

Chapter 29

Plant origins and centuries of meaning

ORIGINS AND AMENDED OPINIONS FOR THE MEANING OF THE PLANT NAME

Recent Y-DNA evidence has prompted a major reassessment of various opinions for the Plant name's meaning: a revised belief is 'offspring'. This can be understood in terms of contemporary scholasticism and popular metaphor. The late medieval philosophy of man's vegetable soul has been described in earlier Chapters, and there is contemporary evidence of a related Great Chain Metaphor; taking these together with the Y-DNA evidence, various explanations can be reduced to a focus: there was a metaphoric grounding of a human family's surname on the plant powers of reproduction and growth. The full gamut of usages of the word *plant* in early English books (c1500) can be reviewed in this light, adding further insights to the contemporary meaning. In particular, the 'offshoot' meaning of Plant can be related to a plant metaphor: generated children with the *vertu* to grow straight.

29.1 Various opinions about the Plant name's meaning

The recorded history of opinions about the Plant name's meaning begins with a startling claim – a royal connection. This nineteenth century opinion was revised variously by others in the twentieth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, recent Y-DNA evidence helps to discriminate between these opinions, making some seem less likely and modifying the detail of others. It becomes particularly informative to analyse the evidence that relates to an opined meaning, an 'illegitimate offspring'; this will form a theme for this Chapter, which will also consider some of the subtleties of meaning that were attached to the Plant name in its early history.

29.1.1 Lower's and Sleigh's nineteenth century opinion

The earliest known explanation of the Plant surname was published in 1860, when Mark Athony Lower¹ listed under the entry *Plant*:

A family in humble circumstances at Kettering, bear the ancient royal name of Plantagenet, though now it is commonly corrupted to Plant. See a late number of the "Leicester Mercury".

Around the same time, in 1862, John Sleigh² noted that '*this name [i.e. Plant] is supposed to be corrupted from Plantagenet*'. It can be seen as a staggering claim to suggest a connection between Plant and Plantagenet, and this becomes the more so with the Y-DNA evidence, which overturns a *weak* version of Lower's and Sleigh's claim: that the Plants were assorted servants who adopted an

¹Mark Anthony Lower (1860) *A Dictionary of Family Names of the United Kingdom*, published by John Russell Smith, London, and G.P.Bacon, Lewes, 1860.

²John Sleigh (1862) *A History of the Ancient Parish of Leek*, p 33.

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abbreviation of the Plantagenet title. This weak version implies various families of Plants, and this is overturned by the recent evidence which indicates that the Plants are largely a single male-line family. The Y-DNA evidence hence diverts attention towards the *strong* version of Lower's and Sleigh's claim – that Plantegenest, Plant, Plantagenet and Plantt all belong to the same male-line family.

A more careful consideration of the evidence can be outlined as follows:

The de Warenne male-line descendants of Geoffrey Plante Genest had settled near what became the principal homeland of the Plants, around Leek in north Staffordshire. It is known that the royal descendants of Geoffrey included the House of York kings, who used Plantagenet as a surname. Then, during the Tudor suppression of the Plantagenets, the surname spelling Plantt is found. To this, we can add more of the initial Y-DNA evidence: this indicates that a Plantt descendant is from the same male-line family as most of those with the surname Plant. To summarise, there is genealogical evidence for a male-line connection between Plantegenest (or Plante Genest) and Plantagenet and, separately, there is genetic evidence of a male-line connection between Plantt and Plant; and Lower's and Sleigh's claim further suggests that there is a connection between these two separate pairs of family surnames.

A vociferous reaction to the *strong* version of Lower's and Sleigh's claim – that there was male-line relatedness between Plantagenet and Plant – is typically not assuaged even when it is stressed that the Plant blazon suggests *illegitimate* descent.

29.1.2 The implications of the Y-DNA results for Weekly's various opinions

Rather less stirringly, in 1916, Ernest Weekly³ opined that the name *de la Plaunt* meant 'from the plantation', and he also considered that *Plaunt* was a nickname meaning 'variously sprig, cudgel, or young offspring'. We may consider each of these meanings in turn.

For Weekly's suggestion that *de la Plaunt* means 'from the plantation', it can be noted that the locations of plantations were widespread, and so also is the early evidence for the Plant name. Nonetheless, the recent Y-DNA evidence indicates that the Plants belonged largely to a single family, which then begs the question 'Which particular plantation were they all from?' This opinion of Weekly's leaves unanswered questions. An alternative possible interpretation of *de la Plaunt* is 'from a generative shoot (or *plante*) of an ancestral tree', which then becomes broadly a recurrence of Weekly's 'young offspring' opinion for *Plaunt*, such that *de la Plaunt* and *Plaunt* can be considered to be variants of the same meaning.

Weekly's 'young offspring' opinion will be discussed further below. It ties in closely with the opinion that has been developed, in the preceding Chapters, that the initial meaning of the Plant name was 'offspring'. To recapitulate briefly, the medieval meaning of *plante* was 'shoot' or 'offshoot'; this allowed an instance of the 'People are Plants' metaphor; the meaning 'offshoot' for vegetation can be mapped up the Great Chain of Being to produce a meaning 'offspring' for a person. Unlike others, this interpretation of Plant fits well with the latest available evidence: documentary; dictionary⁴; and, DNA.

