When Plants Attack: Ancient Sallies in the War on Weeds

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Plants in ancient Greek and Latin literature can form anything from innocuous backdrops to integral symbols and metaphors. They may offer resonant comparanda for human life (e.g.,"Like the generations of leaves are the generations of humans" ["οἵη περ φύλλων γενεὴ τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν", Homer, *Iliad* 6.146]); they may evoke love and beauty (as in "I have a beautiful daughter with a shape like golden flowers, lovely Cleis" ["ἔστι μοι κάλα πάις χρυσίοισιν ἀνθέμοισιν / ἐμφέρη<ν> ἔχοισα μόρφαν Κλέις ἀγαπάτα",Sappho fragment 132]); and they frequently find their way into the realm of the metapoetic.[1] The very word anthology, of ancient origin, figures poems as flowers collected in an elegantly designed bouquet, and many ancient poets use trees to represent their own works or those of earlier poets.[2] Yet plants' literary presences often also mirror their real-life importance. In religion, they are central elements of ritual, such as in the use of garlands, or offerings of grain and wine, as well as fundamental parts of sacred areas and landscapes, in groves and grottoes dedicated to particular gods. They also loom large in various "proto-scientific" contexts, such as writings on medicine, agriculture, and in natural philosophical investigations, from the theories of the pre-Socratic philosophers on the origins and divisions of the world to the botanical works of Theophrastus, the first surviving systematic attempt to categorize the plant kingdom, which sent ripples out into literary discourses. The "literary"

[1] All translations from ancient texts are my own. Homer's image, dated to the eighth century BCE, is echoed multiple times in ancient literature, becoming both a truism and a link between later poets and Homer, the one generally regarded as the earliest and greatest. Sappho's text dates to the second half of the seventh century BCE.

[2] Meleager (fl. 100 BCE) compiled the Garland, a collection of epigrams by a range of authors from the two centuries which preceded him, in which each poet is assigned the name of a flower. In one of his own epigrams (Palatine Anthology 12.256) he combines the erotic and poetic in naming a host of lovely boys to each of whom —like the poets—he allots a flower or tree which best represents their particular character and beauty. See Gutzwiller 1998, 115–82. For brief examples with further references, see Armstrong 2019, 38–49.

and the "literal," the "imaginary" and the "scientific" are thus frequently woven together to form a particularly rich and complex poetics of plants.[3]

Whether in literary texts or beyond, plants are most often characterized in relation to humans, and receive praise, blame, or simple indifference in accordance with their perceived utility or aesthetic appeal for humanity. This chapter looks at a range of appearances of the types of plant which fall under the umbrella of "weeds" across different times and genres in Greek and Latin literature: from a glimpse in Homer of the aged father of Odysseus weeding his orchard to a Roman exploration of oratorical technique in which spontaneously growing wild plants function as metaphors for naturalistic speech, we find a spectrum of engagement which draws on the rich yet frequently paradoxical associations of "weeds." This was as marginalized a group in ancient thought and literature as in the modern context;[4] yet, as every gardener knows, weeds often creep in without any invitation.

Defining and Refining Weeds

Ancient forays into botany reveal an interest in modes of categorization and classification yet find them to be as tricky as they are attractive.[5] From our post-Linnaean perspective, the differing systems of the ancients can seem unwieldy, if not incoherent. Theophrastus (ca. 371–287 BCE), a colleague of Aristotle, is often regarded as the "father" of botanical science. His extensive treatises, the *Enquiry into Plants* (*Historia Plantarum*, in the following abbreviated as *HP)* and *On the Causes of Plants* (*De Causis Plantarum*, in the following abbreviated as *CP)*, draw on his own close observations as well as the collection of information from a range of other sources.[6] In both these works, Theophrastus puts emphasis

[3] I offer a detailed exploration of the overlap between religion, rationalism, and the poetics of plants in the works of Vergil in Armstrong 2019.

[4] Explorations of the idea of the weed in modern contexts include Mabey (2010), Edwards (2015), and Cardina (2021). Environmentally focused work on Classical literature has not as yet paid great attention to weeds, except insofar as they encroach on horticultural, agricultural, or landscape studies more widely.

[5] Hardy and Totelin (2016, 63–92) offer a helpful summary of a range of ancient botanical modes of classification. For an accessible account of the development of taxonomy into the modern era, see Pavord 2005.

[6] Pavord (2005, 21–43) offers a helpful outline of Theophrastus's ideas and influence.

on the structures of plants (he has categories for trees, shrubs, sub-shrubs, and herbaceous plants, and under these headings divides according to other structural differences such as the presence or absence of thorns, whether evergreen or deciduous and so on) but his is not a totalizing system, and he also classifies by other principles, such as habitat and use, or by the broad division of wild and tame. The botanist and pharmacologist Dioscorides (first century CE), meanwhile, makes use of Theophrastus's structural categories, but puts a much greater emphasis on plants' effects on human and animal physiology and thus their medicinal uses. Plants are also primarily defined by their particular forms of usefulness to humankind by Galen (129–ca. 216 CE) and other medical writers. The Roman encyclopedist Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus, ca. 23–79 CE) shares to some degree Theophrastus's divisions into trees, shrubs, etc. as well as his distinction between cultivated and uncultivated species, but in different groups of books, Pliny subsumes these to different principles of categorization, be it geographical, pharmacological, or ethnographic. Part of the difficulty in developing a coherent system must have been a practical one—it *is* tricky to categorise all members of a vast and varied kingdom—but much of it was cultural too. It makes a difference whether a given "botanist" subscribes to an Aristotelian, teleological view of the whole natural world.[7] It also makes a difference which names, categories, and attributes have already been ascribed by the "botanist's" own society, or indeed by others with which he came into contact.

The subcategory of "vegetable," for example, in standard use, means edible, herbaceous types of plant apart from fruit, grain, legumes, and so on. From the ancient point of view, many of these were garden forms, but by no means all: Theophrastus says that λάχανα (*lachana*) are plants cultivated for human use, but they also include wild edible plants, like chicory, dandelion, and groundsel (*HP* 7.7.1). It is a category that we still recognize and feel culturally attached to, yet one which is scientifically rather unhelpful.

[7] Indeed, Theophrastus explicitly emphasizes this point even as he tries to make his categories, see e.g., *HP* 1.1.1; 1.2.3.

Weeds, my subject here, fall into a similarly shifty category: on the one hand, we can easily define them as wild, obstructive, and undesirable plants, but on the other hand, some are edible, medicinal, or otherwise useful. The "weed" is a category that becomes, strictly scientifically, useless, but culturally—and agriculturally—important and immediate.

