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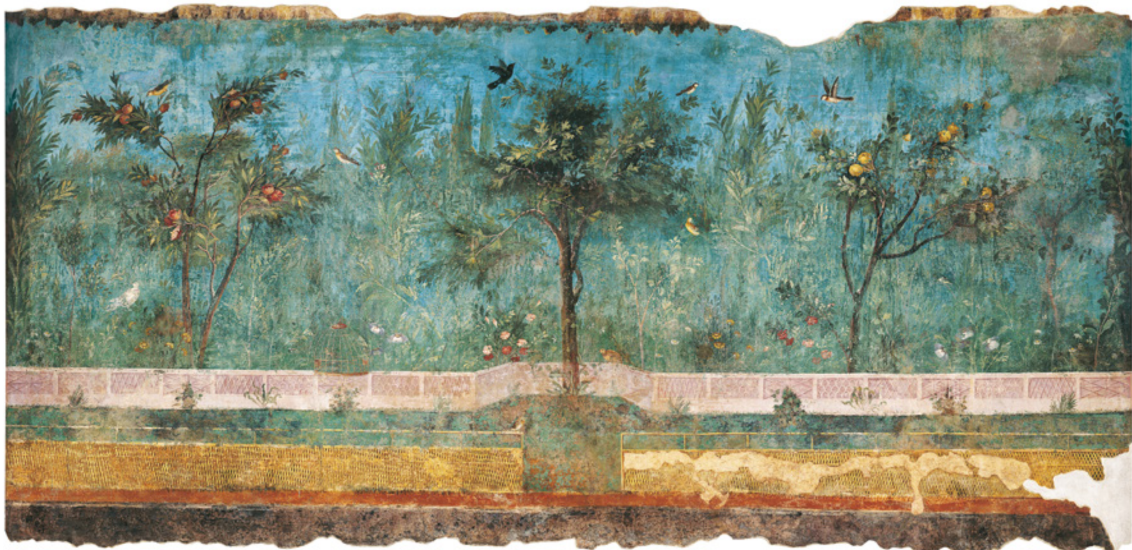
BIODIVERSE POEMS, POSTHUMAN POETS: GARDENS IN/AS ROMAN POETRY



Images courtesy Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Ministry of Culture, Italy

Let us begin with an image. It comes from the cycle of frescos found in the famous subterranean room - probably the triclinium - of the Villa of Livia ad Gallinas Albas at Prima Porta, now housed in the Palazzo Massimo, and which provides the focus for the collection of essays in this volume.

If we look closely, it is clear that the scene is an *adynaton,* a natural impossibility. Pomegranates and quinces jostle with iris, daisies and chamomile, flowering and bearing fruit with no regard for seasonal propriety. Roses, poppies, and chrysanthemums spool out against a backdrop of

Rene Magritte, *La Condition Humaine / The Human Condition*, 1933, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, USA. © Peter Barritt / Alamy Stock Photo

oak, pine, cypress, palm, and oleander. Partridges and goldfinches feast on the fruit trees and rest on their branches. At first viewing, we are looking at a scene of hyper-fertility and abundance, at the idealized and unbridled play of nature (*natura*), free from human intervention. When we lower our gaze, however, the perimeter wall with a solitary birdcage perched suggestively upon it, and the garden path, the *ambulatio,* tell us otherwise. We are looking, in fact, at the imposition of culture (*cultus*) upon nature, at nature contained, an enclosed space, 'paradise' in the most literal sense of the word (*paradeisos,* from the Persian *pairidaeza, pairi* [around] + *daeza/diz* [brick]). Of course, what we are looking at is a garden. At their most basic level, gardens always imply an interplay between nature, art and artifice, suggesting a level of cultural control over the natural, whilst also presenting nature itself as a work of art. The garden is where nature and culture come together.

It is also important to understand the fresco itself as another layer of artifice and technology, a cultural lens through which nature is mediated. This is further complicated when we consider where the fresco stood in relation to Livia's villa: one of its functions was to give the viewer the appearance that she was looking out into the gardens that surrounded the villa complex, including the central courtyard and the grand terrace garden that lay beyond the triclinium's

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walls. The fictive garden is placed in front of the real garden, not so much replacing it as merging with it. We might be reminded, at this point, of René Magritte's *La Condition Humaine* (1933).

Magritte gave a concise account of his own work: "In front of a window seen from inside a room, I placed a painting representing exactly that portion of the landscape covered by the painting. Thus, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the spectator, it was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape."[1] Magritte's last sentence quietly deconstructs the conventional divide between nature and cultural artifice, between reality and representation: as much as Livia's fresco or Magritte's painting occlude nature, they also collapse any distinction, inviting the viewer to identify the boundary of the fresco or the painting directly with the boundaries of the gardens and landscapes themselves. Nature is not something 'out there,' brought into domestic space through copy and reproduction, but a presence which can exert direct control over culture, can even display its own technologies of art and artifice, a point that writers in Antiquity often extol (epitomized by Ovid's description of the grove of Diana in the *Metamorphoses*, in which "nature had imitated art in its design"). The afterlife of Livia's frescos tells a wonderful story. After the subterranean room was discovered in the 1800s, the report of the Pontifical Ministry of Public Works recorded that, "the ceiling had entirely collapsed and the stucco decoration which once decorated the vault was found among the rubble which filled the room."[2] Over time, nature had imposed itself upon its own representation. Horace predicted something similar of Roman luxury villas in *Epistle* 1.10:

> A forest nursed among colorful columns, and a house which looks out on distant fields is praised.
> You will drive out nature with a pitchfork, but she will always hurry back,
> and, stealthily, she will burst through your foolish disdain, triumphant.

In the garden of Livia, we arrive at something not far from Donna Haraway's notion of 'natureculture,'[3] which eschews the traditional structuralist 'nature/culture' binary in favor of a more entangled and ontologically flat model, in which nature and culture are co-dependent, and who and what counts as an actor is constantly up for grabs, making it very hard to determine where the human and non-human (i.e. culture and nature) definitively begin and end. This is a posthuman perspective that is gaining traction in the classics,[4] and equally so in the art world, as the recent *Natureculture* exhibition at Fondation Beyeler, Basel (June 13 to September 21, 2021) shows.

