



TORTURING THE EARTH: MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE IN COLUMELLA'S *DE RE RUSTICA* 10.68–74

Writing in the first century CE, Columella delineates farming practice based on personal experience and observation. Roman attitudes towards slavery, truth, and torture are highlighted in a particularly graphic description of preparing the soil for sowing.

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Inspired by Virgil's apology (*G.* 4.18) that he lacked the wherewithal to write about *pinguis hortos quae cura colendi* ('the cultivation which embellishes lush gardens'), Columella composed in verse Book 10 of his *De re rustica*. After a preamble about the ideal location for a market garden, Columella, with an exhortatory *eia* ('Come on!', *Rust.* 10.69), urges his audience to rouse themselves and prepare their ground for sowing. To gauge the poetic effects Columella wanted to display through his verse in Book 10, the same practical material can be read in the prose of Book 11. In Virgil's *praeteritio*, which follows the apology, the description of the old Corycian and his garden – 'the skeleton of a fifth book of *Georgics*'¹ – is all tranquillity. By contrast, the imagery that Columella employs to start his horticultural treatise in verse is disturbing. Certainly, it is no rustic idyll. Indeed, Lowe describes the passage 'as a startling series of abuses'.² It is as if, pulled away from any dream of country life, the reader is being abruptly woken to the seemingly cruel reality of agricultural toil.

¹ R. F. Thomas (ed.), *Virgil Georgics, Books 3–4* (Cambridge, 1988), 167.

² D. Lowe, 'The Symbolic Value of Grafting in Ancient Rome', *TAPhA* 140.2 (2010), 468.

<i>eia age segnes</i>	68
<i>pellite nunc somnos, et curui uomere dentis</i>	
<i>iam uirides lacerate comas, iam scindite amictus.</i>	70
<i>tu grauibus rastris cunctantia perfode terga,</i>	
<i>tu penitus latus eradere uiscera marris</i>	
<i>ne dubita, et summo feruentia caespite mixta</i>	
<i>ponere, quae camis iaceant urenda pruinis. . .</i>	74

Come on, brush away lazy sleep now, and tear at once her green hair with the plough's curved tooth, rip at once her clothes. You, score her resisting back with heavy rakes, you, don't hold back from scouring deep inside her sinews with broad hoes, and putting the still warm lumps on top of the turf, to lie for the white hoar frosts to scorch. . . (Col. *Rust.* 10.68–74)

The emphatic repetition of *tu* ('you') in 7–12 creates a picture of the various gardeners hard at work. In Seneca's *Phaedra* (49–53), Hippolytus similarly orders through the repetition of *tu* his different hunters to their appointed tasks: one to throw a spear, another to act as beater, another to unstitch the guts of the ensnared animal. For Columella, gardening is collective work for slaves, both those unencumbered and those in chains, directed by a *uilicus*, or overseer, who has been toughened (*duratus*) from a young age by farm work (*Rust.* 1.8.2). The emphasis on strength and stamina lends a particular picture of masculinity. Slaves who have been emasculated through too much leisure, fast food, and sex will, Columella warns, ruin the economy of any villa estate (*Rust.* 1.8.2). Only those with muscle can manage the hard graft of pruning and digging (*Rust.* 1.9.4). In former times free citizens had no qualms about joining in with the labour. Quintius Cincinnatus (*Rust.* 1.praef.13), Gaius Fabricius and Curius Dentatus (*Rust.* 1.praef.14) – these almost mythical heroes of the Roman Republic – could, Columella stresses, till the land just as effectively as they could wield a sword. Farm implements were nothing less than 'weapons for tough farmers' (*duris agrestibus arma*, Verg. *G.* 1.160).³ Governing the people and governing the farm were not discrete actions: *proceres ciuitatis in agris morabantur et, cum consilium publicum desiderabantur, a uillis arcessebantur in senatum* ('the leading politicians of the state used to spend time in the fields and, when they were needed for debate on matters of national importance, were recalled to the senate from their estates', *Rust.* 1.praef.18).

³ As with a military inventory, Virgil (*G.* 161–6) goes on to list these implements: share, plough, wagons, threshing sledge, mattocks, baskets, winnowing fan.