Moreover, weeds provide linguistic as well as categorical and taxonomical difficulties. I would argue that weeds were a recognizable "cultural category" of plants in the ancient as in the modern world, even though there is no Greek or Latin noun that exactly corresponds to our "weeds."[8] Instead, there is a range of words (e.g., ὕλη [*hulē*]; πόα [*poa*]; *herba*; *gramen*) whose meaning is determined—and sometimes ambiguously determined—by context. Crudely speaking, if it grows where it is not wanted, it is probably a weed; otherwise, it might be a "plant," "woodland," "shoot," "grass" and so on. The context is often, as one might expect, indicated by the verbs used: accordingly, there are various dedicated weed-removal words in Greek and Latin (e.g., βοτανίζω [*botanizdō*]; σκάλλω [*skallō*]; *runco*; *sar(r)io*) as well as words more broadly related to clearing or purging that are applied to unwanted plants. It is often, thus, by virtue of the human actions taken or prescribed in a text as much as the noun given to their object that the reader, alongside the gardener, may recognize and categorize the plants in question.

A loose classification of weeds amongst "wild" plants broadly holds, but weeds often refuse to stay fully within the boundaries between wild and cultivated plants. One of Theophrastus's most fundamental claims is that some plants have a nature which responds to human care and cultivation, while others are better left to their own devices, with a few flourishing in either context (*CP* 1.16.13): in this reading, cultivated plants are just as

[8] Having a word for it doesn't necessarily make the concept any less slippery: "Maybe the idea of a 'weed' is hard to define because 'weed' is just that: an idea. In other words, human and plant behaviors give rise to plants regarded as loathsome in the eyes and hearts of those who consider them so. In this circular sociobotanical logic, plant biology and human culture are tangled together," (Cardina [2021] 5). In English, as counterpart to the multiple Latin and Greek words for things we may consider weeds, the word "weed" used to be applied more broadly to any small herbaceous plant, or even to rampant-growing trees (see *OED*, s.v. "weed," 2a and b).Its modern colloquial use to refer to marijuana revives some of the old flexibility of meaning.

"natural" as wild ones, but their *telos* is different. The goal of all plants is to grow to maturity and produce offspring, but the fruit of cultivated plants is also useful for humans, while that of the uncultivated is generally not.[9] Weeds conform to the idea of wild plants with an independent existence from humankind, their generation and proliferation working at a tangent from—or, even, in opposition to—the production of crops desirable to humans, yet they do not live an entirely separate life. Their habitat is not solely uncultivated land, but also, even especially, the tilled soil of cornfield, garden, and vineyard. As Richard Mabey (2010, 12) puts it,

> Weeds thrive in the company of humans. They aren't parasites, because they can exist without us, but we are their natural ecological partners, the species alongside which they do best. They relish the things we do to the soil: clearing forests, digging, farming, dumping nutrient-rich rubbish. They flourish in arable fields, battlefields, parking lots, herbaceous borders […]. Above all they use us when we stir the world up, disrupt its settled patterns.

Theophrastus makes a similar observation,for as soon as [the earth] is stirred up in whatever place, some kind of weed comes up" ("ἅμα γὰρ κινουμένης ἀναβλαστάνει πόα τις ἐν ἑκάστοις", *HP* 3.1.6), and in the account of the development of agriculture offered by the poet Vergil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE), weeds appear as virtually coeval with the techniques of ploughing, sowing, and harvesting (*Georgics* 1.147–54). Weeds *like* cultivation, but because humans do not like weeds, their presence necessitates still more cultivation, and the cycle continues. As Vergil has it, "unless you harry the weeds (*herbam*) relentlessly with mattocks […] alas in vain will you look at another man's large heap of grain and seek solace for your hunger from a shaken oak tree in the woods" ("quod nisi et adsiduis herbam insectabere rastris . . . heu magnum alterius spectabis acervum / concussaque famem

[9] A notable exception can be found in medicinal plants, which, although clearly useful to humankind, are better left to grow in the wild than under cultivation (see *CP* 3.1.2).

in silvis solabere quercu*", Geor*. 1.155–59). The agricultural writers tend not to react with such emotion to the task of weeding, and it is rarely given extended attention, but it is there, recurrent, inescapable: Clear weeds from fallow land and turn them up to be baked by the sun (Xenophon, *Oec*. 16.13–14). Get the wild oats out of your corn by weeding and hoeing twice (Cato, *Agr*. 37.5). If you want to grow panic grass or millet you will need to keep on top of the weeding (Columella, *RR* 2.9.18). Want to grow some vegetables? Take note,: "on this subject it must be said once and for all, at all times you need to ensure to stamp out weeds" ("de qua semel hoc dicendum est, omni tempore consulendum esse, ut herbae exterminentur", Columella, *RR* 11.3.20).[10]

Weeds, then, are both representative of the unruly wild *and* markers of the paradox of cultivation, where plants' natural energies can be harnessed for human benefit; yet cultivation's side-effects can result in weaker, more vulnerable cultivated crops and ever more vigorous uncultivated ones. The Roman philosophical poet Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, ca. 94–55 or 51 BCE) neatly draws up the battle lines between nature and human cultivation:

> As for what arable land remains, even so nature by its own force would obscure it with briars, if human force did not resist, accustomed for the sake of survival to groan over the strong mattock and to break up the land with the plough's pressure. If we did not turn the fertile clods with the share and by working the surface of the earth stir up [the crops] into birth, of their own accord they could not emerge into the fresh air.
>
> quod superest arvi, tamen id natura sua vi
>
> sentibus obducat, ni vis humana resistat,

[10] Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BCE), author of the *Oeconimicus* (a Socratic dialogue on household management and agriculture); Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BCE), known in English as Cato the Elder, a Roman soldier and polymath, author (among many other works) of *On the Cultivation of Farming Land* (*De Agri Cultura*); Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella (fl. 50 CE), author of *On Rustic Subject Matter* (*De Re Rustica*).

vitai causa valido consueta bidenti
ingemere et terram pressis proscindere aratris.
si non fecundas vertentes vomere glebas
terraique solum subigentes cimus ad ortus,
sponte sua nequeant liquidas existere in auras.

(Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* [*De Rerum Natura*] 5.206–12)

On this view, things left to grow wild are both wholly different from the plants that will grow under cultivation (briars vs. corn) and willfully obstructive to human flourishing. The strength of nature itself is pitted against human strength, since human nourishment requires the propagation of the kinds of plant which cannot manage by themselves, and cannot emerge *sponte sua*, of their own accord, in the wild.

The War on Weeds

If Lucretius's account has sown the seeds of the idea of a war on weeds, we find in Vergil's catalog of plant invaders fuller development of the figure:

> Ceres first taught mortals to turn the earth with iron, when already the acorns and arbutus failed in the sacred forest and Dodona denied sustenance. Soon work was added to the growing of corn too, so that harmful mildew ate the stalks and the lazy thistle bristled in the fields; crops die, a harsh thicket of burs and caltrops creeps up, and between the shining harvest infertile darnel and barren wild oats dominate.
>
> Prima Ceres ferro mortalis vertere terram
> instituit, cum iam glandes atque arbuta sacrae
> deficerent silvae et victum Dodona negaret.
> mox et frumentis labor additus, ut mala culmos
> esset robigo segnisque horreret in arvis
> carduus; intereunt segetes, subit aspera silva,

lappaeque tribolique, interque nitentia culta
infelix lolium et steriles dominantur avenae.

