CHAPTER 1

The Ancient World
Us and Them

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Ancient literature reveals a split in attitudes between the notion of plants as emblematic of harmony – whether in an idealised 'romantic' sense or via the structures of reciprocity displayed within agricultural and religious frameworks – and the idea of plants as representatives of the wild other, subjects for human conquest, domination, and ingenious manipulation.[1] This polarity can be traced in broader ancient worldviews, such as that of the Stoics, in which humans have been appointed by the gods as gardeners of the earth[2] and 'everything that comes into being on the earth is created for human use'.[3] Yet there are others, perhaps most prominently the atomists, who vehemently resist any suggestion of providential design, and see the evolution of life on earth as contingent on chance combinations of atoms, itself almost inevitable in the course of infinite time.[4] While anthropocentric attitudes (in varying degrees) tend to predominate in ancient literature, a sense of plants existing for their own sake, within their own realities, is often there to be read between the lines.

In this chapter, I will offer snapshots of three plant types to illustrate some of these ancient patterns suggesting acceptance of and opposition to notions of difference between humans and plants. We find those that appear to be spontaneously friendly, others essentially hostile, and still others ready to be shaped in different ways by human effort, environmental circumstance, or even frame of mind.

The Shady Tree

The image of a human resting in the shade of a tree is common in ancient literature, and grows to be emblematic especially of the pastoral mode. It is the setting with which Vergil's *Eclogues* begins ('Tityrus, reclining under the cover of a spreading beech, you rehearse your woodland Muse on a fine oat stalk', *Eclogue* 1.1–2), and is a picture already familiar from the *Idylls* of his Greek model, Theocritus (e.g. *Idyll* 7.88, 12.8). The very familiarity of

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the motif might risk rendering these friendly trees paradoxically invisible, part of a standard collection of props for the *locus amoenus* (just add water and some lush grass),[5] yet within a world of self-conscious symbolism and metapoetics, the choice of *which* tree should cast its shade over a poem can speak volumes. Vergil's shepherd lies beneath a beech, a genus not found in Theocritus' work (nor found in much of Greece), and so even as the shepherd's name and the shepherd's pose evoke the Greek tradition, the beech tree itself stands as a marker of the more northerly Italian flora, and the poet's ability to transform pastoral into a Latin genre.[6] The tree exemplifies pastoral's cosy anthropocentrism (where nature cares for our little troubles, and provides an idyllic setting for our deceptively simple creativity), yet threatens to fracture the illusion at the point when the tree is no longer so much a tree as a symbol. The most 'nature-based' of genres is in its way the least natural.[7]

The shade tree is not the sole preserve of poetic shepherds, and can be found in earlier literary incarnations, such as the intertwined olive and wild olive trees that offer shelter from both rain and sun to the exhausted Odysseus, washed up in Phaeacia (Homer, *Odyssey* 5.476–81). In Plato's *Phaedrus*, a dialogue on love and rhetoric sees Socrates drawn away from his urban comfort zone and into the different comfort of a shady spot by the river Ilisos, leading him to exclaim: 'By Hera, it is a beautiful resting place; the plane tree is very wide-spreading and high, and the height and the lovely shade of the chaste-tree on the verge of full bloom, how sweet-smelling it makes the place!' (230b). This change of scene allows Socrates to give fuller rein to a less rational, even divinely inspired, side of himself (238d); there is both reassurance and freedom in the intersection of the profoundly human exercising of speech and reason with the quiet, sensuous solidity of nature.[8] The scene becomes famous, and is self-consciously re-created by Scaevola and his interlocutors in Cicero's *De Oratore*: 'Why don't we imitate the Socrates from Plato's *Phaedrus*, Crassus? For this plane tree of yours puts me in mind of it, which no less stretches out its spreading branches to cast shade on this place than that one whose shade Socrates pursued' (28). The plane tree, and the comfortable grass beneath it, represent the ideal location for an inspired conversation about rhetoric; all are enthused by the setting to do as the Greek philosophers did, although the notoriously luxurious Crassus suggests they can achieve this just as well with an added bit of convenience and sends for cushions to spread beneath the plane (29).