In this article, I turn to the poetic correlative of Livia's naturalcultural world, and explore the interactions between nature and culture in the literary gardens found in (some) Greek and (mainly) Roman poetry. I attempt to map out the networks of solidarity that emerge between poets, poems and gardens, and the literary procedures whereby the human and non-human, nature and culture, impact each other and become entangled with each other. Although plants in literature might often seem mere background details, they constantly evoke and intersect with the central themes of classical literature. Latin poetry and its Greek predecessors canvas vast biospheres in their descriptions of plantlife, gardens and natural landscapes; plants and flowers also constitute a rich metaphorical field through which poets can define their poetry, their poetical subject matter, and their own poetic identity. But if we push beyond the figurative implications of this imagery, we find numerous points of contact and influence between the realms of nature and culture. When, for example, a poet describes her poetry as a flower or a garden, what happens when we think about the processes by which Roman poetry books were manufactured from a richly biodiverse plant-world, and how this can impact the meaning of the text? Or, when a poet compares humans (the poet, the lover, the young hero) to flowers or gardens, how does this reflect the ways in which categories of 'human' and 'non-human' were defined and interrogated? And finally, it is important to

consider the political contexts of these poetic blossomings, and their relationship to empire and imperial forces.Uprooting, transplanting, grafting, bordering: these are all terms that apply equally to humans as well as plants, and can point to an affinity between the two. For Roman poets in the Imperial period, the garden represented a tool to reflect on the nature of imperial power, on relationships between ruler and ruled, and the poet's complicity in, or resistance to, the imperial project, both in terms of the autocratic power of an emperor, and in terms of the practices of colonial expansion.

Biodiverse Poems

Poets in antiquity like to think of their poems as flowers. It is a metaphor that never grows old, constantly reseeds, forms new roots (you get the idea). In rhetorical texts, variations on the word *flos* (flower) are often used to denote an embellished, 'florid' style. This could be a pejorative term: Quintilian mocks the self-indulgences of the contemporary style of composition with its 'flowerets' (*Inst*. 2.5.22: *recentis huius lasciviae flosculis*). But, as often as not, it was deployed as a point of praise. Columella says of Virgil's *Georgics fourth* that "he illuminated (*illuminavit*) the subject of bees with poetic flowers (*poeticis floribus*)," and Sidonius Apollinaris, writing in the fourth century CE, describes Horace's *Odes* as "blossoming with many-coloured flowers of words" (*Ep*. 9.13.2: *vernans…verborum violis multicoloribus*). The weaving and arrangement of flowers as a common metaphor for poetic composition is present in Greek poetry from the early lyric poets onwards (Sappho 55.2-3, for example, or Pindar *Olympian* 6.86-7 and 9.48-9), and extends right through to the Roman authors of Late Antiquity. An entire garden could symbolize a poem: the imperial author composes his *numerosus hortus* to discuss gardening in Book 10 of his prose work *De Re Rustica,* slipping into verse to pick up where Virgil left off in the *Georgics*.

Michael Roberts observes that one purpose of this floral imagery was to promote the desired virtue of literary variety (*varietas* in Latin, *poikilia* in Greek), both in the composition of the poem itself from a wide choice of words, but also in the arrangement of a collection of poems.[5] In other words, a book of poetry was expected to display rich verbal and literary biodiversity. Writers titled collections of shorter poems with words that suggested such a variety of different flowers: Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights,* pref. 5-6) writes how authors, "since they had laboriously gathered varied, manifold and indiscriminate learning, therefore invented ingenious titles to correspond with that idea:" Cicero's *Limon* ('meadow'), is a case in point, as is Statius *Silvae* ('woods'), which Sidonius Apollinaris later described as a 'jewelled field' (*Carm*. 22.9: *gemmea prata Silvularum*). Words for joining, blending, weaving, and combining (*miscere, iungere, serere*) often point to the arrangement and combination of these flower-poems. In Greek literature, such collections of various poems were called *anthologia,* which comes from the word *anthos* (flower), or *stephanoi* (garlands); in Roman poetry, Martial describes his eighth book of epigrams as a *serta,* the Latin word for garland. In his monumental *Natural Histories,* Pliny, referencing Cato, describes the process of creating a real garland, emphasising the importance of variety, and noting that the plants used should come directly from the garden.

> Cato bade us include among our garden plants flowers for garlands, especially because of
> the indescribable delicacy of their blossoms, for nobody can find it easier to tell of them
> than Nature does to give them colours, as here she is in her most sportive mood, playful
> in her great joy at her varied fertility… not even the painter's art, however, suffices to copy their colours and the variety of their combinations.
>
> (*NH* 21.1)

For Pliny, the flowers of the garland create an artform of nature that exceeds the artifice and technologies of human culture, to which the poets and painters themselves strived to assimilate

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their own creative labour. The poetic *anthologos* or *stephanos* stressed the identification of poems as flowers, and highlighted the poetic diversity the collection worked to display. Take the famous *Garland* of Meleager, published in the first century BC, a collection of choice epigrams by forty-six different Greek poets from every lyric period up to the editor Meleager's own time. In the elegiac poem that introduces the anthology, Meleager describes each poem as the flower, fruit or plant of its respective poet, all woven into a garland of verse by the editor himself. Here is a small cutting:

Many lilies of Anyte he wove, and many of Moero,
only a few flowers of Sappho, but they are roses ;
narcissus, too, heavy with the clear song of Melanippides
and a young branch of the vine of Simonides ;
and there he wove in the sweet-scented lovely iris of Nossis,
the wax for whose writing-tablets Love himself melted;
and with it marjoram from fragrant Rhianus,
and Erinna's sweet crocus, maiden-hued, the hyacinth of Alcaeus,
the vocal poets' flower, and a dark-leaved branch of Samius' laurel.