(Vergil, *Geor.* 1.147–54)

The growth of weeds is virtually synchronous with the development of agriculture itself, and the movement is soon made from working for a living to fighting for survival. The idea of the farmer's activity as akin to military maneuvers has been established earlier in the poem: ploughing a field is like training an army (*Geor.* 1.99); breaking earth and irrigating is again like the actions of a soldier (1.104–10). If war against the soil feels rather one-sided, or at least less animated, it is in this passage that we find the *Georgics'* first vivid picture of wild nature fighting back.[11] The thistle lies in ambush; as a prickly plant, it bristles—*horreret*—in a literal sense, but shares the verb with war narratives, such as in Ennius's "the harsh force bristles on all sides with weapons" ("horrescit telis exercitus asper utrimque", *Ann.* 384 Sk.).[12] Vergil reuses the verb in a thematically related passage at *Geor.* 2.142, describing the bizarre crop of the earth-born men:: "a crop of men with helmets and thick-gathered spears bristled" ("galeis densisque virum seges horruit hastis"), emphasizing the affinity between thistles and strange warriors.[13] Meanwhile, burs and caltrops form a "harsh" (*aspera*) woodland: the adjective will be explicitly associated with battle many times in the *Aeneid*, while the allusion to Ennius in the bristling (*horrescit*; *horruit*) thistle may also remind us that the poet uses *asper* to describe the army in the very same line.[14] The verb used of this weedy woodland, *subit* ("creeps up"), while not uniquely military, is also frequently used in

[11] Morton (2017) finds in Schopenhauer a precursor to the contemporary interest in the agency of plants ("plants are manifestations of will: they just grow", 176); this resonates with Vergil's persistent tendency to imply or even directly attribute will and intention to non-humans in the *Georgics*.

[12] Quintus Ennius (239–169 BCE), author of the Annals (*Annales*), an epic poem on the history of Rome. For the crop of weapons metaphor, see also e.g., Hom., *Il.* 7.62; Ap. Rhod., *Arg.* 3.1355; Enn., *Ann.* 267 Sk.; *Scen.* 140; Verg., *Geor.* 2.142; *Aen.* 3.45–46; 7.525–26; 12.663–64.

[13] An idea shared in Ted Hughes's poem "Thistles" (1967), where the aggressive weeds are "a revengeful burst / of resurrection […] from the underground stain of a decayed Viking."

[14] E.g., Aen. 9.667; 7.729, 647; 11.282, 635. Within the *Georgics*, the most immediate correspondence lies with unpleasant pests: the gadfly (3.149) and the Calabrian snake (3.434).

martial contexts: the word works on the literal level to indicate the plants' growth, and on the metaphorical level to underline their personification as a hostile force.[15]

However, the metaphor is not simply of a full-frontal attack by nature's forces against cultivation's defenders. The weeds with spikes and hooks (thistles, burs, caltrops) are visually out of place within a field of corn: they *look* different, and have prickly, sticky, aggressive natures.[16] But the darnel and wild oats are another kind of foe: they are enemies within, plants similar enough in appearance to the sown crops to function as evil twins of the cultivated species.[17] The darnel is *infelix*, most literally indicating the unproductive nature of the weed, but the heightened emotion of this passage invites the word's ethical connotations too: unlucky, wretched.[18] The oats are also specifically marked out as *steriles*: barren, wild, emphatically opposed to the fertile cereals which should grow in their place. Once again, the adjective has both literal and metaphorical definitional force: not only are these oats that have not been planted, and which do not produce useful grain; they are also the moral antithesis of the fertile, useful bounty envisaged by the farmer. These weeds, with their unwholesome, paradoxically vigorous fruitlessness, usurp the crops that *should* possess the field. The

[15] At various points in this chapter, I talk about weeds in terms that imply agency. Although it could be an anachronism to import to the ancient context a philosophical argument such as that of Hall (2011) in a vaguer (but not entirely metaphorical) sense, neither would it seem wholly alien in the ancient context to see some kind of intentionality as well as personality in plants: see Armstrong (2019, 8–13) for a brief overview of the spectrum of ancient attitudes towards plants as both a little like and wholly unlike humans.

[16] Even so, it might be noted that a field of full-grown cereal crops is also often said to bristle—*horrere*—as much as a thistle, so there is masquerade as well as full-frontal attack: even in metaphor the thistles engage in trespass, bristling in mockery of the crops which, due to the thistles' interference, will fail to enjoy their own metaphorical mustering as a bristling army.

[17] There is perhaps something more than the purely metaphorical in the "evil twin" idea here. It was commonly believed in the ancient world that cultivated wheat and barley could degenerate into darnel and wild oats, e.g., Theophr., *CP* 4.4.5–5.4; Plin., *HN* 18.149. See Hardy and Totelin (2016, 74–5); Armstrong (2019, 260–63).

[18] The question of productivity is here presented as black and white: a plant is either fertile or "infertile," not meaning literally unable to reproduce itself, but meaning of no use to humanity. It would be irrational to welcome darnel in place of wheat, but it may have been seen to have some nutritional value as a cheap food for the particularly humble, such as Horace's country mouse (*Sat*. 2.6.89, eaten along with emmer, about which Vergil is positive, albeit not loquacious: *Aen*. 7.109; see *far* at *Geor*. 1.73–74), or the particularly stingy, as at Plautus, *Mil. Glor*. 321. Its reputed damaging effect on the eyesight (see Plaut., *loc. cit*.; Ov., *Fast*. 1.691–92) might make it less appealing, however; indeed, consuming darnel infected with the symbiotic fungus *Neotyphodium* (and it often is so infected) can have psychotropic effects and even result in death.

farmer, in response to the weeds' attack must harry and repress for all he is worth: weeds are the living proof that the war between nature and culture is far from one-sided.[19]

The idea of the war on weeds, together with the broader sense already seen in Lucretius as well as Vergil of the precarious nature of agricultural success, is evoked again by their poetic successor, Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso; 43 BCE–17/18 CE), during his account of Ceres's search for Proserpina. In her grief for her lost child, the fertility goddess revokes her favor and protection, and the previously bountiful land of Sicily becomes subject to inclement weather and the predation of birds, while "darnel and caltrops harass the wheat crops, and unvanquishable grass" ("lolium tribulique fatigant / triticeas messes et inexpugnabile gramen", Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.485–86). The broader device of the goddess bringing crop-failure is drawn from the old Greek version of the same story told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (305–09), but the springing up of nuisance weeds evokes a particularly Vergilian dystopia, even down to the combination of darnel and caltrops (see *Geor*. 1.153–54). The ponderous adjective "unvanquishable" (*inexpugnabile*) is not itself found in Vergil, yet economically evokes the earlier poet's narrative of warring weeds, here with the heart-broken corn goddess as their unexpected general.[20]

A Greek passage written by Xenophon around the mid-fourth century BCE in some ways anticipates the mixture of military imagery, moralizing, and emotional engagement with weeds seen in the Latin poets just discussed:

> What, then (he said) if weeds have sallied forth and are choking the grain and plundering the grain's nourishment, much as the useless drones plunder from the bees the nourishment that they have worked hard to lay in store?