These cushions provide a mildly humorous fulcrum between the pastoral/philosophical presentation of the shade-tree as a spontaneously occurring

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harmony between plants and humans, and a more contrived, curated achievement of this 'natural effect' within a human-centred environment. In fifth-century BCE Athens, Cimon was famous for introducing large numbers of shade-trees to the city (Plutarch, *Cimon* 13.7), and the Hellenistic development of the peristyle enclosing an area of trees and shrubs continued this trend. The garden designers for the villas of wealthy Romans also made careful use of shade-trees to formalise this relationship between the natural and man-made world.[9] When Horace invites Quinctius to cast his cares away and embrace a lyrical, hedonistic form of Epicureanism, the party is to be held beneath shady trees but in a very civilised context: 'Why don't we imbibe, doused in Syrian nard, reclining just anyhow either beneath the plane tree or this pine, our white hair scented with roses?' (*Odes* 2.11.13–17). The slightly ageing party-goers, bathed in the perfumes and unguents of the sophisticated rich, will have their experience capped off with plenty of wine, music, and the attentions of an accomplished courtesan: pine and plane are made complicit in this metamorphosis of the *locus amoenus* from mannered yet humble into mannered and unabashedly luxurious. Deeper into the imperial phase of Roman history, Statius is even content to present Nature herself entering into a form of anthropocentric self-styling. Around the villa of Manlius Vopiscius by the River Anio at Tibur (modern Tivoli) not just single trees but a whole woodland combines to present an artist's dream of reflection and shade:[10] 'Nowhere has Nature indulged herself more lavishly. The tall groves have reclined[11] over fast-flowing waters; the deceptive image reflects the leaves and the same shade flits over the lengthening waves' (*Silvae* 1.3.16–19).

Luxury – and the exploitation of nature for the creation of human luxury – is not always seen as unproblematic, however.[12] The plane tree in particular causes both Seneca and the Elder Pliny some anxiety, as a literally fruitless genus[13] with no other use to humans than offering shade (*De vita beata* 17.2; *Natural History* 12.6), an aspect already reflected in Horace's terming of the plane tree as *caelebs* (celibate, *Odes* 2.15.4), and Vergil's as *sterilis* (non-fruiting, *Georgics* 2.70). Indeed, the ever-mercurial Horace, sometimes content with luxuriating in shade, sometimes dismissive of it as a symptom of moral decline, appears to try to have and eat his cake in a description of his own country estate in the Sabine hills north of Rome. Here, the shade-trees' benevolence ranks alongside the gentle productiveness of unfarmed thickets: 'You would praise its mildness, and what if kindly thorns bear ruddy cornel cherries and plums? If the oak and holm-oak delight the herd with much fruit, and the master with much

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shade? You would say that Tarentum has been brought nearer and bursts into leaf' (*Epistles* 1.16.8–11). The balance between wild and tame, and between beauty and utility is carefully engineered: the recipient of the verse epistle, Quinctius, is imagined to be interested in the economic viability of the farm, yet Horace provides him instead with an idealised and low-key productivity, with trees offering acorns for animals to eat and shade for Horace (the master of this domain) to enjoy. This real-life setting is signposted as just that bit too close to the mannered *locus amoenus* of pastoral (*hae latebrae dulcis, etiam, si credis, amoenae* – 'this sweet, even, if you can believe it, delightful hiding place', 15).[14] Even insofar as the farm may still be believable, its simplicity and its location in a secluded valley (5–7) might further indicate isolation from the normal life of an affluent Roman: the oaks beneath which Horace can sit while his pigs happily crunch acorns are a world away from a Ciceronian plane tree with cushions at its base. And yet it is also somewhere that one can be philosophical: the description of the farm functions as the introduction to the poem's main focus on the gap between apparent and actual virtue, the mere absence of serious vice and the difficult presence of tangible goodness. The shade trees, as part of the broader description of Horace's rustic retreat, come to represent something with greater texture than either a working estate, a rich man's toy farm, a poetic idyll, or a self-consciously engineered site for philosophical musing, while yet managing to be all of these things.

Horace can provide us with yet another bridge between different conceptions of the shade tree: in *Odes* 2.3, we find pines and poplars next to a stream all set to provide the ideal setting for another drinking party, yet they are framed by an insistence on the brevity of life. The poem's recipient is cheerfully addressed as *moriture Delli* ('Dellius bound to die', 4); the *umbram hospitalem* ('hospitable shade', 10) offered by the trees thus implicitly transmutes from the friendly place for a picnic to the all-welcoming shadow of the underworld. So the shady tree evokes philosophical speculation and poetical sophistication alongside ideas of harmony and leisure (whether dubious or not), yet it can sometimes loom even larger and darker. When Aeneas heads down to the Underworld, one of the eerie sights he encounters is a vast elm tree: 'In the middle, stretching out its branches and ancient arms is an elm, dark, huge, which empty dreams widely make their home, they say, clinging under every leaf' (Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.282–4). This, the only elm tree mentioned in the whole epic, participates in the paradoxical presentation of the land of the dead as in some senses full of life, a shadowy reflection of the upper world. The tree is dark and huge, verging on the monstrous with its branches that are also

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arms,[15] hosting dreams as if they were birds or bats, and emphatically not the kind of tree under which one would comfortably rest, yet it is undeniably a tree of shade.[16] The *umbrae* (shadows, shades) of the underworld fall thicker than in the world above.

