the original reason she had searched for the mandrake; on the other, how she loved the latter with the same original tenderness that had so pierced her since the night she had first seen the prince. A mother who had believed her child buried by an earthquake could not have greeted it any more lovingly, intimately, familiarly than Bella lifted the little mandrake out of the dust to her breast and cleaned off all the dirt. He seemed to perceive none of this. His breath poured out of scarcely visible openings in his head. Only after she had rocked him in her arms for some time did she recognize from the impatient jerking of his arm against her breast that he loved this movement. And his arms and legs did not grow still until she had lulled him happily back to sleep again with her rocking.

...

She went carefully to her book of magic to remind herself what one could do with this mobile, articulated root to develop its powers, its inner structure. And soon she found her answer. First of all she should wash the mandrake – that she did – and then she was supposed to sow millet on its coarse head, and then, as that grew to hair, all its other parts would develop of their own accord, except that she was

supposed to press a juniper berry onto the spot where an eye should appear and, where the mouth should be, a rose-hip.

This text based on the Duncan translation

Michel Tournier, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* [Friday], Paris, Gallimard, 1967

It took Robinson nearly a year to notice that his amorous behaviour was bringing about a change in the vegetation in the pink coomb. At first he had not paid attention to the disappearance of herbs and grasses everywhere he had spilt seed from his flesh. But his awareness was alerted by the proliferation of a new plant he had not seen anywhere else on the island. There were large serrated leaves growing in clumps at ground level on a very short stem. They produced lovely white flowers with sword-shaped petals, with a wild perfume, and lots of brown berries that hung way down from their sheath.

Robinson examined them with curiosity, then did not give them any further thought until the day when he thought he had indisputable proof that they regularly appeared in the exact spot where he had spilt his seed. Then his mind did not stop turning this mystery over and over. He buried his seed near the cave. In vain. Apparently only the coomb could produce that variety of plant. The strangeness of the plants stopped him picking them, cutting them up, tasting them, as he would have done in other circumstances. In the end he had looked for a variant to this preoccupation with no solution and a verse from the *Song of Songs*, which he had repeated thousands of times without attaching any importance to it, brought him instant illumination: 'Mandrakes will perfume the air,' the young bride promised. Was it possible that Speranza [the name of the island] was keeping that Bible promise? He had heard tell of the marvels about the solanacea that grows at the foot of the gibbet, where hanged men have spilt their last drops of seminal fluid, and which is in short the product of crossing man and earth. That day he rushed to the pink coomb and kneeling before one of the plants he very gently drew up its root by digging all round with both hands. It was true, his love union with Speranza had not been barren: without a doubt the fleshy white root, curiously forked, had the shape of a girl's body. He was trembling with emotion and tenderness as he replaced the mandrake in its hole and drew the sand around its stem, as you tuck a child up in bed. Then he stole away on tiptoe taking great care not to crush any others.

Now, with the Bible's blessing, a stronger closer bond connected him to Speranza. He had humanized the one he could henceforth call his wife in an incomparably deeper way than all the governor's projects. Of course he suspected that on the other hand for him this closer union meant a further step towards shedding his own humanity, but he only realized its extent in the morning when he woke up to discover that his beard, as it grew during the night, had started to take root in the earth.