[19] For more on Vergilian weeds, see Armstrong 2019, 263–88. In modern plant studies, the idea of weeds as representative of migrants, protesters, anti-capitalists, and general counter-cultural resistance has been gaining ground (useful summary in Lawrence [2019]). It would be too much of a push to see evidence of defiance viewed in positive ways in the ancient context; nevertheless, the implication of some kind of parallelism within the imagery of opposing armies at least allows for the possibility of seeing weeds' progress and implied desires as a mirror of human ambition which need not reflect well on either side.

[20] It is, rather, used by Livy of impregnable fortresses, e.g., 2.7.6.

By Zeus, the weeds must be cut down (I said) just as the drones must be taken out of the hives.

Then (he said) do we seem to you to have good reason for sending out the hoers?

Certainly. But I am reflecting (I said), Ischomachus, how effective it is to introduce similes. For you made me extremely angry towards the weeds by talking about drones, much more than when you were just talking about weeds.

Τί γάρ, ἔφη, ἦν ὕλη πνίγῃ συνεξορμῶσα τῷ σίτῳ καὶ διαρπάζουσα τοῦ σίτου τὴν τροφήν, ὥσπερ οἱ κηφῆνες διαρπάζουσιν ἄχρηστοι ὄντες τῶν μελιττῶν ἃ ἂν ἐκεῖναι ἐργασάμεναι τροφὴν καταθῶνται;

Ἐκκόπτειν ἂν νὴ Δία δέοι τὴν ὕλην, ἔφην ἐγώ, ὥσπερ τοὺς κηφῆνας ἐκ τῶν σμηνῶν ἀφαιρεῖν.

Οὐκοῦν, ἔφη, εἰκότως σοι δοκοῦμεν ἐμβαλεῖν τοὺς σκαλέας;

Πάνυ γε, ἀτὰρ ἐνθυμοῦμαι, ἔφην ἐγώ, ὦ Ἰσχόμαχε, οἷόν ἐστι τὸ εὖ τὰς εἰκόνας ἐπάγεσθαι. πάνυ γὰρ σύ με ἐξώργισας πρὸς τὴν ὕλην τοὺς κηφῆνας εἰπών, πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ ὅτε περὶ αὐτῆς τῆς ὕλης ἔλεγες.

(Xenophon, *Oec*. 17.14–15)

The drones' freeloading is couched in martial terms, and the weeds, too, are pictured venturing forth and looting like hostile forces; for Ischomachus, perhaps, as for Vergil, weeds are a bane worthy of multiple negative metaphors.[21] Disapproval of drone behavior may be reminiscent of the archaic Greek poet Hesiod's indignant likening of work-shy humans to drones, but for Socrates it seems that the form of the simile is itself the persuasive key.[22] Yet while Socrates is less moved by the initial military image of the plundering weeds, Xenophon himself can employ the effect of the combined metaphorical force. Xenophon's weeds, unlike

[21] In the ancient world, the role of the male drones in impregnating the queen bee was not well understood, perhaps not least because the queen bee was believed to be a "king"; for the most part, ancient authors viewed drones as some kind of imperfect bee, disliked so much by their hard-working fellows that they would be driven from the hive (e.g., Pliny, *HN* 11.27).

[22] Women appear as work-shy in general at *Theog*. 594–602; idle men at *WD* 303–06.

Vergil's and Ovid's, are unspecific—simply ὕλη (*hulē*)—but the drone analogy may hint at a degree of similarity between weeds and crop, perhaps to be imagined as plants like darnel and wild oats: at a glance, drones seem like other bees (albeit larger), as some weeds may resemble crops, but viewed close up they are revealed as different, even sinister, selfish, and disruptive. As the bee, so often a cliché of virtuous industry, must struggle against the idle enemy within, so the grain is under attack from the unproductive weeds which resemble it.

Vergil's thistle makes this association too. I outlined its aggressive, warlike qualities above, yet it is simultaneously presented as drone-like and idle when "the lazy thistle bristles in the fields" ("segnisque horreret in arvis / carduus", *Geor*. 1.151–52). Weeds, which in many other accounts provide, simply, a necessary backdrop for the display of the vigorous virtue that is weeding, have now themselves come to exemplify the morally defective. The transference is in keeping with Vergil's habitual anthropomorphizing, but also implicates the thistle in yet another weedy paradox and confusion of categories: the thistle is at once an idler and a soldier, both representing avoidance of work, and a symbol of the most concerted kind of effort.[23] The war on weeds implicates farmers and poets alike in the collapsing of clear categories as much as the building of categorical barricades.

Fighting the Good Fight: Weeding and the Work Ethic

Since weeds themselves can be presented as the antithesis of productivity, so humans who tolerate their presence can be tarred with the brush of idleness, while the badge of honor goes to those who battle against the weeds. When Odysseus is reunited with his aged father, he finds Laertes engaged in digging (Homer, *Od*. 24.227) and hoeing (242) around a plant, wearing protective clothing to ward off scratches from the brambles he tackles. Odysseus praises the care the old man has lavished on every plant in the garden, and (pretending to take the king for a servant) contrasts his tattered and worn clothing with his evident lack of

[23] Once again, Xenophon's weeds share this paradox, as both soldiers and drones.

laziness (251), implying intrinsic moral worth as well as his value to his putative masters.[24] Laertes's engagement in the menial task of weeding evokes the harshness of his old age in his son's absence, yet also reveals his essential goodness, in contrast with the idle suitors who consume another man's wealth.

A Roman author of a history of Alexander the Great, Quintus Curtius Rufus (probably first century CE), taps into similar attitudes in his tale of how the kingship of Sidon is conferred by Hephaistion (with Alexander's permission) on Abdalonymus. A man of royal descent, he lives in straitened circumstances, indeed, made poor as a result of his honesty (*Hist. Alex.* 4.1.20). When the deputation approaches, they find him weeding: "they enter the garden, which as it happened Abdalonymus was clearing by picking out the barren weeds" ("hortum intrant, quem forte steriles herbas eligens Abdalonymus repurgabat", 22). The combination of verbs here is interesting, offering at once the sense of a gardener's expert, dispassionate discernment in telling the desirable from the undesirable ("picking out," *eligens*), and the moralizing, emotive potential of a verb of cleansing ("clearing," *repurgabat*). This is no idler in a pleasure garden, nor yet one languishing in primitive squalor, but a virtuous chap whose humility is matched by his work ethic and his upright determination not to let the weeds grow under his feet.

In another of Xenophon's references to weeding, a moralizing element is again allowed to stand overtly alongside practical considerations: poorly performed hoeing around vines results, he says, in a more vigorous growth of weeds rather than their removal. This stands as one of many examples of agricultural failure being patently attributable to idleness (*Oec*. 20.20).[25] The moral superiority in having the weeding done can even be achieved at one remove, as it were, as when Varro's Axius presents his villa as less luxurious than that of

[24] κομιδὴ (*komidē*, see 245, 247), a word more often applied to care of men or horses, emphasizes the particular closeness of Laertes to his plants. For further reflections on the care required for non-miraculous gardens, see Harrison 2008, 1–13.