Weekly's opinions hence include a resilient opinion: 'offspring'. His suggestions included 'young offspring', which is quite closely this opinion, and his suggestion 'sprig' is a simple variant, in that it can be a derogatory term for a young person. Such derogation might be compared with scion which, along with sprig, is another word for an offshoot of vegetation; like sprig, scion can also mean a young person though, rather than being derogatory, its typical sense is a young nobleman. It might be seen as a puritanical view to hold that derogation is more in keeping with an indication of illegitimacy for Plant, or snobbish to hold that derogation is in keeping with a presumed low class for the Plants; on the other hand, it could be held to be presumptuous to claim that a meaning 'scion' or 'young nobleman' is more appropriate.

³Ernest Weekly (1916) *Surnames*, p 185.

⁴The Oxford English Dictionary includes the meaning 'young person' for plant, though this sense is now rare.

Weekly's suggested meaning 'cudgel' is a bit different: this suggests one who wields brutal authority – this sense can be related to the fact that the shoot of a young tree could be used for beatings.

Aside from brutality and derogation, one of Weekly's opinions for *Plaunt*, together with a revision of his opinion for *de la Plaunt*, more or less coincides with the Y-DNA evidence, producing sense as an 'offspring from the ancestral tree'. The name *de la Plaunt* can be considered in analogy to a ramification of offshoots from a common root; thus, *de la Plaunt* can effectively mean 'from the Father', though this leaves a possible question, 'Which forefather?'. There is now some doubt that this alluded to God as the heavenly Father, as the Y-DNA evidence suggests that the Plants were literally the male-line offspring of a single family on earth. Even so, when we consider the vegetable soul, which the contemporary Saint Thomas Aquinas described as the 'first principal of life', there is a religious aspect to the generation and augmentation of a family's offspring; this will be enlarged upon later in this Chapter.

29.1.3 A simple rebuttal of Reaney's later opinion

In 1958, P.H. Reaney⁵ influentially declared that Plant means a 'gardener'. Reaney was particularly interested in the formal classification of surnames, and an occupational surname, such as 'gardener', is in a sense attractive: it is a common type of English surname. Even so, it is open to question why Reaney did not adhere to the Dictionary meaning 'offspring' or 'young person' for *plant*; since, in his foreward, before the 'occupational' type, he lists another surname type: 'names of relationship'. An example of the latter is a male forename compounded with –son (*e.g.* Johnson), and 'offspring' fits this 'relationship' category, at least loosely. Reaney justifies his choice of 'gardener' by citing the bynames *Plantebene* and *Planterose*; but this is not a balanced account of the evidence, as he omits to mention the more common byname *Plantefolie*, which does not fit his chosen opinion.

It is important to note that Reaney formed his opinion before the initial Y-DNA evidence indicated that the Plants were largely a single family. As already mentioned, the Plant name is quite widespread; we might hence surmise that Reaney's logic may have included an idea that the 'occupational' meaning was more fitting for a widespread name than a 'name of *nonspecific* family relationship'. Indeed, Weekly's 'young offspring' opinion had been that Plant was a 'nickname' and, since nicknames are rarer than occupational names, Reaney could well have decided that an 'occupational' meaning was more likely than a 'nickname' such as 'sprig'. It can be added that such names as Young, Younger, Child and Children could also be ascribed to a '*nonspecific* relationship' category. However, a meaning such as 'baby-face' has also been suggested for Younger for example which, like Weekly's 'young offspring' meaning for Plant, has been allocated to the 'nickname' category.

A further consideration of the evidence indicates that the Plants, though widespread, apparently originated as the offspring of a single family; the meaning hence becomes 'offspring of some implied (though unspecified) family'. It is hence now clear that Weekly's 'young offspring' opinion needs amending to an 'offspring of a single (unspecified) family', and this fits the evidence better than Reaney's idea of 'widespread gardeners from many different families'. Hence, the amended 'offspring' opinion becomes that Plant is a 'name of implied relationship'; and, since 'names of relationship' is the most common category of British surname, this can now be taken to be the most likely interpretation of Plant.

29.1.4 The resilient 'offspring' opinion and Lower's controversial claim


Taking Weekly's 'offspring' opinion a step further, there is a choice of including with it, or setting aside, further sense from Lower's and Sleigh's 'corruption of Plantagenet' opinion. There is a

⁵P.H. Reaney (1958) *A Dictionary of British surnames*.

choice of including, or not, a notion that the significance of ‘offspring’ was that Plant alluded to a ‘shoot of descent’ from the pedigree of the famous Geoffrey *Plante* Genest. In mainstream history, the Plantagenet surname is held to descend from Geoffrey and, to this, we might add the spelling Plantt, as a possible abbreviation of Plantagenet. This produces what could be held to be the tidiest explanation of the current evidence: it succinctly explains the single Plant family with its ‘offspring’ meaning and alternative spelling Plantt. However, it needs to be admonished that this is a substantial claim, and it is based on flimsy evidence.