(5-14)

The rest of the poem proceeds in a similar way, matching poet with flower and linking them together with verbs that denote gathering or weaving. Included is "the young branch of Simonides' vine" (νέον οἰνάνθης κλῆμα Σιμωνίδεω) and "the first flowers of Menecrates' pomegranate" (ῥοιῆς ἄνθη πρῶτα Μενεκράτεος); the invective poetry of Archilochus is represented by the cardoon, or thistle. Meleager goes on to describe the more recent poems as, "newly-written shoots" (ἄλλων τ᾽ ἔρνεα πολλὰ νεόγραφα), and his own offerings, humbly, as little snowdrops (λευκόϊα). It is an extraordinary poem that describes both poems and poets in botanical terms, whilst also attributing creative agency to the flowers themselves, blurring the line between nature and culture. Importantly, it also represents the variety of poets included in the garland as an extremely rich biodiversity canvassing the entire Mediterranean, which matches the geographical diversity of the Greek poets themselves, from 'Sicilian anemones' to the 'Syrian nard of Hermodorus' in the east. The garland embodies a vast ecosystem of plant-life, and there are obvious *political* consequences of the control of and imposition of order upon such an expanse in imperial terms, in which the poetic text participates (on which more below). But fundamentally, there is a compelling sense of exchange and affiliation at play between humans and plant-life: nature is imbued with the creative cultural drive of poetry, and poetic creation can be parsed as a natural phenomenon, aimed at creating and sustaining diversity. The anthologist plays the role of the gardener, pruning, taming, editing "living extracts from global nature," as Diana Spencer puts it.[6]

In the context of the imperial Roman villa garden, the production of poetry was synonymous with the production of fruit and vegetables, and by the time of the emperors, *otium studiosum,* had in fact replaced agriculture as the main priority of the villa. An anonymous poet praises the Augustan patron Maecenas for "cultivating Apollo and the Muses in his luxurious gardens" (*Elegiae in Maecenatem* 35: *Pieridas Phoebumque colens in mollibus hortis*). The Flavian poet Statius constantly praises his patrons' creation of poetry in their villa gardens. For Pliny, the villa garden was synonymous with literary production, a text to be read in combination with his own literature: his box hedges were arranged to spell out his name, inscribing his authorial identity upon the garden (*Ep.* 5.6.35).

Catalogues of plants with similar metapoetic implications are a staple feature of Greek and Roman poetry.[7] Virgil employs numerous lists of plants in both his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. At *Georgics* 4.116-48, he describes the flowers and produce of the old Corycian's allotment in Tarentum, a garden we shall revisit shortly, and which is often interpreted metapoetically; the gardener may well represent the Alexandrian poet Nicander, who influenced Virgil's writings.[8] In *Eclogue* 2, the shepherd Corydon attempts to attract Alexis with a garland, adding to the gifts of the nymphs his own contribution of apples, plums, and myrtle:

Come here, O lovely boy: for you the Nymphs bring lilies,
look, in baskets full; for you the Naiad fair,
plucking pale violets and poppy heads, combines them
with narcissus and flower of fragrant dill;

then, weaving marjoram in, and other pleasant herbs,
colours soft bilberries with yellow marigolds.
Myself, I shall pick the grey-white apples with tender down
and chestnuts, which my Amaryllis loved;
I shall add the waxy plum (this fruit too shall be honoured).
I shall pluck you, O laurels, and you, neighbour myrtle,
for so arranged you mingle attractive fragrances.

(45-55)

Like Meleager's garland, words that denote weaving, combining, and arranging dominate the passage, as Corydon creates an arrangement from a wide botanical selection, emphasizing the diversity of his gift. But we are also meant to read Corydon's gift metapoetically,[9] and particularly in reference to Meleager's garland, and to understand the selection and arrangement of the variety of flowers in terms of the various poetic sources that Virgil is drawing on to create his own pastoral poetry (Theocritus, Nicander, Moschus). For Virgil, as for Meleager, the creation of poetry is assimilated to nature. Elsewhere, in *Eclogue* 4 - the famous poem in which Virgil celebrates the birth of a child who will bring a new Golden Age to the World - it is the Earth itself (*tellus*), which creates an arrangement of flowers, formed with no cultural artifice (*nullo cultu*):

But first, child, as small gifts for you, Earth with no artifice
will pour the straying ivy rife and baccaris
and colocasia mingling them with the smile of the acanthus.

In the passages above, it is the poem which is depicted as a natural occurrence. But the trope is reversed here: it is not the act of poetic creation that is likened to the botanical world, rather it is nature that is presented as a creative force, capable of transcending the artifice and cultures of human creativity and producing art *sua sponte*. The idea is encapsulated in Ovid's description of the Grove of Diana in the *Metamorphoses*: we are told that the site has been created "with no artifice" (3.158: *arte laboratum nulla*), but that nonetheless, "nature has imitated art through its talent" (3.158-9: *simulaverat artem* | *ingenio natura suo*). We also find, in descriptions of gardens, a concentration on nature's own 'creative drive' rather than the imposition of artifice by any human cultivator. Pliny's *Letters* often make this case. In his description of a natural amphitheater in his Tuscan villa, for example, he writes that "you will take great pleasure if you should look down on the countryside from the mountain, for you will seem to see not the lands but some form painted for its exceeding beauty," praising nature's artistic talent (5.6.13).

This notion of nature as the supreme artist was familiar from several philosophical schools of thought in Antiquity, including the Platonist tradition, which imagined nature as a designing, demiurgic force, and the Stoics, who viewed nature as identifiable as the universe itself, a living, designed, and rational thing, "in which no randomness but rather order is displayed and a certain resemblance to art" (Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.81-2). And if nature could be understood as the ultimate force of creativity, then aligning poetry with nature allowed the poet to identify as something tantalisingly more-than-human, as a divine force in their own right. When, in the first lines of the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid talks of the creator of the world as either 'god' (*deus*), or 'better nature' (*melior natura*), we recognise the poet himself standing behind this divine creator, the manufacturer of the expansive, totalising universe of the *Metamorphoses*. At its roots, the representation of poems as flowers always hints at this identification of the poet with divine nature.