[25] For an argument that Xenophon's Socrates ultimately deconstructs this clear equation between hard work, agricultural success and virtue, see Kronenberg 2009, 62–66.

Appius, whose place is full of paintings and statues, but in the case of Axius's, "while there is no trace there of Lysippus or Antiphilus [famous sculptors], it is however full of traces of the hoer and the shepherd" ("vestigium ubi sit nullum Lysippi aut Antiphilu, at crebra sartoris et pastoris", Varro, *RR* 3.2.5).[26] A wealthy Roman landowner like Axius can outsource the effort of weeding to his slaves, while reaping the virtuous benefit himself.[27]

Getting down to the weeding is a marker of simple virtue, then, yet it can therefore also enter the realm of idyllic fantasy. Ovid, wistful in exile, sets out a daydream markedly influenced by Vergil's earlier works, imagining how he might herd goats and sheep, or set the ox to plow; in such a consoling fantasy, he would not even shrink from weeding: "nor would I hesitate to clear out the weeds with long-handled hoes" ("nec dubitem longis purgare ligonibus herbas", *Letters from the Black Sea* [*Ex Ponto*] 1.8.59). The double implication that this activity is at once virtuous and yet (at least to his past, urbane self) potentially demeaning is integral to the spirit of these lines, and also reminiscent of moments in the *Georgics* when Vergil has to remind the would-be farmer that even menial and mucky tasks should not be avoided (e.g., *Geor*. 1.80; 1.177; 4.242).[28]

In a related chain of thought, exceptional circumstances that make weeding unnecessary are often also connected with virtuous simplicity. In the Golden Age, a mythical far-off time before the development of morally ambiguous human activities like sailing and agriculture, there was no need for farm work of any kind and, at least in some of Ovid's versions, the first foods of humankind were *herbae* (weeds [?]) and *gramina* (grasses; see Ovid, *Am*. 3.10.9–10; *Ars* 2.475; *Fast*. 2.291–93; 4.395–98).[29] Plants, which in the postlapsarian age became weeds of no use, were in that blissful time simply nourishment-

[26] Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), Roman polymath and author of (amongst many other works) *Three Books on Rural Matters* (*Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres*).
[27] A passage ripe for a Marxist reading along the lines of Geue (2018).
[28] Again, for the sleight of hand, or willful blindness in this literary world to the realities of *who* does the labor in a slave-owning society, see Geue (2018).
[29]The more typical Golden Age staple is the acorn.

providing grasses or herbs rather than obstruction to fields of growing corn. Yet even a Golden Age can be viewed differently. In Catullus's (Gaius Valerius Catullus, ca. 84–54 BCE) poem 64, the countryside is abandoned by the wedding guests eager to celebrate the union of Peleus and Thetis, but far from ushering a return to spontaneous productivity, the lack of agricultural activity results in an encroaching wilderness: "nobody farms the countryside, the oxen's necks grow soft, the low-growing vineyards are not purged [of weeds] by the curved mattocks" ("rura colit nemo, mollescunt colla iuvencis, / non humilis curvis purgatur vinea rastris", 38–39). While later writers rehabilitate Catullus's mattock-free landscape as a less immediately ambiguous marker of an age or place when natural abundance renders agricultural labor unnecessary (see Verg., *Ecl*. 4.40–41; Hor., *Epod*. 16.43–44), Catullus's vineyards are left to the weeds by the people attracted to the luxuries of Peleus's palace.[30]

The neglect of weeding in an emphatically un-idyllic time of civil war similarly leads to more complex moral reflections: "Then Caesar sped off on his journey and, swifter than lightning or a mother tiger, raced through the ploughlands which the sluggish Apulian had deserted with his hoes and betrayed to the idle weeds" ("inde rapit cursus et, qua piger Apulus arva / deseruit rastris et inerti tradidit herbae, / ocior et caeli flammis et tigride feta / transcurrit", Lucan, *The Civil War* [*Bellum Civile*] 5.403–06).[31] Within this world of omni-perversion, the "sluggishness" of the war-weary populace who have left off the weeding cannot be neatly contrasted with Caesar's vigor; Caesar may possess energy, but his morally ambiguous status (a man whose personal ambition leads to civil war) cannot allow him to function as clear antithesis to the neglectors of the countryside. And yet the Apulians themselves cannot be wholly exempted from blame.In the *Georgics*, to which Lucan may

[30] Bramble confirms, "what [the reader] at first took for innocuous *otium* [leisure] turns out to be reprehensible *desidia* [idleness]" (1970, 39).

[31] Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39–65 CE), author of an epic on the civil wars between Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great).

loosely allude here, the deleterious effects of civil war on agriculture are given totemic prominence: “there is no worthy respect given to the plough, the fields grow rough with the farmers led away, and curved sickles are forged into the stiff sword” (“non ullus aratro / dignus honos, squalent abductis arva colonis, / et curvae rigidum falces conflantur in ensem”, *Geor*. 1.506–08). The picture is not positive, but the sense is that the farmers have been swept up by events beyond their control; they are passively led away. Lucan’s people, by contrast, are the ones who have actively deserted the fields and, more shamefully still, betrayed the land they should have been defending against the incursions of wild nature, handing it over to the enemy weeds.[32] In the visions of the countryside discussed in this section, thus, we have seen a weed-free landscape as representative both of a fantasy world in which agricultural labor is unnecessary, and of a managed, cultivated kind of nature that relies on the activity of fine, upstanding human beings to reach its full, fertile potential.

Utopian and Dystopian Weeds

Weeds belong in a category of paradox: on the one hand, they are strongly associated with a savage, undesirable kind of nature, of a fall from grace, yet on the other, they may participate in an ideal, or idealized, landscape of innocence. The death of the pastoral hero Daphnis prompts a dystopian resurgence of weeds in both arable and unfarmed land:[33]

> Often in the furrows to which we entrusted great barley grains, unlucky darnel
> and barren wild oats are born; in place of the soft violets, in place of the shining
> narcissus the thistle and *paliurus* thorn[34] with its sharp spikes springs up.
> grandia saepe quibus mandavimus hordea sulcis,
> infelix lolium et steriles nascuntur avenae;

[32] Fields are here deserted in the military sense (see *OED*, s.v. “desero” 2d).

[33] For modern parallels on the resurgence of weeds as central to many a post-apocalyptic narrative, see Mabey 2010, 233–40.

[34] The *paliurus* is often identified with Christ’s Thorn (*Paliurus australis*), although, in keeping with many references to plants in ancient texts, the identification is necessarily tentative. I have kept *paliurus* in my translation here to avoid sparking any association with the “crown of thorns,” since this is not present in the ancient sources which come from the pre-Christian era.

pro molli viola, pro purpureo narcisso

carduus et spinis surgit paliurus acutis.