Including Lower’s and Sleigh’s opinion to produce a meaning ‘Plantagenet offspring’ can provoke a persisting controversy. Accordingly, the remainder of this Chapter does not necessarily presume that there was a direct *genetic* connection between Plante Genest and Plant. Though that might be called the *strong* version of a resilient ‘amended offspring opinion’, it remains appropriate to consider a softer version of this claim, in which the celebrated forefather is not necessarily Plante Genest but someone whose identity has not (as yet) been adequately established.

29.2 *Plantegenest* in England – illegitimacy and Plant-like names

otwithstanding that we can not simply presume that Plante Genest was the Plant forefather, it is relevant to describe a background of similar surnames in ‘Plantagenet England’. This provides a context for the first evidence for the Plant name. In the early twelfth-century, when some bynames were becoming hereditary amongst the nobility, there is the isolated nickname *Plantegenest*⁶. Relatively few in England have made the connection back to the isolated name *Plantevelu* in ninth-century France, though this may well be indicative of the *culture* by which the nickname Plantegenest came about. A new duchy of Aquitaine had been founded in the ninth-century by Bernard Plantevelu whose name means ‘hairy generative shoot’. In the twelfth-century Geoffrey Plantegenest (1113-51) was the founder of the Angevin Empire and the father of king Henry II of England, who married Eleanor of Aquitaine; Aquitaine was known for a tradition of troubadours and courtly love. Contrary to popular belief, it is not until 1448 that there is evidence that the name Plantagenet was being used as a royal surname, though a male-line *family* connection is invariably made back to the nickname Plantegenest or Plante Genest, which was given to Geoffrey, count of Anjou.

It is important to distinguish between a culture bringing about Plant-like names and proof that similar names belonged to a single male-line family. That said, one can imagine some parallels between various Plant-like names as they developed in England; evidently, the *influence* came first from the nobility from France. First there was *Plantevelu* in France, and then the fame of *Plantegenest* spreading in England to influence such names as *Planteng’* and *Plantyn*:

Plantegenest descent – There is extant primary source evidence of the names Planteng’ and Plantyn in connection with the *de Warenne* male-line descent from *Plantegenest* in the mid thirteenth-century, in Norfolk, England.

Plant – Around the same time, not least around *de Warenne* lands in Norfolk, there is the first evidence for the name Plant in England, with variant spellings (Plente, Plante, Plauntes), dating back to 1219. The first precise spelling Plant is in 1301 near Chester, around the times of *de Warenne* involvement with the Welsh Wars. By the late fourteenth-century there is evidence that the name Plant (or Plonte) was hereditary in east Cheshire; the principal Plant homeland then appears to have become east Cheshire and north Staffordshire, though the name had a much wider early distribution.

Again, we should note that we can not just presume that similar names were passed down the same male-line family. Certain people before the Norman conquest, and a growing number afterwards, had a ‘byname’ which was additional to their first name, but these were not hereditary surnames in the modern sense as they did not pass from father to son⁷. Such names appear in the

⁶There is mention of Plante Genest in the poems of the Norman poet Wace (1135-74) and Plantegenest by Jean de Marmoutier (c1170-75). There is also mention of an unknown Galfrido Plauntegenet in the 1266 Close Rolls.

⁷Society of Genealogists Information Leaflet No. 7: *The relevance of surnames in genealogy*.
<http://www.sog.org.uk/leaflets/surnames.html>

Domesday Book, but it was not until the early twelfth-century that surnames became hereditary among the nobility. They spread gradually amongst the ordinary people in the next century, from town to country and from the south of England to the north. Most people in England did not, however, have anything approaching an hereditary surname until the end of the fourteenth-century.

29.2.1 Illegitimacy, and Plantyn as a possible diminutive of Plantegenest

It is often said that diminutives of the father's name were used to denote illegitimacy – for example, Hodgkins or Hodgkinson is taken to have the meaning 'bastard son of Roger', with Hodge being a pet name for Roger. Although it is not certain that the fame of the *Plantegenest* nickname was sufficient to influence some later diminutive names, it may be relevant that the bynames Planteng' and Plantyn followed on in proximity to the illegitimate *de Warenne* descendants of Plantegenest, shortly after him. It may be supposed that such a name as Hodgkins or Plantyn or Plantagenet did not originate as the direct formal inheritance of the fathers' name, but that they were the gaining of a surname from the reputation of a forefather such as Roger or Plantegenest. This is compatible with a notion that there *could have been* an illegitimate descent of Plant-like names from Plantegenest, though this evidence falls short of proving a male-line genetic connection between Plantagenet and Plant.

In 1235 the statute of Merton dealt with common lands, inheritance and illegitimacy. Even when Blackstone⁸ wrote his commentaries in 1765-1769, he included a remark about surnames and illegitimacy:

Yet he may gain a fi rname [surname] by reputation, though he has none by inheritance. All other children have a settlement in their father's parish; but a bastard in the parish where born, for he has no father. ... A bastard may, lastly, be made legitimate, and capable of inheriting, by the transcendent power of an act of parliament, and not otherwise: as was done in the case of John of Gant's bastard children, by a statute of Richard the second.