The notion of tree-cast shade as anything but comfortable is not confined to the underworld, either. The distinction between a 'civilised' plane tree by a river bank or a convenient group of pines near pasturage and the tangled, ancient trees of primeval forest is easy to make and yet not absolute. The sacred groves familiar in both ancient literature and ancient landscapes might represent a kind of half-way point: defined places within the countryside (and in some cases within cities), they are familiar yet not necessarily easy places. We might see a version that feels very close to the *locus amoenus* type with an added injection of divinity,[17] as in Sappho's portrayal of Aphrodite's precinct: 'Come for me from Crete to this holy shrine where your lovely apple-grove grows and the altars smoke with frankincense. Cool water sounds through the apple boughs and the whole place is shaded with roses, and from the quivering leaves sleep takes hold'(Sappho, frag. 2.1–8). Yet a grove such as that of Picus and Faunus by Rome's Aventine hill, while sharing some of these idyllic elements, feels overall a more discomfiting place:[18]

> There was a grove beneath the Aventine black with the shade of holm-oaks; once you'd seen it you could say, 'There is a power (*numen*) in there.' In the middle was grass and, veiled by green moss, an everlasting rill of water dripped from the stone: from there, generally alone, Faunus and Picus would drink. (Ovid, *Fasti* 3.295–9)

The Roman invasions of the lands of the Gallic and German tribes brought them into contact both with the wide expanses of wild forest that had by then largely become confined to memory in Italy itself,[19] and with versions of the sacred grove that were alarmingly like and unlike the groves back home. Lucan takes grim relish in describing a grove outside Saguntum (modern Sagunto):

> There was a grove never touched throughout a long age, enclosing with branches twisted together a dark space and cold shade, shutting out the sunlight far above. There no country-dwelling Pans or Silvani, powers of the groves, or Nymphs held sway, but the barbaric sacred rites of the gods; altars were heaped with terrible offerings, and every tree was spattered with human gore. (*Bellum Civile* 3.399–405)

No wild birds or animals dare approach; even the grove's own priest is frightened to enter at midday or during the night (times particularly ripe

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for divine epiphany), and whichever gods live there, they are certainly none of the familiar Greco-Roman country deities.[20] Julius Caesar orders the felling of this grove, overcoming the initial superstitious reluctance of his men by taking up an axe himself and swinging it against an ancient oak; fear of the nameless gods is then overcome by fear of Caesar's own anger, and the trees are duly cut down and the light let in (426–45). Yet what could have become a simple narrative of civilisation overcoming barbarism, part of the broader anthropocentric mission of taming the wild places of the earth, is left in an uneasy limbo. The local people expect divine vengeance for the desecration of the grove; none comes, and the poet even remarks, 'but fortune protects many who do harm, and the divine powers can only exercise their wrath against the unfortunate' (448–9). Yet who does not remember the ultimate fate of Julius Caesar? The grove is a paradox: it is the embodiment of terror, a place of barbarism, the antithesis of what might be assumed to be the 'right' forms of religion; yet it is ancient, until now untouched, and possessed of divinity – uncomfortable whether allowed to stand or razed to the ground.

The Happy Crops

Vergil's *Georgics* opens with the question, 'What makes the crops happy?' (*Quid faciat laetas segetes. . .?*, 1.1),[21] and the concept of agriculture as a form of harmonious and mutually beneficial co-operation between human and plant underlies many an ancient depiction of rural life. There are webs of emotional, aesthetic, and moral connection forged between the farmer and the fields of corn, the vineyards, and the orchards. When Odysseus returns home after two decades of war and wandering, he finds his house overrun with idle suitors, but the land beyond is still being tended by his aged father, Laertes, whose own wretched state is a source of pity, but whose well-kept vegetables, vines, and orchards are a marker of his essential goodness.[22] The proof of his own identity that Odysseus offers to his father is the memory and recognition of the trees on the garden terrace planted for him while he was a boy: the grizzled, much-travelled stranger can still list them all (*Odyssey* 24.336–44). Just as cultivated plants can mark a home regained, so they can mark a home lost: the dispossessed Meliboeus laments that he might never again wonder at the few ears of corn that are to him his kingdom, and he will leave his trees for a demobbed soldier to own in his place (*Eclogue* 1.67–73). This is more than a loss of livelihood: it is a loss of identity and of the special relationship with the flora of his farm, forged over years and once assumed

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to be inter-generational. As Meliboeus says to himself, with bitterness, '*Now* graft your pears, Meliboeus, and train your vine' (73); this line is echoed later as a tentatively remembered song of hope, 'Graft your pears, Daphnis: your grandchildren will pick the fruit' (*Eclogue* 9.50).