(Vergil, *Eclogue* 5.36–39)

The contrast here is not simply—or not only—between the cultivated and the uncultivated. Although this appearance of darnel and wild oats among the crops is closely echoed in the *Georgics*, the implication here seems to be of weeds entirely taking the place of cultivated grains, not growing alongside and attacking them.[35] The situation in the *Georgics* may be grim, as the farmer is forced into constant battle against the invaders, but here in the *Eclogues* things are still more hopeless: natural productivity itself has taken a dystopian shift and what grows now is barren and useless rather than nourishing for humankind, or prickly and ugly rather than delicate and aesthetically pleasing.[36]

Death and the dystopian triumph of weeds are connected again in a third century BCE poetic epitaph on the simple countryman Alcimenes: "Sir, address the small mound and this little tombstone of the wretched Alcimenes, even if it is all hidden under sharp *paliurus* thorn and bramble, which I, Alcimenes, used to slay" ("Τὴν ὀλίγην βῶλον καὶ τοῦτ' ὀλιγήριον, ὦνερ, / σῆμα ποτίφθεγξαι τλάμονος Ἀλκιμένευς, / εἰ καὶ πᾶν κέκρυπται ὑπ' ὀξείης παλιούρου / καὶ βάτου, ἥν ποτ' ἐγὼ δήϊον Ἀλκιμένης", Leonidas of Tarentum, *AP* 7.656). Somehow thorns and brambles achieve immortality, while the all too mortal Alcimenes, once able at least to fight his corner against the weeds, sees the war is lost and his own tomb obscured by his enemies.[37] Brambles and thorns would be welcome only, it appears, to the willfully counter-cultural, like the misanthrope Timon, who in death wishes to eschew even the company of birds: "Dry soil, twine all around me a thorn bush, or the wild arms of a twisted bramble, so that not even a bird in springtime may rest its light tread on me, and I may be left

[35] Vergil may hint at theories of degeneration of grain species: see above in footnote 16.

[36] A metaphorical comparison can be found in Job 31.40: if he has, contrary to his declaration, committed various sins, "let thistles grow instead of wheat and cockle ["noxious weed" in some translations] instead of barley."

[37] For an argument that Vergil alludes to Leonidas in *Ecl*. 5, see Schmidt 1968.

alone, reclining in peace" ("Τρηχεῖαν κατ' ἐμεῦ, ψαφαρὴ κόνι, ῥάμνον ἐλίσσοις / πάντοθεν, ἢ σκολιῆς ἄγρια κῶλα βάτου, / ὡς ἐπ' ἐμοὶ μηδ' ὄρνις ἐν εἴαρι κοῦφον ἐρείδοι / ἴχνος, ἐρημάζω δ' ἥσυχα κεκλιμένος", Zenodotus or Rhianus [third century BCE], *AP* 7.315.1–4). The grumpy old man finds an affinity with and protection from these sharp, unattractive plants. His use of κῶλα (*kōla*, "arms") for bramble branches is far from unparalleled, but it is tempting to see this as a live metaphor: the man who hates all company finds a close embrace in the thorns which both hide his tomb and represent his character.

Yet weeds are nothing if not tricky and contradictory. The very symbols of the countryside gone to rack and ruin can also represent the idyllic and unspoiled. *Ulva*, a generic term for aquatic grass, is classed as a weed to be ripped out of a willow bed by the agricultural writer Cato (*Agr*. 37.2) yet for poets can either form part of nightmarish visions of the underworld marshes (e.g., Vergil, *Aen*. 6.416; Propertius 4.11.16) or decorate an idealized riverbank landscape (Vergil, *Ecl*. 8.85–89). Similarly, brambles and thorns, which choke fields and scratch sheep, might nevertheless form part of an idyll, "and the tree-frog murmurs from afar amongst the thick-growing thorns of brambles" ("ἀ δ' ὀλολυγών / τηλόθεν ἐν πύκιναῖσι βάτων τρύζεσκεν ἀκάνθαις", Theocritus [early third century BCE], *Idyll* 7.139–40).[38] Horace's (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–8 BCE) tired shepherd and flock find rest in the shade of "the thorn-thicket of bristling Silvanus" ("horridi / dumeta Silvani", *Odes* 3.29.22–23), and the attractive young Chloe, fawn-like within a landscape of erotic idyll, may be startled by the movement of lizards within a bramble bush (*Odes* 1.23.6–7).

We return, then, to the question of definition by context: the cliché of the weed as "a plant in the wrong place" has more than a ring of truth about it. Yet even plants defined by the site of their growth as weeds can—in more practical outlooks, at any rate—be transformed into something useful. Thus Cato (*Agr*. 37.2) picks out elder, hemlock, long grasses, and sedge as weeds to be removed from the field, but thereafter to be given as

[38] See Vergil, *Ecl*. 1.74–75; *Geor*. 3.335–38; *Aen*. 4.525–27.

bedding to sheep and oxen. The *ulva* mentioned above as either nuisance weed or fantasy backdrop can also be useful in providing fodder or bedding.[39] Xenophon distinguishes between more and less careful farmers, the former with the sense to make use of natural resources readily available to him, casting the weeds he has had to remove from his fields into a nearby stagnant pool in order to make a liquid manure (*Oec*. 20.11). Weeds may lurk within stark utopian/dystopian polarities, but can also grow in the ambiguous, pragmatic middle ground.

The Symbolic Weed

When weeds enter the broader symbolic and metaphorical realm, once again their usefulness and interest as a fluid category is apparent, and once again notions of the practical and "real" are intertwined with the poetic. The moralizing element already noted in the "good fight" that is actual weeding often reappears in the metaphorical act: vice and the vicious (as well as milder moral or stylistic failings) are frequently figured as weeds to be purged by the virtuous through the practices of self-cultivation. In Plato's (ca. 429–347 BCE) *Euthyphro*, Socrates notes that it is right to look after the young in society just as a farmer tends most carefully to his young plants, and he assumes that Meletus, who has brought the indictment against Socrates for corrupting the young, must be thinking along these lines: "and perhaps Meletus is clearing us away first, as things corrupting the growth of new plants" ("καὶ δὴ καὶ Μέλητος ἴσως πρῶτον μὲν ἡμᾶς ἐκκαθαίρει τοὺς τῶν νέων τὰς βλάστας διαφθείροντας", *Euth.* 3a). Here Socrates imagines himself as the noxious weed interfering with the healthy growth of the desirable plants that are the young men of Athens, placing Meletus (doubtless ironically) in the position of a virtuous hoer of young minds.[40]

[39] Fodder: Vergil, *Geor*. 3.175. Bedding: Ovid, *Fasti* 1.200; 5.519. Compare Theocritus, *Id*. 7.133, where *schoinos*, a type of rush, performs a similar function in a line immediately preceding a particularly idyllic evocation of the countryside in summer. Columella also finds a use for it as a soft binding for tender young vines in *RR* 4.13.2; see Pliny *HN* 17.209.

[40] The verb I have translated "clearing away," ἐκκαθαίρει (*ekkathairei*), seems strong, with its connotations of ritual cleansing, but it also belongs to the realm of the practical, of clearing ships' runways in Homer (*Il*. 2.153) and even (as simple καθαίρειν [*kathairein*]) weeding itself (Xen., *Oec*. 20.11). As noted above, the Latin verb *purgare* shares a similar range of meaning.