As well as commenting on how bastards may gain surnames, this refers to the legitimisation in 1397 'for all purposes save succession to the crown' of Gaunt's Beaufort children; these were born in 1373 and 1379 of his mistress Catherine Swynford (née Roet). This piece of history involves a reference to the name *Plaint*. Catherine Swynford had been a lady in waiting to Blanche who was the heiress of the earldom of Lancaster, and, in 1386, a John *Plaint* testified⁹ to the age of a son, Sir Thomas Swynford, of Catherine; Gaunt married Catherine as his third wife in 1396. Gaunt's first wife, of 1359, had been Blanche of Lancaster from whom he had gained the title, Duke of Lancaster; Gaunt, who was unpopular at the time of the Peasant's Revolt, is reknowned because of his first wife's child, Henry Bolingbroke, who captured Richard II at Chester in 1399 to become the first 'Lancastrian' king of England.

It is interesting that a John *Plaint* is mentioned in this connection, but, again, this is inconclusive for the purposes of ascertaining genetic descent.

29.2.2 A single Plant family, their principle homeland and the spelling Plantt

The first Y-DNA measurements quickly instigated a minor revolution of understanding for the Plant surname. This evidence can be restated as follows:

⁸Sir William Blackstone (1765-9), *Commentaries on the laws of England*, 4 vols, book I, ch. 16.
<http://www.lonang.com/exlibris/blackstone/index.html?bla-214.htm&bla-214fn.htm&.../footer.htm>

⁹Callendar of Inquisitions 17 Richard II 432 and 18 Richard II 576.

Surnames are typically supposed to have multiple genetic origins, especially if they have a widespread geographical distribution, and this is being confirmed for many surnames by the recent Y-DNA evidence. An exception to this general rule, however, is that the DNA evidence is suggesting that the Plant surname had a single paternal-line origin, despite its widespread early distribution. It seems appropriate to include the spelling Plantt with Plant, since a Y-DNA match has been found between a Plantt male-line descendant (now called Plant) and the most common Plant Y-DNA signature.

It is tempting to imagine that this may be evidence of widely distributed bastards, called Plant and Plantt, all descended down one or another male line from the famous forefather Geoffrey Plantegenest. However, it is not clear how far back one should go to identify the origins of a single family with the hereditary Plant surname. The Y-DNA evidence for a single Plant family can not be applied back to before when the surname was hereditary. It is possible that those with the first Plant-like bynames, in the thirteenth-century, may not have been the forefathers of the current Plant family (*i.e.* of those Plants who have the Y-DNA signature of the main matching group of Plants). On the other hand, it seems relatively safe to presume that the Plant family dates from as early as 1400 in east Cheshire, and *possibly* earlier. As already noted, the Plantagenet surname was in use by 1448, some 300 years after Geoffrey Plantegenest, though this was suppressed following the Tudor accession in 1485. In sixteenth-century Tudor times, the particular spelling *Plantt*, which might be an abbreviation, is found in Cheshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Worcestershire and Oxfordshire.

Traditional genealogical evidence maintains that the *de Warennes*, the Lancastrians and the royal House of York all descended down male lines from a famous forefather Geoffrey Plantegenest. Around those late medieval times the Canon Law of the Pope also carried authority. Even so, following a feud with the Lancastrians from around 1320, the last Warren earl of Surrey had failed to legitimise his own children and most Warren lands had passed by around 1350 to the Lancastrians or their ally Arundel. Around those times, an illegitimate Warren descent settled in east Cheshire, coinciding with early evidence there for the Plant surname. The roughly simultaneous appearance of both this descent and the Plants here may be no more than a coincidence, though there is some flimsy evidence of an earlier connection between the Plants and dispossessed Warren lands in north Norfolk. Though there is no conclusive evidence that the Plants were noble bastards, it is more certain that the ‘Warrens’ of Poynton were. Cheshire and nearby regions in Staffordshire and Shropshire may have offered a measure of sanctuary to some of the so-called Plantagenet’s bastards: the palatine of Chester had a tradition for making its own laws under the heir to the throne – the earl of Chester and Prince of Wales.

There is no known *genealogical* evidence of a connection between the names Plantt and Plantagenet, though it has long been supposed¹⁰ that Plant may be corrupted from Plantegenest or Plantagenet. To seek further clarification, we might look to the prospect of further results from the ongoing Y-DNA investigations, though, so far, the prospect of obtaining a well accredited Y-DNA signature for the Plantagenets has remained elusive; it is this that stands in the way of making a *genetic* comparison between Plantagenet and Plantt (and hence between Plantegenest and Plant). We have not yet reached the point when we can cite Y-DNA evidence to confirm, or deny, the male-line relatedness of Plants and Plantagenets.

29.2.3 Acceptability of the ‘offspring’ opinion for Plant

A modesty to the Plant name is implied by the Great Chain of Being, common to most cultures, in which humans are placed above animals which are placed above plants. In the *extended* Great Chain of late medieval England, God was placed above man such that only a noble might be regarded


¹⁰John Sleight (1862) *A History of the Ancient Parish of Leek*, p33 notes ‘This name [Plant] is supposed to be corrupted from Plantagenet’.

as a ‘generative shoot of the realm’. Though probably wrong¹¹, the ‘gardener’ proposal¹² has more pragmatic appeal: a pleasant and modest vision of a ‘gardener’ is straightforward in contrast to an ‘illegitimate offspring of a medieval alpha-male’; the latter sense for Plant can raise problems of both politeness and modesty, though simply stating ‘offspring’ can evade these problems.