We can clearly see how poetic biodiversity is a metaphorical trope that runs through Greek and Latin poetry, using the plant-world to describe the creative actions of humans, but also attributing creative agency to the natural world. But this metaphorical language of literary creativity and variation also hints at the material contexts of the production of poetic texts in antiquity, a process that was deeply reliant on botanical and other natural resources, drawn from a vast geographic expanse across the Roman empire. The poetry book, as a physical artifact, could itself constitute a form of natural diversity, a point to which the poets were highly sensitive. A number of words for writing implements that frequent Roman poetry attest

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to this. *C(h)arta,* the word often used by poets to signify a sheet of paper, also refers to the leaf of the papyrus plant itself, which came predominantly from Egypt (Pliny *NH* 13.21); similarly, the original meaning of *liber,* the word for book in Latin (= 'library', 'livre', 'libro') is 'bark', the thin rind of tree from which the papyrus leaf was taken. The Egyptian name for the plant, *Byblos,* said to derive from the Phoenician city of Byblos, provides the Greek noun for book, *biblos* (='bibliography'). Roman poets were especially aware of the material properties of the poetry books, and - as with flowers - often identify their literary creations directly with the plant-based *charta* themselves (the *longa carta* of Horace, *Satire* 1.5), for example, or the *cacata carta* of Volusius that Catullus denounces in Poem 22). Pliny suggestively describes *charta* as the "commodity by which immortality is ensured to mankind," stressing the underlying connection between the natural resources that link the poetry book, poetry, and the poet, and the enduring legacy, beyond the limits of mortality, that such a connection ensures.

Wax tablets, another common symbol of poetic creativity and production in Latin poetry, are often described in relation to their origins in nature. The wooden board over which the wax was stretched was procured from the boxtree, the *buxum*, similar to the root of our word 'book' (= Old English *bōc* (beech), related to Germanic 'Buche'). Propertius describes his well-worn tablets as 'cheap wax on common boxwood' (3.23.8: *vulgari buxo sordida cera fuit*). Metaphors for writing on wax tablets were often agricultural, aligning literary composition with working the land: one might 'plough' (*arare, exarare, sulcare*) through the wax, and the stylus used to write might also be referred to as a 'plough' (*vomer*).[10] The wax itself was identified with the flowers from which bees collected the pollen needed to produce it. In *Amores* 1.12, Ovid, discussing his writing tablets which now bear a rejection letter from his mistress, curses them on strictly botanical terms. The wax is denounced as being made from hemlock, and pollinated by Corsican bees, infamous for the bitterness of their honey:

> quam, puto, de longae collectam flore cicutae
> Melle sub infami Corsica misit apis.
> Extracted, I bet, from honey of long hemlock,
> Flowers delivered by the famous Corsican bees.

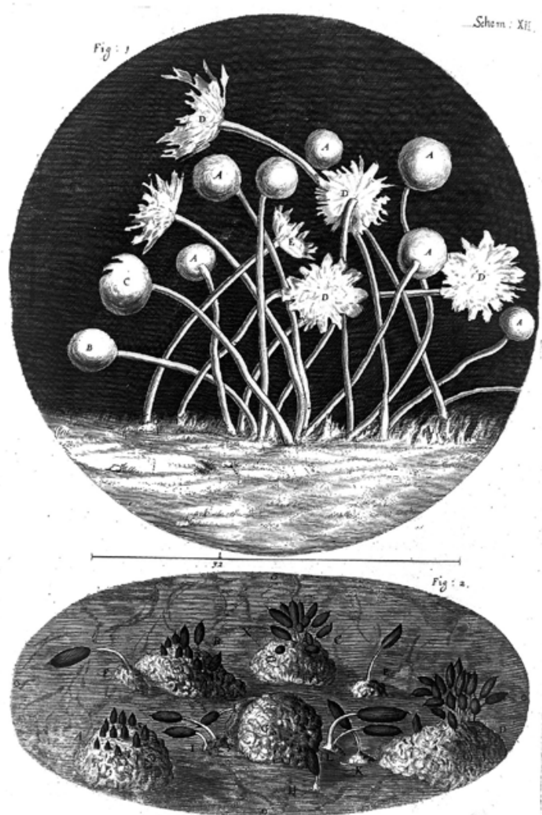
The metaphorical biodiversity explored above is thus never far from the actual diversity of natural materials that the poetry book in antiquity demanded. The description of flowers that fill the poems of Greek and Latin literature were physically inscribed on the pulped and pressed flowers, plants and trees from across the Mediterranean. The poetic artifact can constitute a miniature ecosystem. But we can go further than this, and recognise this diversity on an even smaller, microbial scale. As the poetry book moves through the time, passing from readership to readership, from geographical location to location, it accrues and develops new forms of microbial and bacterial life. If we pay attention to this thrumming diversity of biological life that fills the pages of classical poetry, we are able to engage with it on a wholly new hermeneutic level. Such an interpretative practice exists, and is referred to as 'biological hermeneutics,' already extant in the seventeenth century with Robert Hooke, who placed his books beneath a microscope (a recent invention at the time) to study their microbiome. On the sheepskin cover of one book, he discovered:

> ... a small white spot of hairy mould, multitudes of which
> I found to bespeck & whiten
> [the book]. These spots appear'd, through a good
> Microscope, to be a very pretty shap'd
> Vegetative body, which, from almost the same part of the
> Leather, shot out multitudes of
> small long cylindrical and transparent stalks.

(*Micrographia*, Schema 12)

Hooke provided illustrations for his observations, drawing small white flowers blooming against an ink-dark background, an image that unwittingly looks back to the floral metaphors the poets of antiquity use to describe their own poetry-books, now presented as a reality.

More recently, the artist Sarah Craske has explored the possibilities that biological hermeneutics presents. Arguing against an



Robert Hooke, *Micrographia*, London : Printed by J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1665. Schem. 12, fig. 1. Of blue mould, and of the first principles of vegetation arising from putrefaction; Figure 2: Of a plant growing in the blighted or yellow specks of Damask-rose leaves, bramble leaves and some other kinds of leaves. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert_Hooke,_Micrographia,_Wellcome_L0010931.jpg.

overreliance on the digitalisation of literary archives, Craske "develops the concept of books as centres of microbial life and data transfer"[11] by mapping out the biological information gathered in books over decades and centuries. The book she chose to investigate was a 1735 edition of the *Metamorphoses,* Ovid's epic riot of mutation, transformation and human/non-human connections. By submerging pages from the book in a blood agar mix and incubating the pages, Craske revealed "the incredible diversity of microbial life that had been coughed onto the book's pages by generations of readers,"[12] with hundreds of colonies blooming in the plates. Craske's images present the poem, poetry book, and readership in a rich, entangled web of microbial biodiversity. Over time, the poetry book develops a life of its own, and poetry is preserved by nature in its most infinitesimal and microscopic form, providing an exhilarating dimension to the concept of 'literary immortality' pursued by poets even as it decentres human agency.

