Introduction

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People cannot survive without plants. We rely on them for food, shelter, clothes, tools – as much now as we ever did before modernity. Our relationship with plants predated the emergence of written language: that history is archaeological. But as long as we have had the words to write we have written about plants: that writing is the subject of this book. The history of literature about plants is long, rich, and varied: the task of accounting for it would demand many volumes. Nonetheless, this collection is ambitious in scope. Its sections cover historical periods of Greek, Latin, Norse, and Anglophone plant literatures; prominent modern plant genres, and the plant writing of most global regions. The scholars who took on the difficult task of accounting for a region's plant literature have done so with elegance, many of them focusing on the long history of literature about a single plant species whose place in the region's culture deserves attention for its sustained national, religious, or ethnic importance.

Plants are so present in our lives – urban or rural – they often go unseen. It is through art and writing that we attend to them. And yet, writing on plants often speaks primarily about our understanding of ourselves. Plants are central to our awareness and yet distinct from human life: in art, the space between us and them comes to life. The growing field of interdisciplinary plant studies has explored the question of our difference from plants but even that question has a long history, to which this volume attends. Michael Marder has observed that human beings have at their disposal a 'wide array of possible approaches to the world of vegetation' and often 'we overlook trees, bushes, shrubs, and flowers in our everyday dealings, to the extent that these plants form the inconspicuous backdrop of our lives'. Because of this inconspicuousness, 'we take plants for granted'. And yet, 'the absolute familiarity of plants coincides with their sheer strangeness, the incapacity of humans to recognize elements of ourselves in the form of vegetal being, and, hence, the uncanny – strangely familiar – nature of our relation to them'.[1] To make nature familiar, to make it

strange – humans never tire of this particular game. It is a game we play through art and literature.

The chapters in this volume explore some of the most abiding human concerns about plants: the extent to which we resemble them or they us; our use of plants to negotiate geo-political conflict; the ethical dimension of our plant sensibilities and the possible sensitive nature of plants; the moral dimension of our desire to engage aesthetically with plants; and the ways in which human–plant relations have been used to make and unmake national and ethnic identities. A number of chapters examine the ways we have used plants to navigate modernity's cultural and intellectual shift from theological engagement with the created world to the discourses of modern science – and more recent attempts to rectify lost knowledge traditions in the face of empiricism and positivism. Literature about plants has been especially attentive to recovering a lost vision of plant life – whether in the pre-modern Anglophone world or among Indigenous communities still fighting to hold onto their long-standing belief in plant sentience. In some modern novels, the loss of this knowledge takes the form of plant horror. As Leslie Wylie argues, in *La vorágine*, the description of plants as 'sentient, communicative beings has powerful consequences for our understandings of the relationship between human and non-human nature. Rubber trees in Rivera's novel are not presented as the inert matter of global commodity chains, but as mutilated beings, who, alongside their enslaved human tappers, for the same master shed different juices: rubber and blood.'

Plant horror asks us to see our relationship with plants at the same moment as we recognise the sudden and unnerving loss of that relationship. As a literary strategy, it is not so very different from the theological work of tree poems from 'The Dream of the Rood' to more recent depictions of the crucifix as a 'living' tree that perceives its role in the divine narrative of the Crucifixion. Michael D. J. Bintley provides insight into the history of this trope in Old Norse and Old English poetry, but we can see it at work in Shakespeare and in the devotional poetry of each succeeding age. The capacity for plants to take on a role as agents of the divine mind can be traced in the theological traditions of all religions. Some of these traditions use their attention to the divine/natural question in order to interrogate its implications for human consciousness or sensual awareness. For Xiaofei Tian the lotus in Chinese literature is 'paradoxically' an embodiment of sensual desires that do not interfere with its capacity as an 'appropriate embodiment of Buddhist teachings: the true nature of the phenomenal world is emptiness' while material form is 'illusory and unreal'

and yet, 'one may understand the principle of emptiness and obtain spiritual enlightenment through experiencing and penetrating the sensuous appearances of physical reality'. These seeming paradoxes, so productive of mystical experience, often focus on plants because they belong to the created world – and have a divine life – but their role in that world is different from our own. The uncertain nature of our difference from plants has proved very productive for mystical thought.

The literary genres section of this handbook offers chapters that consider not only the kinds of plant writing but the ways in which we have used plants to think about literary form itself. Jessica Rosenberg's chapter on early modern printed herbals reveals a genre at once encyclopaedic and aesthetic, a genre that opens up questions about modernity's understanding of texts and their uses. We now assume that some texts are 'useful' and those that are not are pleasurable, peripheral, even wasteful. The same could be said about the way we categorise plants. Holly Corfield-Carr looks with the eyes of a poet at formal definitions that render poetry cognate with plants species. And for Robert N. Watson it is precisely the manner by which seventeenth-century poets described the human–plant relationship that distinguished them as metaphysical or cavalier. This distinction is formal but it relies also on the period's increasingly polarised political and theological allegiances.

We offer this handbook in the hope that it, in Giulia Pacini's words, 'speaks to the splendour of a literary tradition in which plant-writing has long allowed authors to ponder fundamental questions about the nature of life and death, the mystery of liveliness, and the relationship between the human and the nonhuman'.

Notes

1 M. Marder, *Plant Thinking* (Columbia University Press, 2013) 3–4.

PART I

Historical Periods

CHAPTER 1

The Ancient World
Us and Them

Rebecca Armstrong

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

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

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

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

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

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