Passivity beneath God is generally considered to have been a feature of late medieval times; to counter possible objections to too grand a presumption for Plant, it can be noted that some modesty is implicit in a passive meaning ‘offspring’ for Plant. A meaning ‘offspring’ for Plant implies a passive role beneath the Father; and, on a more earthly plane, it may be noted that the first element of a recorded Plant blazon (a *label*) denotes cadetship to a more senior figure of the family. More precisely, this is a *label in bend* which indicates illegitimate cadetship. Blazons are generally awarded to individuals, and it is not clear to which branches of the single Plant/Plantt family such an illegitimate cadetship applied.

It may just be a coincidence, attributable to the common contemporary culture, that there were *two* ontological plant metaphors for Plant-like names. First, there was *Plantegenest*, meaning ‘sprig of broom’, which is an instance of a ‘hairy generative shoot’ (*cf.* the earlier Aquitanian name *Plantevelu*): *Plantegenest* may allude to powers of generating a realm. Secondly, there is *Plant* with the archaic English (and modern Welsh) meaning ‘generated offspring’. It can not, of course, simply be presumed that these generated offspring (the Plants) were necessarily the offspring of a generator of the realm (*Plantegenest*). To reiterate my current opinion, there seems to be a sense for Plant as an ‘offspring’, with some connotations of ‘illegitimate offspring’; but, this does not tell us whose offspring. The spelling *Plantt* can be used to point to *Plantagenet*, but there is (as yet) a paucity of evidence to support a fancy that *Plantegenest* was the *genetic* forefather of Plant as well as of *Plantagenet*.

29.3 Meaning, and usage of the word *plant* in Early English Books

 In previous Chapters, a discussion has been developed of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literature, which coincides with the first evidence for the Plant name. For example, it has been noted that both the meaning ‘shoot for propagation’ of the Latin word *planta* and the meaning ‘shoot’ of the Old English word *plante* were conducive to the formation of an image metaphor of man’s generative powers. Plants were also a model for the emergence of life from mother earth’s lap. This produced a strong association with fertility and generation, and the writings of the thirteenth-century scholastics focussed on the generative, augmentative, and nutritive powers of the vegetable soul. Moreover, contemporary Green Man Head carvings show a plant issuing from the orifices of a man’s head, illustrating man’s vegetable soul as a *vertuous* plant within him. Fourteenth-century Middle English literature refers to the creative ‘planted Word of God’, to the ‘planted grace of noble lineage’, and to ‘planted *vertue*’. Later, by around 1500, there is fuller evidence for the meaning of the Plant family’s name, and the corresponding *meaning* may relate back as far as earlier ‘*Plantegenest* times’.

By around 1500, the OED makes it clear, there was sense to *plant*¹³ as a ‘young person springing

¹¹There is some tradition for comparing Plant with other similar names, though such a comparison is not essential. The Plant name may be compared with ‘shoot’ or ‘offshoot’ or ‘offspring’ meanings for other Plant-like names. The byname *Plantefolie* literally means ‘wickedness shoot’; this common thirteenth-century English byname suggests illegitimacy, with a metaphoric grounding of the figurative meaning ‘bastard offspring’ on ‘wickedness offshoot’. Rather similarly, the rare byname *Plantebene* may have meant ‘hallowed offshoot’ or ‘planted seed’ and hence, figuratively, ‘pleasant child’; *Planterose* might have meant ‘risen shoot’ and hence figuratively ‘matured child’. Rather differently, however, just the selected thirteenth-century bynames *Plantebene* (rare) and *Planterose* (mainly French) have had their chosen ‘gardener’ sense transferred to the less specific name Plant. The ‘gardener’ argument was already a dubious approach to the meaning of Plant, when the documented name evidence was considered more fully. It has become still less sustainable: as already stated, the meaning ‘gardener’ was proposed when the Plant surname was thought to be multi-origin, but the initial Y DNA findings indicate that this surname belonged to a single family.

¹²P.H.Reaney (1968) *Dictionary of British Surnames*.

¹³This is listed as the *noun*¹ 1(c) sense of *plant*.

up'; the OED cites for example as evidence:

1500-20 DUNBAR Poems lxxxvii, 30. *Grete God ws graunt that we have long desirit, A plaunt to spring of thi successioun.*

It seems clear that *plaunt* here refers to a child in the image of God. A fuller search of the literature is appropriate, however, since the OED does not indicate how prevalent a particular sense was at a given time; this results partly from the OED's policy of avoiding 'repetitious examples'¹⁴. By around 1500, William Caxton's printing press was producing a growing number of books and the typefaces used, though archaic, make computer processing of the texts a convenient possibility. An associated EEBO¹⁵ database is currently growing in size; a search through it for occurrences of the word *plant* (or *plante*) in Early English Books, between 1473 and 1550, has provided a fuller insight into how the word *plant* was being used around 1500.