An external enemy can be a weed; yet weeds may also be the enemy within, one's character flaws that need to be isolated and exterminated: "Shake yourself out to see whether nature has sown any vice within you, or even bad habit; for bracken grows up in neglected fields and has to be burned out" ("te ipsum / concute, num qua tibi vitiorum inseverit olim / natura aut etiam consuetudo mala; namque / neglectis urenda filix innascitur agris", Horace, *Satires* 1.3.34–37). One's character, like a field or garden, needs cultivation, and may similarly face attack from the weeds of vice. The kind of accidental "sowing" here done either by one's innate personality or the accretion of bad habits may result in an unwelcome crop of weeds; and this particular weed, bracken (*filix*), has a notably cussed nature, making its way into figurative use to mean a no-good person (see Petronius [Petronius Arbiter; first century CE], *Satyricon* 45.9). Vergil characterizes it as "bracken hateful to the curved plough" ("filicem curvis invisam . . .aratris", *Geor*. 2.189), the kind of weed that gets in the way at the very start of the process of arable farming, and Horace's solution is accordingly aggressive: not a simple hoeing or picking out, but a wholesale burning. In a similar vein, Pliny characterizes wicked, violent men as brambles fit only for the bonfire: "leaving those brambles of men to their own consumption in the fire" ("relictis exustioni suae istis hominum rubis", *HN* 18.5).[41] Weeds also perform a moralizing function in the Christian tradition. In the biblical "Parable of the Tares," a farmer has sown good seed in his field, but an enemy sneaks in and sows tares (often identified as darnel); contrary to the advice to pluck out such invaders generally seen in the Classical texts, in the Bible, lest the good wheat be uprooted with the weed, the farmer allows the tares to grow alongside the grain and rather separates them at harvest, burning the tares and storing the wheat. This represents the separation of the righteous and the evil at the end of the world (Matthew 13.24–43).

[41] Ennius probably also uses weeds in a moralizing metaphor (see Courtney 1993, 38–39), when he pairs darnel and wild oats growing within a crop of wheat as the object of careful weeding: "when he sees oats and darnel growing amongst the wheat, he picks it out, isolates it, removes it" ("ubi videt avenam lolium crescere inter triticum, selegit, secernit, aufert", Enn., *Praecepta* 42, Courtney = 31–33 V).

Yet some troublesome weeds may also represent the kind of irritant one can learn to live with: “But as for the idea that a life in which there is some evil cannot be a happy one, then therefore does a corn-field not have a thick and abundant crop just because you can see wild oats anywhere in it?” (“At enim qua in vita est aliquid mali, ea beata esse non potest. Ne seges quidem igitur spicis uberibus et crebris si avenam uspiam videris?”, Cicero [Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106–43 BCE], *On Final Ends* [*De finibus*] 5.91). A pragmatic moral outlook perhaps reflects a pragmatic agricultural one too: for all that Vergil’s farmers may be urged to exterminate every blade of wild oats, what a farmer in an age before Glyphosate can realistically aim to achieve is a balance in which the prevalence of weeds is not so great as to hinder the growth of his grain.

Back in the metaphorical realm, and in ways broadly parallel to representations of the composition of poetry as akin to farming or gardening, ancient guides to the study and perfection of oratory offer particularly fertile ground for thinking about weeds:[42]

> There is nothing more fertile than intellects, especially those cultivated by training; but just as fertile and rich arable land brings forth not just crops, but also weeds, deadliest enemies of the crops, so sometimes from those commonplaces either some levity or something irrelevant or unhelpful to the case arises.
>
> Nihil enim est feracius ingeniis, eis praesertim quae discipliniis exculta sunt. Sed ut segetes fecundae et uberes non solum fruges verum herbas etiam effundunt inimicissimas frugibus, sic interdum ex illis locis aut levia quaedam aut causis aliena aut non utilia gignuntur.
>
> (Cicero, *Orator* 48)

The weed grows from the same soil, the same conditions as the desirable arable crop; so, too, even a trained orator may through inattention allow the weeds of cliché and digression to spring up. Although Cicero does not explicitly extend the metaphor beyond

[42] On agricultural imagery more widely in Roman oratory, see Connors 1997.

> this passage, his emphasis on the importance of the orator's use of a *dilectus magnus* ("rigid discrimination," 49) benefits from some residual sense of this raking through the mind to weed out the undesirable, specious, or irrelevant. In the *Dialogus*, however, weeds move from the category of an enemy within to represent, rather, the disorderliness of oratory in its entirety: Our own state, too, for as long as it went astray, as long as it wore itself out with parties, factions, and internal strife, as long as there was no peace in the forum, no harmony in the senate, no moderation in the law courts, no respect for the upper orders, no moderation among the magistrates, for sure it brought forth a more powerful eloquence, just as the untilled field has some more thriving weeds.
>
> Nostra quoque civitas, donec erravit, donec se partibus et dissensionibus et discordiis confecit, donec nulla fuit in foro pax, nulla in senatu concordia, nulla in iudiciis moderatio, nulla superiorum reverentia, nullus magistratuum modus, tulit sine dubio valentiorem eloquentiam, sicut indomitus ager habet quasdam herbas laetiores.
>
> (Tacitus [P(?) Cornelius Tacitus, ca. 56–119 CE], *Dialogus* 40.4)

I offer the specific translation of "weeds" for the less specific *herbae* for the sake of a neater transition in my argument, while, I admit, eliding the rather pointed lack of clarity here. The "crops" produced by the untamed field of a state in times of political and social upheaval are insolent creatures of paradox. Fertile, strong, and exuberant, they *could* represent a fortuitous emergence of cultivated varieties of plant in an uncultivated context. This fits with the characterization of great oratory as something appealing in itself, but not sufficiently beneficial to outweigh the downsides of the circumstances needed for its production: the Gracchi's bad laws outweigh their eloquence, Cicero's excellence in oratory did not compensate for his death. Equally, though, these could be *herbae* as weeds, strong growth which might even be aesthetically pleasing, but cannot be reaped and used for the benefit of humankind. Their "thriving" is thus self-serving, due to the absence of human intervention in

and control of the natural environment. There is a likely interaction here with an earlier employment of an agricultural simile, when it is claimed that the greatest delight comes from extempore speaking: “For as regards the intellect, just as in the field, although those crops which have been long sown and worked upon are welcome, all the same those which arise of their own accord are more welcome” (“nam <in> ingenio quoque, sicut in agro, quamquam <grata sint quae> diu serantur atque elaborentur, gratiora tamen quae sua sponte nascuntur”, *Dialogus* 6.6). As analogies go, this is questionable: while those with an overtly agricultural rather than oratorical interest may welcome the help nature can offer and appreciate some things which grow of their own accord (*sponte sua*), the idea that they are *preferable* to the cultivated crop is rather hard to sustain, especially if one associates spontaneous growth in a field (as one well might) with the growth of weeds. Within what we might call the agricultural tradition of writings on oratory, this also bucks the trend, since these analogies generally stick with the more intuitive pattern equating training with cultivation (as in the Cicero passage just discussed). It is no doubt an accident, but for my purposes a happy accident, then, that we see both of these potential references to weedy growth in the *Dialogus* as embodying something ambiguous and counter-intuitive: categories that at once stick and cannot stick; symbols of imperfection that may not be so imperfect after all.

