

*Hortorum quoque te cultus Silvina docebo: Generic Boundary Transgression in Columella 10*

Columella intended book 10 of his *Res Rustica* to be at once an homage to and extension of Vergil's *Georgics*. The only poetic book in a prose agricultural treatise, it was prompted by Vergil's *recusatio* from including gardening in the *Georgics*, but instead leaving that task to posterity (Col. 10. Pref. 3; Verg. *G.* 4. 147-148). *Res Rustica* 10 thus clearly falls into the didactic tradition. While the generic boundary between didactic and epic is often ambiguous (Gale 2004(1), xvii), Columella's tenth book, like Vergil's *Georgics* before it (Farrell 1991, 238-272), veers in many ways into the epic camp, including both *cosmos* and *imperium* (Hardie 1986, 1-2). Columella not only crafts a didactic poem about gardening but also creates a mini-epic about the glory and extent of the Roman *imperium* in his time.

Volk notes that didactic poems share several characteristic features, including a first-person narrator (generally the poet), self-referential "metapoetic reflection", and instruction in a particular *res*, or subject. Finally, though most often written in dactylic hexameter, unlike epic they are non-mimetic (Volk 2002, 2-3, 30-31). In addition, didactic poems often emphasize attaining happiness or success through the diligent application of specialized knowledge (Nelis 79-80).

Hardie remarks that epic, on the other hand, "is a totalizing form" in which its actors or agents strive "for a lonely pre-eminence and ultimate omniscience. Hardie sees both Virgilian and post-Virgilian epic attempting "to construct a comprehensive and orderly model of the world" (Hardie 1993, 3). In addition, epic is narrative, both mimetic and descriptive (Genette 1982, 133), in contrast to the discursive nature of didactic (Gale 2004(2), 49).

Vergil's *Georgics* transgresses the didactic/epic boundary in several ways. As a didactic poem, it deals discursively with a *res* (agriculture), giving instruction to the farmer; thus Vergil

often addresses the reader in the first person (e.g., 1. 175; 4. 147-148). In addition, it is, as is normal for didactic, addressed to a person, Maecenas. That said, the poem takes an epic turn with its portrayal of Aristaeus, who enjoys his own *epyllion* in book 4. As Conte observes, Aristaeus is a “georgic” hero who, like Aeneas, is shaped by his *labores*, learns from his experience, and is able to complete his hero’s journey successfully (Conte 1986, 139).

Moreover, in the *Georgics*, Vergil constantly hints that his underlying theme is the entirety of Roman history: he glances backward at Roman origins (2. 532-538) and looks forward to stability under Augustus and his eventual elevation to patron deity (1. 24-42).

Columella emulates these aspects of the *Georgics* in book 10 of the *Res Rustica*. In the first line – *hortorum quoque te cultus, Silvine, docebo* (Col. 10. 1) – Columella shows that he will straddle the boundary between epic and didactic: he opens in the epic manner, stating the subject in the first word, *hortorum*; but then immediately continues in the didactic fashion, by addressing a person, Silvinus, and ending with *docebo*: the didactic first person, performing the didactic function. As Vergil does in the *Georgics*, Columella guides the reader, and the gardener, through the annual round of tasks essential to ensure a prosperous harvest. But within his garden, he contains the whole Roman world. It is the “garden of empire” (Pagán 2006, 19), including produce not only from various parts of Italy, but also from one end of the empire to another, encapsulating within its borders the entire Roman *imperium* (e.g., Col. 10. 179-188). The gardener, like Aristaeus, is striving, through *labor*, to complete a successful journey to the end of the gardening year. Moreover, by linking the gardener’s tasks to the universal sidereal cycle and encompassing within his garden devotion to both the universal Olympian gods and native Italian fertility gods, Columella joins *imperium* to *cosmos*, and connects the successful maintenance of his garden with the prosperity of the entire Roman world.

Works Cited:

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