In Early English books, there are relatively few literal references to a vegetable plant and these should be interpreted prototypically as a planting (*i.e.* planted bed) of herbs, or as the young shoot of a tree; rather than as a fully grown plant as we now more typically understand it. On the other hand, as will be evidenced further below, there are several references to plant as a metaphor for reproduction (generation), or as a creative shoot of the realm; or as a metaphor of growing (augmentation), or of planting virtues into the hearts and minds of men. The following subsections give a fuller insight into how the word *plant* was being used in the early times of the Plant surname.

29.3.1 Plant as a metaphor for the generation of children

The 'offspring' sense of Plant can be associated, at its most basic level, with a priapic image of a 'shoot'. It is hence relevant to note that the male generative power is associated in the literature with a planted vine, and that there is also reference to planting children.

The works of Jacobus de Cessolis, fl. 1288-1322¹⁶, describe Noah's planting of the vine and the emergence of man's power of generation..

*And so dyde noe which was the fi rst that planted the vygne after yf deluge and flood ...
And when he had dronken of the fruyt of this vygne / hit was so good and mighty that he
becam so dronke / that he dispoyllled hym in such wise y^t his pryuy members might be seen*

Geoffrey Chaucer, d 1400¹⁷, wrote of the heirs of the first father, and implored us to plant the root of youth in such a way that, in strength and *vertue*, our growing is always like a goodness (*i.e.* virtue)..

*But to the fi rst fader in mageste
That makes hem eyres ...
Plante the rote of youghthe / in suche awyse
That in vertue / your growyng be alway
Loke ay godenes*

Richard Tavener translated into English the works of Desiderius Erasmus, d 1536¹⁸, writing that the immortality (as it were) of renewed life in children and nephews is like a *plante* (*i.e.* shoot, slip, or cutting) springing up afresh..

¹⁴Henry Bradley wrote in 1884 a review of Part I of James Murray's *New English Dictionary* (later known as the Oxford English Dictionary) and included that Murray had been much more sensible in his relatively economical use of quotations – he had been wise not to pile on simply repetitious examples, as Littré had done (in his French Dictionary). Simon Winchester (2003) *The Meaning of Everything: the story of the Oxford English Dictionary*, p154.

¹⁵Early English Books Online <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>

¹⁶Jacobus de Cessolis, fl. 1288-1322. *[T]o the right noble, right excellent [and] vertuous prince George duc of Clarence Erle of warwyk and salisburye ...*

¹⁷Geoffrey Chaucer, d 1400, *The lyf so short the craft so lo[n]ge to lerne.*

¹⁸Desiderius Erasmus, d 1536, *A ryght frutefull epystle, deuysed by the most excellent clerke Erasmns (sic), in laude and prayse of matrimony, translated in to Englyshe, by Rycherd Tauernour, which translation he hath dedicate to the ryght honorable Mayster Thomas Cromwel most worthy counseloure to our souerayne lorde kyng Henry the eyght.*

By this polecye nature hath provided that in our chylderne & newewes we may be renewed & florysh fresh agayne. ... But by this only waye the prouydence of nature assayethe (as it were) a certain immortalite, whyll she thus maketh one thyng out of an other (lyke as a yonge plante which is cut of, from y^e tree spingeth freshly vp)

Theodor Basil, who translated into English the works of Heinrich Bullinger, 1504-75¹⁹, referred to the fruit of planting in marriage, counseling care for one's spouse's welfare when planting children and imploring us to take care of the power of growing things; and he went on to stress the importance of the timely planting of strength or *vertue* in children to avoid never having an apt harvest..

... whose harte & lust, is set with hys mariage to please God, and to plante & bring forth profi table frute vnto men ... Muche more shuldest thou haue respect to the condicions of thy spouse, oute of whom thou desyrest to plant chyldren, the frute of honeste and welfare. And lyke as plantyng and carefulnes hat great power in al growyng thinges: so hath it greater vertue and strength and better frute in the diligent byngyng vp of children. ... And begynne tymers to plante vertue in thy chyldrennes brestes: for late sowyng bryngethe a late or neuer an apte haruest.

29.3.2 Planting a people, a realm with concord, or a name

A notion of planting children also extended to planting a people or a realm and, moreover, a lasting name. An English translation of Erasmus Desiderius, d 1536²⁰, refers to building and planting a people and realm:

I wyl speke of the people & realme / that I may edifi ce it / and that I may plant it.

Edward Hall, d 1547²¹, uses a plant as a metaphor for a dynasty or a people; and, as well as describing how to weaken the plant of Scotland, he writes of the regal planting, in heart and mind, of the grain of concord and unity:

quod the Duke of Excester, vncler to the Kyng [Henry V] ... If you will destroy a plante, plucke awaie his sap which is his norisshyng and life. ... Plucke away Fraunce and neuer looke that Scotlande will resist or withstande your power. ... and plant if it might be, in his hart and minde, the very goodly and gracious greyne of concord and vnitie

Thomas Nicholls, in his prologue to Thucydides²², wrote of those who covet fame by going about planting their name so that it shouldn't suffer the injury of being forgotten:

that whylest they desyred and couerted fame and learning, and went about to plante and establish theyr name to be continued from the iniurye of forgettyng:

29.3.3 Plants as a metaphor for growing

As well as the generation of new life, plants were associated with growth during young life; and, beyond, with the ascension of prayers up to heaven. John Rastell, d 1536²³, wrote of the vegetative soul as the life of growing things; and, hence, of plants as the basis of life and of the growing powers in man:

¹⁹Heinrich Bullinger, 1504-75, *The golde[n] boke of christen matrimonye moost necessary [and] profi table for all the[m], that entend to liue quietly and godlye in Christen state of holy wedlock newly set forthe in English by Theodore Basille.*

²⁰Erasmus Desiderius, d 1536, *De immensa dei misericordia. Translated out of Latine into Englisshe, at the request of the moste honourable and vertuous lady, the lady Margaret countesse of Salisbry.* 1526.