The landscape produced by cultivation is often viewed with pleasure and approval. The sight of the world transformed from an 'unproductive' forested wilderness to shining fields of corn is the climax of one of Lucretius' progressivist descriptions of the age of human–plant co-operation:[23]

> And day by day they forced the woods to retreat further into the mountains and to concede the land below to cultivation, so that they might have meadows, lakes, streams, crops, and fertile vineyards on the hills and plains and so that a grey-green strip of olive trees could run in between to mark the boundaries spread out through the hills, valleys and plains; just as now you can see everything picked out with varied charm, laid out and interplanted with sweet fruit trees and surrounded with fertile plantations. (*De Rerum Natura* 5.1370–8)

Although Lucretius does not subscribe to the anthropocentric philosophies of a world designed for human exploitation, there are echoes here of that sense of the 'rightness' of cultivation in the combination of practical benefit and aesthetic improvement once wild trees have been replaced with olives and fruit trees, and the view of the meadowlands has been opened out. Left to its own devices, nature would cloak the earth in thorns and brambles (*DRN* 5.206–9), and it is human effort that brings about the transformation from unappealing wilderness to civilised farmland. Not just human effort (on which more later) but also human tenderness: as early people took their cue from nature herself in developing methods of propagation, 'they perceived that wild fruits grew tame in the earth with kindness and gentle tending' (*DRN* 5.1368–9). Thetis talks of her early care for Achilles as equivalent to care of young trees: 'he shot up like a sapling, and I tended him like a shoot in a garden bed' (Homer, *Iliad* 18.57–8). When Columella gives instructions on the training of vines, he also draws the comparison with a parent's approach to their offspring: 'from the first day of its planting it immediately needs shaping, like the limbs of young children' (*Res Rustica* 4.3.5). The training of a vine onto specially pruned elm trees is widely termed a 'marriage' in ancient literature, and its very cultivation renders it more attractive as well as more productive:

> As an unwed vine which grows in a bare field never raises herself up, never brings forth sweet grapes, but turning her delicate body away with her

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> drooping weight now, now touches the tip of her shoot to her root; no farmers, no oxen have cultivated her: but if the same plant should be joined to her husband elm, many farmers, many oxen have cultivated her.[24] (Catullus 62.49–55)

There is, then, something more than the strictly utilitarian and survival-minded in the human attitude to domesticated plants. Concomitantly, the fear of seeing the beloved, shining fields destroyed is recurrent and also strikes an emotional chord:

> Often, when the farmer is bringing the reaper into the golden fields and already strips the barley from its fragile stalk, I have seen all the warring winds rush together to upturn the pregnant crop far and wide and from its very roots throw it high in the air . . . The high air crashes down and with inundating rain washes away the happy crops and the work of the oxen. (*Georgics* 1.316–20; 324–6)

The 'happy crops' of the poem's opening line are here destroyed by a storm of epic proportions,[25] and the suffering of the plants (pathetically both 'pregnant' and 'fragile' as well as 'happy') mirrors the loss of the farmer and the waste of the plough-oxen's effort. The advance of an enemy across the battle field can, similarly, bring thoughts of a disaster threatened by storms; when Aeneas makes his way towards them, the emotions of those who have to face him in battle are compared to those of farmers watching the coming storm:[26] 'Alas the foretelling hearts of the wretched farmers shudder with fear from afar: that cloud will bring ruin to trees, slaughter to crops, everything far and wide will fall' (*Aeneid* 12.452–4). Fear for self (felt both by those dreading Aeneas' wrathful violence within the main narrative and by the farmers within this simile) is combined with a fear for the plants. Mutual reliance entails mutual vulnerability: plants and people are equally at the mercy of the elements and of elemental anger.

Nevertheless, acts of cultivation themselves are frequently violent, a form of war on nature, which flips the human–plant relationship back into one of difference, opposition, and oppression. This is not always viewed (from the human perspective) as a bad thing. The idea that farming the fields can, quite literally, make a virtue out of necessity is clear in Hesiod's didactic poem on agriculture: 'work is no disgrace; idleness is a disgrace' (*Works and Days*, 311), and for the Romans the ideal of the farmer as a paragon of simple honesty and industry was so powerful that it could appeal even to the most elevated in society.[27] But the success of cultivation rests on a degree of force, and of a policy of divide and rule between different plant species. The farmer's 'war on weeds' is an

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undercurrent in much ancient literature, where one type of plant is categorised as idle and inimical and must make way for a different, 'approved' species. In the first book of Vergil's *Georgics*, the necessary and repeated task of weeding is elevated to a stark, militarised presentation of 'us versus them': 'for unless you harry the weeds with constant hoeing. . .alas in vain you will look at the grain heaps of another man and will solace your hunger in the woods by a shaken oak tree' (1.155–9).