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. 'Deux thèmes chers au romantisme allemand: la mandragore et la harpe éolienne dans *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* de Michel Tournier', in *Recherches sur l'imaginaire*, Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 17, 1987, p. 169.
2. It should be noted that in the Carpathians, where it is still very popular today, the mandrake is known only for its aphrodisiac properties, while everywhere else around the Mediterranean its character as a plant–man predominates; see Mircea Eliade (1986), *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God: Comparative Studies in the Religions and Folklore of Dacia and Eastern Europe*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, chapter 7: 'The Cult of the Mandragora in Romania'; and especially Jean Cuisenier (2000), *Mémoire des Carpathes. La Roumanie millénaire: un regard intérieur*, Paris, Plon, chapter entitled 'Détruire ou séduire par la mandragore', pp. 479–90.
3. Louvain, Publ. Unies, 1959.
4. The Persians also know it as *mīhr-gīyah*, love plant.
5. Bernard Laufer (1917), 'La Mandragore', *Toung Pao*, 2nd series, Paris, pp. 22–30.
6. We only have copies of this work; one of them, a Turkish translation dating from the 17th century, is preserved in the French National Library, Oriental Manuscript Department, Turkish Supplement no. 1063, f. 17 v.
7. Laufer, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–30.
8. Bouloumié, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
9. Here I would like to thank those who helped me put together this dossier: Arlette Bouloumié, Ali Haydar Bayat, Jean-Pierre Brach, Francis Laget, Alexandre Papas and Fayadas Steeve.
10. Only a few of the notes from the texts selected have been retained so as not to overburden the dossier.
11. There is a very rich bibliography in J. D. Roland (1990–1), 'La mandragore: le mythe d'une racine, la racine d'un mythe', *Annales des Sciences Naturelles, Botanique* II(8): 49–81.
12. P. Buberl (1936), 'Die antike Grundlagen der Miniaturen des Wiener Dioscorideskodex', in *Jahrbuch des deutschen archäologischen Institut LI*, pp. 114–36. On the iconography of the mandrake see the richly illustrated article by G. Belloni Speciale (1985), 'I cerchi della mandragora', *Kos XVI*: 17–40.
13. Pseudo-Apuleius, *Effectus herbae mandragorae XXXI*, in E. Howald and H. E. Sigerist (eds) (1927), *Antonii Musae De vettonica liber. Pseudoapulei Herbarius. Anonymi De taxone liber*, Lipsiae-Berolini, pp. 222–3.
14. A. Festugière (1950), *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste. I: L'astrologie et les sciences occultes*, Paris, p. 146.
15. See W. Schneider (1974–6), *Lexikon zur Arzneimittelgeschichte. Sachwörterbuch zur Geschichte der pharmazeutischen Botanik. Chemie, Mineralogie, Pharmakologie, Zoologie*, Frankfurt-am-Main, vol. V/2, pp. 291–3.
16. On the mandrake in the East see Ibn-el-Beithar, *Traité des simples*, trans. L. Leclerc, in *Notices et extraits des mss. de la Bibl. Nationale*, XXV, 1881, pp. 246 et seq.
17. A. De Gubernatis (1878–82), *La Mythologie des plantes ou les légendes du règne végétal*, Paris, II, p. 215, n. 1; G. Finamore (1889), 'Botanica popolare abruzzese', in *Archivio per lo studio delle trad. popol.*, VIII, p. 213. It is also thought that pulling up the mandrake can unleash a storm as if the whole of nature was moved by the crime. Apollonius of Rhodes (*Argon.*, III, 865) reports that the earth shakes and groans when Medea cuts the root of the plant born of Prometheus' blood. And nature grieves when the golden herb of Brittany is cut without observing the rituals.
18. A species of orchis also emits a plaintive cry when it is pulled according to a belief recorded in both Germany and Slovakia (Schell [1901], 'Der Volksglauben im Bergischen', in *Archiv für Religionswiss.*, IV, p. 310; Manzell, 'Knabenkräuter', *Handwörterbuch d. deutschen Aberglaubens*, IV, p. 1561).
19. In *Zalmoxis*, 1940–2, 21.
20. Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), *The Runenberg*, in H. von Kleist, L. Tieck and E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Six German Romantic Tales*, trans. Ronald Taylor, London, Angel Books, 1985.
21. Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776–1822), *Little Zaches, surnamed Zinnobe*, in *Three Märchen of E. T. A. Hoffmann* (1971), trans. Charles E. Passage, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press.
22. Achim von Arnim (1781–1831), 'Isabella of Egypt, Emperor Charles V's First Love', in *The Novellas of*

- 1812: *Isabella of Egypt, Meliuck Maria Blainville, The Three Loving Sisters and the Lucky Dyer, Angelika the Genoese and Cosmus the Tightrope-Walker*, trans. Bruce Duncan, Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.
23. Charles Nodier (1780–1844), *La Fée aux miettes*, 1882, reprinted Paris, Garnier Flammarion.
 24. Théophile Gautier (1811–72), *Le Club des hachichins* (1846), in *Contes fantastiques*, Paris, José Corti.
 25. Michel Tournier (1998), *Gemini*, trans. from the French *Les Météores* by Anne Carter, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
 26. Cairo Bulak, undated, Kahire, I, pp. 232–4; Abu Ali Ibn Sinâ, *Tib Kanunlari*, Tashkent, 1982, II, pp. 303–6.
 27. Hakim Muhammed Said (1973), *al-Birûni's Book on Pharmacy and Materia Medica*, Karachi, Hamdard National Foundation, Pakistan/Karachi, pp. 293, 340–1.
 28. Kashgarli Mahmûd (1939), *Divânî Lûgâtî't-Türk*, trans. Besim Atalay, Ankara, Türk Dil Kurumu, I, p. 409.
 29. T. Baytop (1994), *Türkçe Bitki Adlari* [Names of Plants in Turkish], Ankara, Türk Dil Kurumu, p. 21; Sheref Üsküp (1968), *Shifali Otlar ve Kuvvet Macunlari* [Medicinal Plants and Fortifying Remedies], Izmir, Hürefe Matbaası, p. 6; İlhan Yardımcı (1968), *Shifali Otlar ve Halk İlaçları* [Medicinal Plants and Popular Medicine], Istanbul, Hüsnitabat Matbaası, p. 37.
 30. Tuncer Bağışkan (1991), 'Dünyada ve Kıbrıs Halkbiliminde Sihirli Bir Ot . . . Mandragora (Beshdamar Otu)' [A Magical Plant in Worldwide and Cypriot Popular Wisdom . . . the Mandrake (Five-veined Plant)], *Halk Bilimi*, Cyprus, no. 24, p. 13.

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