²¹Edward Hall, d 1547, *The vnion of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre [and] Yorke, beeing long in continual discension for the crowne of this noble realme ...*

²²Prologue to Thucydides. *The history writtome by Thucydides of the warre ... translated oute of Frenche into the English language by Thomas Nicholls citezeine and goldesmyth of London.*

²³John Rastell, d 1536, *A new boke of pergatory.*

A soule vegetatyue is that lyfe that is in a plante / tre gras / herbe / or frute whych do grow. ... And because man hathe growyng as plantes & herbs haue / he is therefore called lyfelv

Sir Thomas Eliot, 1490?-1546²⁴, when translating Plutarch, wrote of planting good examples in children that they may grow straight without animal vice:

so good and perfecte maysters plant in children conuenable and good aduertisementes and preceptes, wherby the young spryng of vertuous maners shall growe streyghte, and be out of daungerous and beastly vice

Thomas Brecon, 1512-67²⁵, wrote of plants (cf. plants) as the growing of prayers up to heaven to set a good soul in ascension with the Lord:

For the fountaines of water do make gardyns so fertyle, and fruytfull, as the fountaynes of tears wateringe the plante of prayer, make it to exercyse & growe vp vnto a bery great heyght, & sette hym y^e prayeth before the LORD.

29.3.4 Various references to the planting of *vertu* (i.e. strength)

The plant metaphor was also associated with the good husbandry of replanting sin with faith, so that infants could grow straight; and so could adults also since, through the Lord's suffering, they could grow and increase their virtuous strength.

John Bale, 1495-1563, wrote of rooting out the plant of sin²⁶ and planting faith and fervent zeal in the heart²⁷:

the plante of sinn[...] shall be roted out in the proude Sinagoge of the wycked. ... the faythe and feruent zele of the prophetes and Vpostles shall they plant in their hartes,

I.B. (presumably John Bale)²⁸ also wrote of baptism as trusting that God would plant living faith in the hearts of infants that may cause them to confess his name when they received an intellectual component to the soul:

But if they do it of fayth trusting that God shal plant in the hertes of the infantes that lyuynge fayth that may cause them to confess his name when they shal receyue the vse of reason:

John Purvey, 1353?-1428?²⁹, following Wycliffe's translation of the Bible, wrote of rooting out sins and building virtues, and planting good works and customs:

that thou drawe vp by the rote and bylde and plante. That is thou drawe out olde synnis, and dystry circumstauncis either causis of thou: and bylde vertuis & plant good wervkis and customis

Otto Werdmüller, 1511-52³⁰, wrote of God's planting of a mind in men and planting *vertues*:

²⁴Plutarch. *The education or bringinge vp of children, translated oute of Plutarche by syr Thomas Eliot knyght 1490?-1546.*

²⁵A newe pathway vnto praier ful of much godly grute and christe[n] knowledge, lately made by Theodore Basille ...

²⁶John Bale, 1495-1563, *The image of both churches after reulacion of saynt Johan the euangelyst.*

²⁷Excerpt from John Bale in Anne Askew, 1521-46, *The fi rst examinacyon of Anne Askew lately martyred in Smythfelde, by Romysh popes vpholders, with elucydacyon of Iohan Bale,*

²⁸I.B., fl. 1547, *A bryefe and plaine declaration of certayne sente[n]ces in this little boke folowing to satisfi e the consciences of them that haue iudged me thereby to be a fauourer an the Anabaptistes.*

²⁹John Purvey 1353?-1428?, *The true cople of a prolog wrytten anout two C. yeres paste by Iohn Wycklife ... the original whereof is founde written in an olde English Bible ...*

³⁰Otto Werdmüller, 1511-52, *A spyrytuall and moost precyouse pearle Teaching all men to loue and imbrace the crosse,* ...

He is onelye alone suffycyent ... to plante and grafte suche a mynde in vs, ... The crosse and trybulacion do banysh and dryue away the former synnys and resyste those that are to come hereafter and help to plante, exercyse and increase all manner of vertues

29.4 Synthesizing a fuller context for the early meaning of Plant

The word ‘offspring’ forms a well justified basis for understanding the early meaning of Plant. The word was associated with generation and growth, though it seems that this was placed in the context of the heavenly Father of creation. The Plant family embodied both the wickedness and virtues of human generation. The name Plantefolie evidently means an ‘offshoot of wickedness’, in keeping with the illegitimacy implied by the Plant blazon, though there is also repeated reference in the literature to planting heavenly strengths, or *vertues*. These two contrasting aspects, of vice and virtue, can be compared with an enigmatic heart of western Christian culture: man was born of sin but aspires to immortality by accepting an infusion of God’s virtues.