Wild plants may seem fair game for human aggression, but cultivated plants, too, can be targets of violence as much as recipients of care. Vines, especially, need their natural, rambling tendencies reined in, as they are trained and pruned into rigid order: 'once [the shoots] have grown up and embraced the elms with strong stems, then strip back their foliage, then cut their limbs (before they drew back in fear of the iron), then at last exercise your tough command and check the overflowing branches' (*Georgics* 2.367–70). Meanwhile, the 'happy' arable crops, when ripe, will of course be mowed down by the reaper. Once more, though, opposition between human and plant shades into assimilation; whole armies can be characterised as standing corn, ready for the grim reaper's scythe.[28] Aeschylus describes the war god Ares as one 'who harvests mortals in blood-soaked fields' (*Supplices* 638).[29] And, more broadly, every human awaits the universal reaper: 'Orcus harvests the great with the small' (Horace, *Epistles* 2.2.178–9).

The Wayside Flower

In many ways, the contrasts and oppositions between humans and plants are least apparent when it comes to flowers: in much ancient literature, their symbolic function, whether standing for love, for the brevity of youth (and / or life), or for the beauty and variety of poetry, keeps them tied particularly closely to the human realm.

Flowers' association with the erotic ensures the presentation of the love goddess as surrounded with blooms, often roses, as in Euripides' *Medea* – '[Aphrodite] always crowns her hair with a sweet-scented wreath of roses' (840–1) – or Nossis' claim – 'the one whom Aphrodite has not loved, *she* does not know what kind of flower the rose is' (*Palatine Anthology* 5.170.3–4). When Hera seduces Zeus in order to distract his attention from the Trojan battlefield, they lie on a bed of flowers: 'The son of Chronos drew his wife into his embrace; beneath them the divine earth put forth fresh-sprouting grass, dewy lotus, crocus and hyacinth, close-growing

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and soft, which lifted them off the ground' (*Iliad* 14.346–9). The scene becomes a type, eventually ripe for parody by the likes of Petronius, who presents the attempted seduction of his underwhelming protagonist Encolpius by the notionally respectable Circe as a movement from prose to soft-focus verse, directly citing the Zeus-Hera scene, but offering a variant list of plants: roses, violets, galingale, lilies (*Satyricon* 127.9). However, the association with flowers – especially with picking flowers – can take a darker turn, too, in the repeated motif of young women abducted from meadows.[30]

> When the girls came to the flowery meadows, they each took delight in different flowers. One of them plucked sweet-smelling narcissus, another hyacinth, another violet, and another thyme; for many flowers bloomed in the earth of the spring-flourishing meadows. They competed to collect the fragrant filaments of the yellow crocus, but their lady in the middle [Europa] was picking the splendour of the fiery rose, pre-eminent among them like Aphrodite among the Graces. But she was not to delight in the flowers for long, nor keep her virginal girdle undefiled. (Moschus, *Europa* 63–73)

Europa's imminent abduction by Zeus, disguised as a bull, is made doubly inevitable by the fact of her pre-eminent beauty and her plucking of the particularly erotic rose; her earlier departure for the outing carrying a flower basket on which is engraved the story of Zeus' rape of Io (37–62) only underlines the connection more fully. The archetype for this scene is of course the story of Persephone, whose rape by Hades and (thereafter) annual return to the upper world in spring is also the aetion for the very flush of lovely flowers in the meadows which heralded her first abduction. 'At a distance from Demeter ... [Persephone] was picking flowers in the soft meadow: rose, crocus, lovely violets, iris, hyacinth and narcissus, a marvellous, shining flower which Earth reared to delight the All-Receiver (Hades) in accordance with the plan of Zeus as a trap for the flower-faced girl' (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 4–10). The poet goes on to describe the fabulous multi-headed narcissus (100 blooms from one root), but as Persephone reaches out to take it the earth opens and Hades springs out in his chariot to carry her off. Persephone, the picker of flowers, ultimately to be the bringer of flowers, is herself described as having a face like a budding flower (*kalykōpis*), drawing still closer the connections between human and floral beauty and sexuality.