Posthuman Poets

We can thus construct a formula that looks something like this: poem = flower = poet. Meleager's garland shows how both poet and poem can be identified as flowers within a diverse system of language. The poem can be understood as a natural creation, but we are also prompted to view nature through an anthropocentric lens, and to see nature as an act of poetic creation and artifice. The poem - and, by extension, the poet - becomes something more than human, metaphorically and materially entangled with the natural resources that it both describes and utilizes, and assimilated to the divine creative impulse of nature, the ultimate

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Sarah Craske,
etamorphoses chapter p73.

fabricator. This identification with flowers provides a means of transcending human limitations, and also to reflect on what it means to be human. We turn now to look at some of the ways in which the identities of plants and humans intersect, the ways in which nature can assume human qualities, and the ways in which humans are embodied as flowers in poetry.

The attribution of human qualities to nature is a theme that runs right through classical thought. This often belies an anthropocentric approach that views the purpose of nature as to benefit mankind.[13] Aristotle attributes a basic form of soul to plants (*De anima* 413a-b), and the Neoplatonist philosopher, Plotinus, maintained that plants have some share in reason and soul (*Enn.* 3.2.7.36-7). On the other hand, Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle who wrote some of the earliest extant botanical works (*Historia Plantarum, de Causis Plantarum*), argued rather that plants were not intended to benefit humans, but were endowed with the ability to pursue their own happiness and flourishing - namely the propagation of their own species: if humans eat the flesh of a fruit and throw away the seed, for example, it ultimately benefits the fruit rather than the human. If this asks us to understand plants in strict terms of human embodiment and agency, it also subtly decentres an anthropocentric view which, when taken to the extreme, reveals nature's complete disregard for humans, reminding us of our insignificance and undermining any sense of human exceptionalism. As Lucretius likes to insist throughout the *De Rerum Natura*, "in no way is the nature of things divinely arranged for us" (*DRN* 5.198-9).

The literary device in which nature is made to react to a human situation, or to express human emotion, was defined by Ruskin as the 'pathetic

fallacy,' pejoratively meant to indicate a weakness in poets unable to see the reality of nature as it really is. The poet might see in nature instead a perfect reflection of their own disposition. Ennius can talk of 'happy meadows' (*laeta prata, Ann.* 537 Sk.), and Cicero of the 'happiest flowers' (*laetissimi flores, Ver.* 4.107). Virgil describes 'a tree with fortunate branches' (*ramis felicibus arbos, Georg.* 2.81). Such happiness and fortune indicate the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, where the plants, fruits and trees willingly and happily serve humans. The description of the natural world in human terms is a particular trait of pastoral poetry, which imagines an ideal rural existence in nature, free from urban constraints. Like Theocritus and the Hellenistic pastoral poets before him, Virgil constantly describes the emotional capacity of the landscape, and particularly its ability to articulate and to respond to poetry. When Tityrus leaves his homeland in *Eclogue* 1, the pines and the orchards call for him (1.37-8). In *Eclogue* 5, the mountains and woods and groves "joyously fling their voices to stars" and "ring out with song" (59, 64). *Eclogue eighth* praises the "ever-tuneful groves and speaking pines" of Maenalus (22).

This quasi-poetic ability of nature is often employed in pastoral laments for the dead. In *Eclogue tenth*, "the laurels and the tamarisks, and the pines on Mount Maenalus weep" for the dying poet Gallus. Here, Virgil is looking back to the pastoral laments of Hellenistic poetry, and particularly that of Bion, who wrote a *Lament for Adonis*, in which nature effusively mourns the hero's death:

> The rivers lament Aphrodite's suffering,
> the springs in the hills are weeping for Adonis,
> from grief the flowers turn red.

In turn, as Aphrodite weeps and Adonis bleeds, "the tears and blood become flowers on the ground" - roses and anemones, respectively (64-66) - enacting a reciprocal exchange: flowers exhibit human emotions, and the emotions of humans lead to the creation of flowers. To a degree, the connection between human and nature that the pathetic fallacy presents points to the doctrine of universal sympathy extant in classical thought, and particularly in Stoic philosophy, which assumed that a natural bond connected all elements of the well-ordered and inter-connected universe (Cicero *de Div.* 2.34). But the ability for the landscape to respond empathetically and articulately also re-emphasises the idea of nature as the ultimate poetic creator, capable of generating meaning and emotional value.

Equally common in ancient poetry is the presentation of humans as flowers. In the *Timaeus,* Plato makes a curious connection between plants and men, describing humans as a form of 'heavenly plant' (φυτὸν οὐράνιον), whose head is a 'root' which tends upwards (*Tim.* 90a). The comparison of humans to flowers is present in classical literature from Homer onwards. In the military world of the *Iliad,* young heroes are described as "the new shoots of olive trees" (17.52); when they are killed in battle, they are compared to wilted poppies in gardens, like Priam's son Gorgythion: "and he bowed his head to one side, like a poppy that in a garden is laden with its fruit and the rains of spring" (8.306-8). Virgil imitates this simile in his account of the fateful young heroes Nisus and Euryalus in the *Aeneid*: when Euryalus is slain, his head falls limp, "just as when a crimson flower, cut down by the plough, droops as it dies, or poppies with weary neck lower their heads" (*Aen.* 9.436-7). Before Virgil, Catullus had repurposed the image as a metaphor for his unrequited love:

> Nor may she look back upon my love as before,
> which by her lapse has fallen, just as on the meadow's edge
> a flower has been touched by the passing plough.
>
> (11.21-24)

