

Durior aeternusque vocat labor: Metapoetics in Columella Res Rustica 10

Columella's *Res Rustica* 10 is a poetic book, modeled on Vergil's *Georgics*, in an otherwise prose agricultural treatise. Columella's poem concerns gardening, which Vergil explicitly declines to consider at length (Col. 10. Pr. 3; Verg. *G.* 4. 147-148). *Res Rustica* 10 is thus both homage to and extension of the *Georgics*, and likewise falls formally into the didactic tradition.

Katharina Volk (2002, 2-3) lists self-referential "metapoetic reflection" as a distinguishing mark of the didactic genre. Columella demonstrates this in *Res Rustica* 10 with a recurring trope of the gardener as poet and the garden as poem. Here Columella again hearkens back to the *Georgics*, where Vergil draws a parallel between the farmer and poet. Leah Kronenberg (2009, 157) argues that farmer and poet are similar in their striving for order: "Virgil's farmer reacts to physical and emotional chaos by trying to recreate order on both levels ... Virgil's poet figures initially strive for a similar, ordered understanding of the world." In particular, the gardener/poet connection is seen in the story of the Corycian gardener (*G.* 4.116-148), Vergil's brief and ultimately abandoned attempt to address gardening, which prompted Columella to write his poetic gardening book. Stephen Harrison (2004, 109-110) suggests that the Corycian gardener represents a poet, perhaps the *Georgics* poet or one of Vergil's predecessors; "his horticultural skills reflect themes of the *Georgics* as a whole" (Harrison 2004, 109-110). Columella also likens garden and gardener to poem and poet both in the structure and placement of his work and his descriptions of the gardener's task.

Columella instructs the gardener, after choosing a suitable plot, to surround it with a wall or hedge (Col. 10. 27-28), marking its boundary. Likewise he gives his garden poem its own enclosure, marking it off from the rest of his prose treatise by placing it in its own poetic book,

between two prose books. The model is Vergil, who describes himself, in his refusal to discuss gardening further, as “shut out by unequal boundaries” (*spatiis exclusus iniquis*, *G.* 4. 147); a line exists between what is inside the garden/garden poem and what is not. As Victoria Pagán (2006, 34) remarks about Vergil’s Corycian gardener episode, “The digression, separated so markedly from the rest of the narrative, vividly demonstrates the separateness of the garden.” Columella adopts and builds on this.

The work of the farmer/gardener and that of the poet are both called *labor*. Vergil uses the word for hard physical work: *labor omnia vicit / improbus* (*G.* 1. 145-146). Columella does likewise; the work of planting is *hominumque boumque labores* (*Col.* 10. 330). However, Columella also describes his poem as *labor* (*laboris nostri*, *Col.* 10. Pr. 4). He plays on both meanings when he says of the task facing both poet and gardener: *durius aeternusque vocat labor* (*Col.* 10. 68); the gardener must now engage in plowing and planting; the poet must resume his task – his main theme – after a short digression. The *labores* of both gardener and poet also recall Vergil’s Aristaeus from *Georgics* 4. Gian Biaggio Conte (1986, 139) observes that Aristaeus is a “georgic” hero who, like Aeneas, is shaped by his *labores*, learns from his experience, and reaches a successful end to his hero’s journey. Similarly, Columella’s gardener earns, through *labor*, a successful completion of the gardening year, with enough produce to last through the winter (*Col.* 10. 423-432).

Finally, the poem itself is embodied in the garden. At the beginning, Columella describes his garden as *numero horto*, which can mean a garden that is varied and well stocked, but also a garden in verse – a “garden symphony,” as John Henderson (2002, 126) renders it. The poem that follows is indeed a garden of variety, incorporating much from the *Georgics*, *Eclogues*, and even *Aeneid* to offer a harvest of Vergilian motifs, much as Columella’s gardener produces a

varied harvest of flowers, fruits, and herbs. Thus he brings his gardening year to a successful close just as Columella closes his gardening poem (Col. 10. 423-424).

Works Cited

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