When the erotic epigrammatist Meleager wants to sum up the varied glories of the boys of Tyre, he also has recourse to botanical comparison: Diodorus the lily, Theron the crocus, Asclepiades the white violet, and so

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on (*Palatine Anthology* 12.256).[31] Or the particularly beautiful might be thought to outshine even the proverbial beauty of flowers: 'Sea-nymph Galatea, sweeter to me than Sicilian thyme' (Vergil, *Eclogues* 7.37). While it is more often young men and women who are afforded the flower comparisons, with some divine help even the middle-aged Odysseus has hair like a hyacinth flower as he is about to be reunited with Penelope (*Odyssey* 23.158).[32]

In myths of metamorphosis, the connection between humans and flowers is no longer limited to analogy, but becomes quite literal. While the transformations of people into trees can often possess a nightmarish quality (e.g. Phaethon's sisters claw at their hair as it turns to leaves and cry for help as their bodies are subsumed into poplar bark: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.346–66), these flower transformations tend to be marked by a sad tranquillity. Even Clytie, turned into a heliotrope as punishment for her jealousy over her sister's affair with her own beloved Sun, achieves this state: 'They say her limbs stuck fast in the ground; a greenish pallor spread and part of her changed into bloodless leaves, and part of her, blushing like a violet, became a flower. Though she is held fast by the root, she turns to her Sun and, changed, she preserves her love' (*Metamorphoses* 4.266–70). The hyacinth itself is a well-known example, emerging after the death of Apollo's beloved Hyacinthus in a freak discus accident. In Ovid's version, the ultimate connection with that particular flower frames the episode, while the death itself is described in terms which link him to other, more permanent, deaths of young men in epic, also seen in that moment of beauty and vulnerability as flower-like:

> Just as when someone breaks off violets or poppies in a well-watered garden, or lilies bristling with their yellow tongues, at once, withering, they lower their drooping head and cannot support themselves and their tops face the ground, so his face lay as he died and with strength gone his neck lolled on his shoulder, too heavy for itself. (*Metamorphoses* 10.190–5)

Like Gorgythion in Homer (a drooping poppy, *Iliad* 8.306–7) or Vergil's Euryalus (a poppy or an unnamed bright flower, *Aeneid* 9.443–7) and Pallas (violet or hyacinth, *Aeneid* 11.68–71), Hyacinthus' youth and fragility seem best captured in a floral image. In the case of the hyacinth (as often),[33] the flower grows from the dead boy's blood (*Metamorphoses* 10.210–13), but with the narcissus (at least in Ovid's version) the flower appears to arise from a full metamorphosis. Entranced by the reflection of his own beauty in a pool of water, Narcissus' body begins a terminal wasting away, but when the nymphs assemble to carry him to his funeral

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pyre, 'his body was nowhere to be seen; instead of his body they found a saffron-yellow flower in the middle with white petals surrounding it' (*Metamorphoses* 3.509–10).

There is particular paradox in the permanence of the memorial in flower transformations set alongside the proverbial brevity of the flower's blooming, and this underlies the introductory lines to Ovid's Hyacinth: 'Yet as far as is permitted, you are eternal, and whenever spring fights back winter and Aries is followed by watery Pisces, so often then you rise and flower in the green turf' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.164–6). Flowers which come into being, wither, and die so quickly can return in the spring; humans, however, do not usually have the chance to return. For the Elder Pliny, there is a lesson in this evanescence: 'indeed [Nature] brings flowers and their perfumes to birth for a day, as is clear, to be a great warning to humans that those things which most showily bloom most quickly fade away' (*Natural History* 21.2).[34] Just as the comfortable shade offered to Horace's party guests may anticipate the darkness of death, so, too, the flowers which adorn his tables can simultaneously evoke the joy of the moment and that moment's brevity: 'let roses not be lacking from our banquet, nor lively celery, nor the brief-flowering lily' (*Odes* 1.36.15–16).[35]

When poems are compared to flowers there may be paradox too, or at least tension, if the appealing idea of the artful arrangement of words as being like the natural splendour of flowers may also entail that their brief period in bloom will mirror the fate of the poem itself. Sometimes this spectre of efflorescence followed by oblivion is consciously evoked and averted, as when Lucretius talks of Homer as 'ever-blooming' (*DRN* 1.124); at others it must be subsumed in the general enthusiasm for presenting individual poems as flowers, like Pindar's 'flowers of new song' (*Olympian* 9.48–9), or collections of poems as 'garlands' and 'anthologies'.[36] That other tension, between artifice and naturalism, however, may be harder to elide. The reader may have noted in several of the passages quoted in this section a tendency towards lists when flowers are concerned; while ancient poets are quite partial to catalogues in general, it is still a noticeable trend for poetic flowers to appear in bright and beautiful company. This seems to reflect the importance, begun in Greek poetry and continued into Latin, of *poikilia*, an aesthetic principle promoting colour, variety, virtuosity, and complexity.[37] Poets occasionally present a botanically accurate vision of flowers in a meadow, but in general they tend to ignore the different flowering seasons of narcissi, roses, and lilies, in order to make maximal use of colour contrast and linguistic variety. Theocritus' Polyphemus is allowed (as a true country-dweller, if also a one-eyed monster) to poke

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gentle fun at this floral poetic licence when he explains to his beloved that he would like to bring her 'either white snowdrop[38] or soft poppy with its red petals; one grows in summer and the other in winter, so I could not bring both these together' (*Idyll* 11.56–9).