The Nettle: A Foot in Many Camps

I now turn to the nettle, a plant which illustrates particularly well the great difference that both practical and cultural interactions can make to the profile of a particular plant. In many cases in modern English-language poetry, as in Anglophone culture more widely, nettles accompany the likes of thistle and goosegrass in the role of the aggressive, insurgent weed. So, for example, Vernon Scannell’s poem “Nettles” (1980) shares with Vergil and others the marked military metaphor to illustrate the combative relationship between people and unwanted plants. The nettles that sting his young son are termed a “regiment of spite” (3)

and a "fierce parade" (11), imputing an element of malice alongside the military imagery in a manner akin to that seen in the *Georgics* and *Eclogues.* Similarly, too, the very temporary nature of any victory over these weeds is emphasized; the poet has "slashed in fury" (10) with his billhook to cut down the nettles, but the sun and rain assist in the generation of new "recruits" (15) equipped to inflict wounds again. Yet there is also an element here of the transgression and mixing of categories familiar in ancient approaches to weeds, with the focus in the poem's opening lines as much on linguistic idiom—the inappropriate implication of comfort in the term "nettle bed"—as it is about seeing the weeds themselves as occupying some kind of contradictory or liminal status.[43]

From the ancient perspective, however, nettles provide a rather different example of the cultural construction of categories with which I began. Although nettles grew in similar contexts in both the ancient and modern worlds, and although then as now they had their stings, the ancient literary nettle predominantly appears neither as an enemy nor a nostalgic marker of the pastoral, but as a plant with practical uses. Most often, thus, in ancient thought, it falls into the category not of weed, but of medicinal plant and/or vegetable, and as such might belong outside the scope of this discussion.[44] Yet its fierce nature and habit of growing on disturbed and then neglected soil help it to straddle categories, putting it into an "undesirable" as well as "useful" plant box.

As bracken can represent a stubborn nuisance, so the stinging nettle finds its way into metaphorical usage to connote bad temper or persistent, intrusive lustful impulses, and general trouble in love.[45] In a charming instance of reclaiming an apparently negative

[43] Even in a poem such as Edward Thomas's "Tall Nettles" (1920), where the nettle represents an idealized return to nature, covering up rusting agricultural machinery, the aesthetic appreciation of its dusty flowers ("as well as any bloom upon a flower / I like the dust on the nettles," 7–8) is clearly set against the current of cultural expectation that nettles are, at best, beneath notice, and, at worst, unwelcome and all too vigorous weeds.

[44] The scholia on Aristophanes's *Knights* 422 even explicitly say it is a wild vegetable. Theophrastus similarly lists it along with other vegetables that require cooking before consumption as well as categorizing it among uncultivated herbs (*HP* 7.7.2), his only reference to the plant. For Horace it is also a vegetable, one which represents a life of virtuous, Stoic simplicity (*Epistles* 1.2.7–9).

[45] Temper: Aristophanes (ca .460–386 BCE), *Wasps* 884. Lust: Juvenal (Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis; fl. second century CE), *Satires* 2.128, 11.167–68. Lovesickness: *Anth. Pal*. 12.124.5–6; see Theocritus, *Id*. 7.109–10

association, matrons on a sex-strike for peace are "womb-endowed stinging nettles" ("μητριδίων ἀκαληφῶν", Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 549), the plant's notoriously fierce nature implicitly combining with its health-bringing qualities, perhaps, as the women are envisaged simultaneously as warriors and ones to bring an end to war. The nettle's vicious qualities cannot be denied (as Pliny has it: "what could be more hateful than a nettle?" [urtica quid esse invisius potest?", *HN* 22.31]), yet they are balanced out by its healing properties, offering respite from troubles ranging from the common cold to hemlock poison.[46]

But it is in a brief reference in Ovid's *Cures for Love* (*Remedia Amoris*) that the nettle's refusal to be easily categorized becomes most apparent: "Learn to be cured by the one who taught you to love; one hand will both deal you a wound and bring help. The same earth nourishes both medicinal and noxious plants, and the rose is often next to the nettle" ("Discite sanari, per quem didicistis amare: / una manus vobis vulnus opemque feret. / terra salutares herbas, eadem nocentes / nutrit et urticae proxima saepe rosa est", 43–46). The immediate contrast lies between the desirable rose and undesirable nettle: the rose is here implied to be useful medicinally and, more broadly, is readily connected with beauty (and, indeed, poetry) in the ancient as much as the modern context.[47] The nettle, meanwhile, appears to be classified as a weed, a *herba nocens* in the agricultural sense (e.g., Varro, *RR* 1.55.7). Yet in this opposition between *herbae nocentes* and *salutares* ("harmful" and "health-bringing" weeds), it is the nettle which may have better claim than the rose to the title of *herba salutaris*, both in medicinal fact—the nettle having a wider range of helpful properties than the rose—and in the symbolic realm, as the rose also represents the very love from which the student of the *Remedia* wishes to extricate himself. With this, we might see the cultural categories shift as the nettle becomes the medicinal plant and the rose a kind of

where the lover tells Pan to sleep on a bed of nettles if he will not help the lover.

[46] E.g., Nicander of Colophon (fl. c.130 BCE), *Alexipharmaca* 201, 427–28, 551; Catullus 44.15.

[47] E.g., Sappho refers to poetic talent as the "roses of Pieria",meaning the roses of the Muses, ("βρόδων τὠν ἐκ Πιερίας", fr. 55). On roses in Roman culture, see Mello 2003; more broadly, see Horwood 2018.

weed. All the same, one might recall the rejection of aphrodisiac potions in Ovid's earlier *The Art of Love* (*Ars Amatoria* 2.417), where nettle seed is supposed to spur a man along: nettles can in their way be as erotic as roses. The *Remedia* passage thus leaves us with a particularly knotty conundrum of classification: Is the nettle a weed or a medicinal plant? Does it belong to the sphere of medicine proper, or the murkier world of love potions? Is it a true contrast with the rose, or simply another version of the same kind of thing? Is it with us or against us?

Conclusion

Weeds are undesirable from the point of view of humans who want to use plants for specific purposes: they get in the way of the plants we do want; they disrupt the flawless vistas of our fields and gardens; they symbolize the unwelcome and the recalcitrant.. Their disorderliness extends even into the metaphysical realm, where they test the completeness of anthropocentric understandings of the natural world, and challenge the very notions of classification and definition. . The self-same species can belong in the category of "weed," yet also be vegetable, herb, ornament, wildflower. In literary terms, too, the weed is ambiguous, mercurial, and offers a paradoxical poetics of the unwelcome and unpleasant, yet also of the persistent, the independent, the adaptable. Wherever we have culture (as well as agriculture), we have weeds, which we may or may not come to love.

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