The generation aspect of the word *plante* can be explained in a way that is in keeping with the Politeness Maxim (the so-called Pollyanna Principle) of pragmatics; or, alternatively, there is a less polite explanation. The polite explanation is that ‘offshoot’ evokes the figurative meaning of a ‘human offspring’ through a simple mapping of ‘offshoot’ up the Great Chain of Being to a human ‘offspring’ – this is a straightforward instance of a common ‘People are Plants’ metaphor, as is found throughout history, such that we might say for example the the Israelites were the *seed* of Abraham. However, there is also a less polite explanation:

Plant can be regarded, also, as evoking the generative powers of a man. As described more fully in an earlier Chapter, the archaic Old English meaning ‘shoot’, of plante, maps as an image metaphor on to a man’s generative member and then, by metonymy, this stands for a whole man with the powers of generation and augmentation (growth).

This rather less polite explanation can be balanced with late medieval, scholastic beliefs. By those times it is clear that, as well as the powers of growth and generation, plants (shoots) were associated with a more virtuous sense of augmentation. The name Plant can imply a vegetable soul or power within a person: the name can hence mean, by metonymy, a young inheritor of the power of growth, nurtured by *vertuous* doctrine – indeed, Henry Bradshaw (died 1513)³¹ wrote of such a plant growing inside Princess Ermenylde; this may be associated with a growing foetus:

*... vertuous doctryne
In her so dyd water a pure perfyte plante,
Which dayly encreased by sufferauce devyne,
Merveylously growynge in her fresshe an varnaunt,*

In 1916, Ernest Weekly proposed that Plant could mean a ‘young offspring’, though only in the sense of a nickname such as ‘sprig’. Notwithstanding Weekly’s derogatory sense ‘sprig’, which would tally with some indication of illegitimacy for the Plants, ‘offspring’ seems to be as good as can be ascertained for the meaning of Plant, as there are arguments either way towards wickedness or virtue; or, in other words towards more nearly a ‘sprig’ or ‘scion’ sense to the meaning of Plant.

The Y-DNA evidence indicates that, rather than having a nickname, the Plants were literally male-line offspring of a single forefather. There is not sufficient evidence to insist that this forefather was Plantegenest, though that would provide a simple, tidy explanation. Lower’s and Sleight’s Plantagenet claim tends to provoke strong reactions. Suggesting that the Plants were the produce of the royal brothels, for example, mollifies charges of too much fanciful grandeur, but this still leaves a charge of prurience which is sometimes lodged by those who prefer a more puritanical view of the royalty. In meeting prudery, one might go so far as to intrude with the facts that chastity is not always in keeping with the medieval evidence: illegitimacy is repeatedly in evidence in medieval

³¹Henry Bradshaw d 1513, *The Life of Saint Werburge of Chester*, ll 603-7.

times. For example, Ralph de Brock, who was instrumental in Saint Thomas Becket's murder, was the keeper of the royal brothel during Henry II's reign; also, the lechery of Henry's youngest son John was legendary. Though it is *feasible* that Plante Genest was the forefather of the Plants, there were of course many others who could have been that forefather. This does not mean that talk of Plantegenest (the forefather of the English royalty when the Plant name was forming) is irrelevant, since, beneath God, only Plantegenest's *royal* descendants might be considered to be sufficiently elevated to be the true planters of the English realm. Culturally, in the extended Great Chain of Being, God can be placed above the Plantegenest forefather, who can be placed above the Plants, who in turn can be placed above *plante* or *planta* in the sense of a shoot of vegetation. That said, and apart from a contention that Plantt might be an abbreviation of Plantagenet, there is as yet little to offer as proof that the Plants were, in cadetship to the royalty, amongst the *genetic* descendants of Plantegenest.

The Plants were 'offspring'. This was more literal to a *single family* on earth than a more generic meaning, God's children, as we all are. Nonetheless, it remains relevant to consider a context of medieval religion: the Pearl poet of the fourteenth century Plant homeland described virgin birth with, '*And there was rose reflowr where rotz hatz ben euer*'. Synthesizing this metaphor further, a Plant was a small shoot, with its roots in rot, growing with *vertu* to an elevated rose flower. The Plant blazon denotes illegitimate cadetship, with a red rose appended: man fallen, seeking re-ascension with Lancastrian vigour. This might be seen as the lot, around 1400, of the illegitimate *de Warenne* descendants of *Plantegenest* following their failed feud with the Lancastrians. This forms a fitting context to the evidence; but, as needs still to be stressed, there is no direct evidence of a *genetic* connection between Plant and Plantegenest. Less contentiously, we may note that the context is such that we can presume a cultural influence on the Plant name that was shared with the Plantagenets: there was a noble hierarchy in a religious age that may have influenced the name of a widespread Plant family. In the prevailing culture, in times before modern science, it was God's generation of the plants, through his handservant Nature, that *explained* the creation of a family's offspring; and Plant was a fitting name.