There is, then, so much that is especially human-centred in ancient presentations of flowers, that we may need to be reminded of their function from the plants' perspective. When Ovid allows the Roman flower goddess to list her areas of influence, Flora lays claim to the human to flower transformations of the iris, narcissus, crocus, and violet, but later pauses to reassure the serious-minded:

> Perhaps you think my rule is only over delicate garlands. My power touches the tilled fields too. If the crops have flowered well, the threshing-floor will be rich; if the vines have flowered well, there will be wine; if the olive trees have flowered well, the year will be sleekest, and the fruits benefit from the growth at this time of year [May]. (*Fasti* 5.261–6)

Even this goddess, so strongly associated with frivolity, merriment, and sexual licence (e.g. *Fasti* 5.331–54), can be at least partially rehabilitated for the moralisers through her link with agri- and arboriculture, the last word in respectability.[39] Flowers are so often symbolic reminders that we must die; here Flora reminds us that in the real world we need them that we might live.

Notes

1 See, for instance, C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (University of California Press, 1967).
2 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.99.
3 Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.22. (All translations in this chapter are my own.) Compare Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.3.3–12, where Socrates similarly argues for a natural world divinely ordained for human benefit.
4 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 5.156–234.
5 P. Hass, *Der locus amoenus in der antiken literatur* (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1998).
6 See further R. Armstrong, *Vergil's Green Thoughts* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 41–5.
7 T. Gifford, *Pastoral,* 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 11: 'It is this very versatility of the pastoral to both contain and appear to evade tensions and contradictions . . . that made the form so durable and so fascinating.'
8 For the scene as reconfiguring a poetic trope for philosophical dialectic, see N. Worman, *Landscape and the Places of Metaphor in Ancient Literary Theory and Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 146–84.

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9 On the younger Pliny's description of his Tuscan villa (*Epist.* 5.6), see K. T. von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden* (Routledge, 2009), 127–9. On the development of gardens as renegotiation of the human relationship with nature, see A. L. Giesecke, *The Epic City* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 79–125.

10 Discussion of the pro-luxury stance of this poem in contrast with Horace's more understated presentation of his own villa at Tibur (on which more later) in C. Newlands, *Statius' Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119–53. Newlands also makes a strong case for seeing Statius, as much as Horace and Martial, as the inspiration for the 'country house poem' in seventeenth-century English literature.

11 Statius uses the contracted perfect form, *incubuere*, which could come either from *incubare* (to lie or recline) or *incumbere* (to bend forward or lean over); while the more realistic verb for trees by a river would, of course, be *incumbere* – the woodland leans across the water – I am trying to preserve in my translation this hint of the trees themselves as reclining guests at leisure that Statius' particular word choice can allow.

12 C. Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 173–206.

13 Classic anthropocentrism: plane trees are, of course, able to reproduce, but the fact that their fruits are not edible or otherwise useful to humans means that for ancient authors it does not seem illogical (or plain wrong) to refer to them in terms that connote barrenness and infertility.

14 There are further links to the garden of the 'Old Man of Tarentum' in Vergil's *Georgics*; helpful discussion of the opening of this *Epistle* can be found in S. McCarter, *Horace: Between Freedom and Slavery* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 146–51.

15 It is common for Latin to use the word *bracchia* ('arms') to refer to trees' branches, but it is not, or not necessarily, a dead metaphor: see Armstrong, *Vergil's Green Thoughts*, 31–5.

16 Critics have sometimes seen a similarity between Vergil's elm and Yggdrasil, the Norse world-tree (an ash); one might also suggest loose affinities with other potentially alarming trees, such as Lucy M. Boston's Green Noah or Tolkien's Old Man Willow.

17 This is not to deny an element of the divine within the *locus amoenus* or the pastoral landscape more broadly: Armstrong, *Vergil's Green Thoughts,* 59–62.

18 The proximity of the description of this grove to that of Diana at Aricia (*Fasti* 3.261–72), with its ancient custom of the temporary *Rex Nemorensis* 'king of the woods' that so fascinated Frazer doubtlessly adds a little more frisson. C. M. C. Green, *Roman Religion and the Cult of Diana at Aricia* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

19 E.g. Livy 9.36 on the Ciminian forest in Etruria, tamed and reduced in size in his own time, but, in the late fourth century BCE still a place of terror, ripe for hostile ambush.