The blossoming of Catullus' love is felled by the apathetic agricultural technologies of his mistress, oblivious to nature. The flower could stand as a symbol of both youth and beauty, as well as a reminder of the transience of life and love. It was also a means of embodying the lover as an object of desire and sexuality. The use of

plant imagery for human beauty and sexuality was long-standing in the ancient world: in the *Odyssey,* the nubile Nausicaa is a young palm tree (6.162-3); Sappho compares a bride to an apple and hyacinth (105a and b). This trope could be extended to indicate an entire garden: the lyric poet, Archilochus, regards his intended lover as a garden (*P.Colon*. inv. 7511), and in Catullus 62, the bride is a "flower in a secluded garden," anticipating the Christian *hortus conclusus* of the Vulgate *Song of Songs* (*hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up."). For Ibycus, the entire expanse of youth is a fertile garden, the appropriate time to love. In this amatory context, diversity could indicate a degree of promiscuity: boy-mad Meleager returns with another garland, this time composed not of poets, but of his young lovers:

For you, Cypris, Eros plucked with his hand at harvest the fruitful flower of boys as
a soul-bewitching crown. For he wove the sweet lily Diodorus into it, and Asclepiades the
pretty wallflower. Yes, he wove Heraclitus in, like setting a rose from its thorn, and Dio
bloomed like a vine. He bound in Theron, a golden crocus from his hair, and he added
Uliades, the twig of thyme. He harvested Myiscus with his beautiful locks, an evergreen
branch of olive, the lovely branches of courage. Holy Tyre is the most blessed of islands!
It contains the myrrh-breathed grove of the boys who bear the flowers of Cyprus.

Like the poets included in the earlier garland, each beautiful boy here constitutes an individual flower or plant, which come together to represent the proverbial 'flower of youth.' Meleager again slips between comparison and identification, allowing a number of different images to stand at the same time: plants arranged in a garland, boys embodied as flowers, boys arranged in a pageant, *eros* as a garland-weaver, and the poet-lover himself as Eros-the-garland-weaver, and poems about boy-flowers gathered together within a poetic 'garland.'

Behind these different configurations of human-as-flower stands the poet, who often self-presents as a form of flower. At the end of the *Georgics*, Virgil says that he 'flowered' in Naples (*Georg*. 4 563–4: *illo Vergilium* ***me*** *tempore dulcis alebat | Parthenope studiis* ***florentem*** *ignobilis oti*); we still refer to the productive period of a creative's life as their *floruit*. Lucretius calls Homer 'always-blossoming' (*semper florentis Homeri...speciem*), the evergreen (ἀειθαλής) poet. The poetic identification with a flower can allow the poet to advertise his poetic capacities, but also to dwell on the fleeting nature of life experienced by all; the transience of flowers reflects our own brief lives. As Ovid grows old in exile, he describes his skin as "the colour of autumn leaves, struck by the first frost when winter spoils them" (*Tristia* 3.8). Seneca identifies with the superannuated plane trees that he planted as a child, "now parched, knotted and without foliage," synonymous with his own aging body (*Epistle* 12). The Greek lyric poet, Mimnermus, laments the human condition, "as leaves born in the teeming spring" before the "fruit of youth, like one day's worth of sun, dies fast" (Poem 2). But on the other hand, flower-imagery can be employed to make a *distinction* between the terminal fate of humans and the regenerative capacity of nature. In his *Lament for Bion,* the Hellenistic poet Moschus looks to the garden:

Alas! When the mallow and fresh parsley
and the springing crumpled anise perish in the garden
they live yet again and grow another year,
but we men, so tall and strong and wise,
as soon as we die, in a hole in the earth we sleep
Without end or waking.

(3.99-104)

The flower can symbolise the ephemerality of life; but, like 'evergreen Homer,' it can also suggest a form of immortality achieved through regrowth and renewal, to which the poet might compare their own poetic immortality through the process of being reread and reread. In the last poem of the *Odes,* the 'monument-poem' which predicts the poet's eternal fame, Horace talks of "growing fresh with praise in posterity," an image of renewal that evokes associations with flowers. Similarly, the presence of flowers in epigrams on the tombs of poets symbolizes a desire for immortality beyond

the grave, playing up the nourishing power of plants, flowers and vines and their metaphorical association with poetry. One sepulchral epigram explains how the acerbic poet, Hipponax, "even now dead, does not cause cultivated vine to grow (ἐπιτέτροφε) on his tomb, but brambles and acerbic fruits" (*AP* 7.536); another epigram exhorts ivy to "flourish green on top of the tombstone of Anacreon" (*AP* 7.24). Poems, poets, and tombs are grouped together in various floral combinations, associating the immortal power of poetry with the regeneration of flowers, through which the poet will live on. Human bodies directly give way to the (poetic) bodies of flowers, such as in one particularly one particularly touching funerary epigram from Sardinia:

> May your bones, Pomptilla, grow into violets and lilies:
> May you flower in the petals of roses, sweet crocus and ageless amaranth,
> and of the beautiful flowers of the white pansy,
> like the narcissus and the sad amaranth,
> also the time that will always will have your flower.

There is an acknowledgment here of the deep connectivity and symbiosis between humans and nature, and that the death of one yields new forms of life, in which the deceased may also take part. But we are also asked to imagine the works of the poets in similar terms, as the blossoms through which they will survive. Walt Whitman poignantly expresses this combination of poems, flowers and bodies in the exequy *Scented Herbage of my Breast*, where the poet's body seems to quite literally yield flower-poems for posterity:

> Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best afterwards, Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death,
> Perennial roots, tall leaves, O the winter shall not freeze you delicate leaves,
> Every year shall you bloom again, out from where you retired you
> shall emerge again…

Both Whitman and the ancient poets push us gently towards a posthuman perspective, recognising not only that humans don't just inhabit the world but *are* inhabited by the world as one object among many others, but also that we are organisms that, like poems, display a staggering diversity of human and non-human life. The beginning of Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*[14] encapsulates this sentiment perfectly:

> I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with* many.

Perhaps the poets of antiquity who spend their time with flowers were more aware of this fact than we like to give them credit for. Nature and culture are constantly destabilised in the poetic flowers and gardens of ancient texts, forcing the reader to constantly question the relationship between the natural world and the production of poetry, and the relationship between humans and non-humans.

