

The Evil Eye and the Fertilizing Gaze of the Paterfamilias  
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Vergil's Menalcas complains that some eye has enchanted (*oculus... fascinat*) his flock (*Eclogue* 3.103). But while some eyes bewitch, others, particularly the eyes of the paterfamilias, benefit a farm. Pliny (*Natural History* 18.43) quotes a maxim that the master's eye is the best fertilizer. While this is clearly metaphorical in some cases—the agronomists put great emphasis on the benefits of the owner's personal supervision—in others, a more magical effect is indicated. Pliny (18.19) suggests that the earth itself prefers to be cultivated by senators and triumphant generals than by fettered slaves, and “everything flourishes more for honorable hands”. Columella (3.21) appropriates one of Vergil's verses on Bacchus to describe a paterfamilias walking in his vineyard, and says that the fruit is more abundant wherever the paterfamilias brings “himself and his eyes”. The mere presence of the master increases the plants, but the agronomists describe his eyes or his gaze, particularly, as a powerful force which is almost separate from the person.

Classical discussions of the evil eye and similar phenomena suggest ways of understanding the fertilizing glance of the Roman paterfamilias. The evil eye is associated with envy; Plutarch (*Moralia* 680c-683b) believes it is a physical emanation from the body and especially from the eyes of the envious, which makes their feelings physically potent. Columella (3.21) takes the master's emotions into account in suggesting that the farm should be arranged as pleasingly as possible, so that the owner will visit more often and will enjoy looking at his fields and vineyards. The owner's pleasure in his produce, like the envy of the curser, becomes a physical force communicated to the crops. Columella (4.18) also mentions that arranging the vines correctly allows easier access for the owner's eyes and feet, as though his gaze has physical substance and needs a passage to reach the plants. Regarding powerful emanations more generally, Pliny discusses other peoples whose eyes or bodies have useful or harmful properties: the Psylli, Marsi and Ophiogenes (marginal peoples and foreigners who had reputations as sorcerers) cure poison just by being nearby, through a “natural antipathy” of their bodies to venom, while anyone once bitten by a snake or dog makes wounds worse and cattle miscarry (28.30-31). Menstruating women can kill garden pests and plants with a touch, glance, or their arrival (28.77).

While the concept of the fertilizing gaze is influenced by discussions of the evil eye and uncanny bodily powers, the agronomists place the phenomenon in opposition to sorcery. Pliny mentions the eye as the “best fertilizer” in the context of C. Furius Chresimus' famous acquittal of having used magic to make his farm prosper—crop-increasing sorcery is redundant when the farm has the master's personal attention. In the paterfamilias, powerful eyes are a physical expression of the moral, social, and religious authority which makes him the best possible overseer for his estates. The bodies of others may emanate pollution, foreignness, or evil intent, but for the agronomists, the paterfamilias makes all right with the world by assuming his traditional place on the Roman farm.