20 The Greeks were not immune to the potential terrors of wild landscapes, but the Romans in particular seemed to develop an interest in these inversions of

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the *locus amoenus*. D. Garrison, 'The '*Locus inamoenus*': Another Part of the Forest', *Arion*, 2 (1992), 98–114; A. Kliszcz and J. Komorowska, 'Glades of Dread: The Ecology and Aesthetics of *Loca horrida*', in C. Schliephake (ed.), *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* (Lexington Books, 2017), 45–60.

21 The Latin adjective *laetus* has a range of meanings, including 'fertile' and 'abundant', but the most immediate association is with joy and happiness.

22 Or perhaps symbolic of emotional displacement in a man who has lost his wife and (he assumes) his son: B. Currie, 'Emotionally Reunited: Laertes and Odysseus in *Odyssey* 24', in M. P. de Bakker, B. van den Berg, and J. Klooster (eds.), *Emotions and Narrative in Ancient Literature and Beyond* (Brill, 2022), 135–52.

23 Lucretius' presentation of a clear dichotomy between the wild woods and cultivated land is, of course, a simplification. A notion of 'wild' versus 'tame' plants and landscapes is frequently found and corresponds to broad human intuitions, but rarely withstands too much scrutiny: e.g. Armstrong, *Vergil's Green Thoughts,* 233–40; H. Forbes, 'The Uses of the Uncultivated Landscape in Modern Greece: A Pointer to the Value of the Wilderness in Antiquity?', in G. Shipley and J. B. Salmon (eds.), *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity: Environment and Culture* (Taylor and Francis, 1996), 68–97.

24 The Latin word for cultivate (*colo*) has a range of meanings: here it suggests a vine being, literally, cultivated and, figuratively, cherished.

25 In the generic sense as well as the looser one: J. Farrell, *Vergil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 217–21.

26 For warfare itself as damaging to agriculture, see L. Foxhall, 'Farming and Fighting in Ancient Greece', in J. Rich and G. Shipley (eds.), *War and Society in the Greek World* (Routledge, 1993), 134–45.

27 Cato the Elder's famous formulation of farmers as making the best soldiers and earning the most honourable living at *De Agri Cultura* praef. 4. For this farmer-soldier ideal, see R. Evans, *Utopia Antiqua: Readings of Golden Age and Decline at Rome* (Routledge, 2008), 169–79.

28 See, for example, B. D. Shaw, *Bringing in the Sheaves* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), 150–220.

29 The trope is discussed more fully in R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 138–43.

30 Many additions could be made to the examples cited here. There is an interesting (and one might feel entirely justified) sense of protest in the version of the trope sung by Creusa, one of Apollo's 'conquests', in Euripides' *Ion* (887–96). For a gender-inverted example, see Propertius 1.20.33–42, where the beautiful boy Hylas picks lilies and poppies before being abducted by the nymphs.

31 There is much that is self-consciously metapoetical as well as simply floral here: the poem is itself one of the 'flowers' that makes up the collection known as Meleager's *Garland*: more on flowers and poems later.

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32 Some readers may find this (or indeed a flower-faced girl) a difficult image to picture, but the trick is probably not to be too literal. Compare Pindar's description of the Muses as violet-haired (*Pythian* 1.1): one *can* imagine this as merely meaning 'wearing violets in their hair', but a more impressionistic synthesis of lovely hair with the beauty, perfume and wider symbolism of the flowers is richer.
33 See P. M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myth* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 279–83.
34 Along related lines, Horace's famous *carpe diem*, often translated 'seize the day' in fact makes use of a metaphor of plucking flowers ('pluck the day'), as evoked in Herrick's 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may'.
35 See B. K. Gold, '*Mitte sectari, rosa quo locorum sera moretur*: Time and Nature in Horace's *Odes*', *Classical Philology*, 88 (1993), 16–31.
36 The *Garland* of Meleager is possibly the most sustained example, K. Gutzwiller, *Poetic Garlands* (University of California Press, 1998), 276–322.
37 A. Grand-Clément, 'Poikilia', in P. Destrée and P. Murray (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics* (Wiley, 2015), 406–21 (for flowers specifically, 410–11).
38 The identification of plants in ancient texts is often difficult and this is a case in point: Theocritus uses the word *krina*, which are usually thought to be lilies, but the description of a white winter-flowering plant here makes the snowdrop (or possibly a narcissus) seem more likely.
39 In spite of the reported antiquity of her festivals, Flora is not a prominent figure in much surviving Roman literature, perhaps at least in part due to the moralising of Augustus: E. Fantham, 'Ceres, Liber and Flora: Georgic and Anti-Georgic Elements in Ovid's *Fasti*', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 38 (1993), 39–56 and 50–1.

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