Containing Diversity

There is, however, a further layer to this story. The flowers of Greek and Latin poetry can gesture towards a posthuman imaginary, and facilitate the collapse of traditional structuralist binaries or progressive solidarities. But we should not forget that the reduction of certain types of humans (women, slaves) to the status of non-human was a standard practice of power and exploitation in antiquity.[15] The poetic celebration of botanical diversity and geographical variety can also slip easily into a celebration of the imperial powers that govern such expanses; this is particularly true of the Imperial Roman period, in a period in which Rome enjoyed a global market and facilitated the free-flowing movement of produce and people. Walls and borders defined the garden in the ancient world. In Rome, the word *hortus* signified an enclosure before it meant garden.[16] Much like imperial

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borders, garden borders impose order, harmony and structure upon a natural space whist keeping out hostile and undesirable aspects. The English poet-gardener Ian Hamilton Finlay might have the last word on this matter when he claims that "the dull necessity of weeding arises because every healthy plant is a racist and an imperialist; every daisy wishes to establish for itself an Empire on which the sun never sets." [17] The poetic gardens of Latin poetry can thus shed light on the processes of control and order of empire, on the creations of borders, and on competing notions of local self-sufficiency and globalised markets, as well as reveal the poet's complicity in, or resistance to, the imperial project.

The vast expanses of private pleasure parks (the *Horti Agrippae, Horti Luculliani, Horti Sallustiani, inter alia*) in imperial Rome could represent miniature empires in their own right, creating the illusion of whole worlds and realms, teeming with foreign plants from foreign conquest, symbols of botanic imperialism. For imperial gourmands, the borders of the dinner-table were also interchangeable with the borders of the world, where plates heaved with produce from across the empire. Gowers puts it well: "imperium had turned Rome into the world's emporium: its alimentary choices are presented as almost infinite, from the turnips of Romulus to the larks 'tongues of Elagabalus.' [18] In literature, Trimalchio's feast in Petronius' *Satyricon* is an obvious example, and Seneca offers numerous cases of exotic banquets of which he vehemently disapproves. Juvenal, a satirist deeply wary of external pressures and globalising tendencies of empire, constantly pushes back against import culture in his *Satires*. The small garden (*hortulus*) is to be preferred to any pleasure garden, and when he gives us a glimpse of his dinner table in *Satire* 11, it's loaded with local, organic produce: asparagus, eggs, grapes, apples, pears. We get a similar portrait of the self-sufficient garden in the fourth book of Virgil's *Georgics,* where the poet recalls an old Corycian gardener:

For I remember once, beneath the walls of hill-top Tarentum, where black Galaesus waters golden crops, I saw an old Corycian, who had a little plot of unwanted land, not rich enough for cattle, no use for sheep, unsuitable for vines. Yet here he dotted cabbage-plants among the brambles, with white lilies and verbena and slender poppies in between. To his mind, such wealth was equal to a king's; and when he came home late at night, he piled his table high with unbought feasts. He was the first in spring to pick the roses, and in autumn fruit, and, when bitter winter still made rocks explode with cold and rivers' flow was frozen up with ice, there he was already trimming dainty hyacinths' locks, and cursing summer and its zephyrs for being late in coming. Yes, he was first to overflow with families of bees and bounteous swarms and force the spurting liquid from squeezed honey-combs. His lime-trees and his pines were all abundant, and all the fruit these fertile trees gave promise of from early blossom came to ripeness in the autumn. Elms he planted out, full-grown, in lines, along with hardy pear, thorn-trees full of plums, and planes already serving shade to drinking-parties.

(*Georgics* 4.123-48).

The self-sufficient garden of the Corycian, occupying a tiny corner of the empire and in the final margins of Virgil's *Georgics,* nonetheless carves out its own imperial expanses ("such wealth was equal to a king's"). Virgil's praise of the gardener's ability to respond to the constraints of local times and seasons contrasts with the global *imperium sine fine*, upon which the sun never sets and where everything is available. We do not know who the Corycian gardener is supposed to represent. Ancient traditions associated him with a pirate settled on land by Pompey the Great; others have interpreted him as a figure of Epicureanism, or utopian thought. He is also synonymous with the poet himself, laying out trees in lines much like Virgil lays out lines of poetry. But he might also be a symbol of resistance to empire, the separateness of his garden a symbol of poetic and political self-reliance and autonomy, a garden from which Virgil is also excluded, "shut out by space and time's unfair constraints," placing the poet ambiguously on the garden fence, both part of the mechanisms of empire and tacitly critical of them. The small size of the garden stands in contrast to the vast swathe of imperial space. Similarly, in the pseudo-Virgilian, *Moretum*, the peasant's garden is "tiny in size, but lush with different plants," and Martial's epigram on his modest garden villa similarly teem with homegrown produce, straight from farm to

table - even though he complains that his estate is so small a cucumber can't lie straight. (11.18).

Imperial control of natural expanses and produce can also double as the imperial control of nature itself. In Statius' *Silvae,* the poet praises the emperor Domitian as "better and even more powerful than nature itself" (*Silvae* 4.3.135 *natura melior potentiorque*), a divine being capable of bringing climatic stability to the world. For a ruler, control over exotic plants could signify authority over far-flung regions, and a well-ordered garden could signify a well-ordered state. Xenophon tells us about the Persian king Cyrus' gardening abilities (*Oeconomicus* 4.21-22). As Totelin points out "a king like Cyrus, with a love of such order, can be trusted with the administration of a kingdom." In Rome, exotic plants and trees were led in triumphal processions, as Pliny observes ("...it is a remarkable fact that since the time of Pompey the Great we have led even trees in triumph" 12.112). Pompey led the ebony tree in the triumph over Mithridates VI Eupator (Plin. 37.12-14). The Flavian emperors Vespasian and Titus led the balsam tree, native only to Judaea, in their triumph over the Jews; Pliny recounts that the tree "was now a slave, and paid tribute together with its race," a bold move that combines the human and non-human in one act of subjugation, the botanising rulers, ruling over their plant-like subjects.[19] Vespasian's Temple of Peace, built in 71 CE, contained garden beds eighty meters long,[20] populated with exotic flora unknown to Italy. In the *Natural History* Pliny praises the 'peace' Vespasian has bestowed upon the world, which has allowed plants brought to Rome from across the empire*,* a passage which Elizabeth Pollard[21] suggests must be read in close relation to the temple:

> other [plants] moreover are brought from elsewhere hither and thither throughout the whole world for the welfare of humanity, because the immense majesty of the *pax Romana* presents in turn not only humans with different lands and races among them, but also mountains and peaks rising up into the clouds, and their offspring and even plants.
>
> (*HN* 27.3)

Just as imperial gardens aimed to contain the world within its borders, so too does Pliny's text, compressing the flowers and plants of the world within the confines of the manuscript, which in turn burgeons with the miracles of nature. Emperor and poet coalesce in the same project of domination, structure and order.

When we look at frescos of Livia, the wife of the first emperor of Rome, it is important to acknowledge the implications of power and imperial control these images could connote; the vegetative iconography of the frescos is mirrored by the Ara Pacis, Augustus' monumental altar aimed at communicating abundance and prosperity under his rule upon his return to Rome in 13 BC. The abundant diversities and various arrangements of flowers and plant-life that we find in poetry are never far from questions of imperial control, the relationship between the natural world and cultural domination, and the poets' role in producing cultural and political meaning. Diversity could be parsed in opposite ways, both as symbolic of self-sufficiency and autonomy in the face of an imperial, globalising culture, but also as a celebration of the expansive reach of Roman power. In Imperial Roman poetry, biodiversity can be parsed as an imperial practice, and gardens can represent microcosms of empire, but it is important to note the flipside of this observation: that nature is more than capable of displaying its own imperial tendencies, and the non-human always stands to conquer, contain and colonise the human. But more than this, the rich diversity of plantlife in literature prompts fundamental questions on the poetic and real relationships between humans and nature, and the endless configurations of and connections between both, stretching far beyond the limitations of a lifespan.

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Notes

[1] Quoted in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1977). Wikipedia article, "The Human Condition (Magritte)," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Human_Condition.

2 Quoted in *Understanding Rome*, "Paradise regained: the painted garden of Livia at Palazzo Massimo,"

http://www.understandingrome.com/2014/01/08/paradise-regained-the-painted-garden-of-livia-at-palazzo-massimo-3/.

[3] Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness. Vol. 1* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

[4] See: Emanuela *Bianchi,* Sara *Brill* and Brooke *Holmes*, *Antiquities beyond humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Giulia Maria Chesi and Francesca *Spiegel eds., Classical literature and posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Publications, 2019); Francesca K. A. Martelli, *Ovid* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020).

[5] Michael Roberts, *The Jewelled Style: Poetry and poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: University Press, 2010).

[6] Diana Spencer, [Review of *Hortvs: The Roman Book of Gardening; Morals and Villas in Seneca's Letters: Places to Dwell*, by John Henderson], *The Journal of Roman Studies 95* (2005): 275-278.

[7] *Eleni Peraki-Kyriakidou, "The Ovidian Leuconoe: Vision, Speech and Narration," in* Stratis Kyriakidis *ed.*, *Libera Fama. An endless journey* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), *71-93*; K. Sara Myers, "The *Culex's* metapoetic funerary garden," *Classical Quarterly* 70 (2020): 749-755

[8] Stephen J. Harrison, "Virgil's *Corycius senex* and Nicander's *Georgiaca*: *Georgics* 4.116-48," in Monica Gale ed., *Latin epic and didactic poetry: Genre, Tradition and Individuality* (Swansea UK: The Classical Press of Wales, 2004), 109-124.

[9] See; Wendell Clausen, *A commentary on Virgil, Eclogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[10] Mary A. Rouse and Richard H. Rouse, "The vocabulary of wax tablets," *Harvard Library Bulletin* n.s. 1 no.3 (1990): 12-19.

[11] Sarah Craske and Charlotte Sleigh, "The art of biological hermeneutics," in Arthur Clay and Timothy J Senior eds., *On media, on technology, on life*: *interviews with innovators* (Gistrup, Denmark: River Publishers, 2021), 82-99.

[12] See: David Farrier, *Footprints: in search of future fossils* **(**London: 4th Estate, 2021).

[13] Rebecca Armstrong, *Vergil's green thoughts: Plants, humans, and the divine* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2019).

[14] Donna J. Haraway, *When species meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[15] See: Tom Geue, "The Imperial Animal: Virgil's *Georgics* and The Anthropo-/Theriomorphic Enterprise" in Giulia Maria Chiesi and Francesca Spiegel eds. *Classical literature and posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Publications, 2020), 103-110.

[16] Emily Gowers, "Vegetable Love: Virgil, Columella, and garden poetry," *Ramus* 29 (2) (January 2000): 127-148.

[17] Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Selections* (Berkeley, Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 2012).

[18] Emily Gowers, *The loaded table: Representations of food in Roman literature* (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).*

[19] Laurence Totelin, "Botanizing rulers and their herbal subjects: plants and political power in Greek and Roman literature," *Phoenix* 66 (2012): 122-144.

[20] R. B. Lloyd, "Three monumental gardens on the Marble Plan," *American Journal of Archaeology* 86 (1982): 91-100.

[21] Elizabeth Ann Pollard, "Pliny's *Natural History* and the Flavian *Templum Pacis*: botanical imperialism in first-century CE Rome," *Journal of World History* 20 (2009): 309-338.

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Archilochus, *P.Colon*
Aristotle *De anima; Historia Plantarum; de Causis Plantarum*
Aulus Gellius, *Attic nights*
Bion of Smyrna, *Lament for Adonis*
Catullus
Cicero, *De Natura Deorum; Verrine; de Divinatione*
Columella, *De Re Rustica*
Ennius, *Annales*
Hipponax
Homer, *Iliad; Odyssey*
Horace, *Epistle; Satire*
Ibycus
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Nicander of Colophon
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Sappho
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Virgil, *Eclogues; Georgics; Aeneid*
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