That in this process of digging, Earth (Tellus) will suffer is recalled by Ovid (*Met.* 2.285–6), although reference here is made only to the wounds (*uulnera*) caused by the crooked plough and mattock. The idea of wounding the ground with the plough appears elsewhere: *ut sauciet...uomer aduncus humum* ('so the hooked plough can wound the ground', Ov. *Rem. am.* 172). Modern organic gardeners can also refer in a similarly anthropomorphic way to the Earth hurting after digging: 'Weeds are attempting to cover up the pain and heal the wounds'.⁴ To emphasize the physicality of farming, mattocks usually attract the stock epithet of heaviness (*grauibus rastris*, 'with heavy mattocks', Ov. *Ars am.* 1.726 and Verg. *G.* 1.496). In describing the same action, Virgil (*G.* 1.94–5) notes just two processes: firstly, the initial ploughing into clods and, secondly, the reduction to fine tilth with harrows. Columella adds the third process of weathering. While he was certainly influenced by Ovid, albeit usually through suggestion rather than direct quotation,⁵ here, with the succession of different physical actions, Columella is definitely describing something far more than the regular actions of digging and turning referred to by other writers. The addition of weathering to the action allows Columella to juxtapose ground heat with bodily warmth (*summo feruentia caespite mixta*, 'the warm soil blended with the upper turf', *Rust.* 10.72) and thereby emphasize the image of a human body.

Earth is naturally at the core of gardening. It is no surprise that Tellus, or Earth, is invoked by Varro (*Rust.* 1.1.5) as one of the twelve deities most involved with farmers. These deities are paired: Sun with Moon, Ceres with Liber, Robigus with Flora, Minerva with Venus, Lympha with Bonus Eventus. As an indication of supreme importance, Tellus is set alongside Jupiter, the latter controlling the sky and therefore the weather. Livy (8.6.10), in turn, juxtaposes Earth with the underworld, to which, during a war between the Romans and the Latins, the commander of one side and the army of the other had to be offered. Earth was regarded as a goddess, under the names both of Terra and Tellus (*Cic. Nat. D.* 3.20.52, *Hyg. Fab.* 140). As the mother of life (*Liv.* 5.54.2, *Suet. Tib.* 75), the Earth, like the fire goddess Vesta, needed no images for worship (Ov. *Fast.* 6.298). Once life had ended, the Earth embraced the dead corpse (*Cic. Leg.*

⁴ C. Dowding, *Organic Gardening. The Natural No-Dig Way* (Cambridge, 2013), 20.

⁵ H. B. Ash, 'Some Notes on the *De cultu hortorum* of Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella', *CJ* 18.6 (1923), 330.

2.56). In more peaceful descriptions, the goddess Earth might merely be turned (*uertere*) with the plough (Verg. *G.* 1.148, Hor. *Sat.* 1.1.28). Nature's frosts and farming tools are inescapable adjuncts to agriculture. If harsher treatment is imposed, for example digging with a mattock after the north wind has broken up the surface of the soil, then it is done at one remove to any stubborn clumps (*glaebas...inertis*, Verg. *G.* 1.94) rather than directly to the Mother Earth. Columella, however, is describing something that is far from tranquil turning.

Working the land demanded a deep knowledge of agriculture and a physical strength of body to bear the struggles involved (*ad labores sufferendos*, Col. *Rust.* 1.praef.12). The resulting toil was nothing other than insatiable.⁶ To manage these struggles effectively, *scientia* ('expertise') was required (Col. *Rust.* 1.praef.22). Whereas there were schools for rhetoricians, surveyors, musicians, chefs, and hairdressers, nothing of the sort existed for trainee farmers (Col. *Rust.* 1.praef.5). Such an omission is surprising, Columella adds, given that many of these professions are morally suspect, sometimes deviating from masculinity, and traditionally not even Roman.⁷ Throughout his work, Columella emphasizes this *scientia*. Deities may be referenced, whether as a synonym (e.g. Bacchus for wine, *Rust.* 1.1.5, and Orcus for death, *Rust.* 1.3.2), or as a literary topos (e.g. an invocation to the Muses in the poetic section, *Rust.* 10.40). They are not, however, called to assist with the growing or harvesting. Doody notes that Columella, even when referring to Virgil, rarely quotes his mythologizing.⁸ By contrast, Cato urges offerings to Mars Silvanus for the health of cattle (*Agr.* 83), to Ceres before the harvest (*Agr.* 134.1), to the spirit of a wood before coppicing (*Agr.* 139). How sincere Columella is when he stresses that humans are not descended from the clay moulded by Prometheus, but rather the stones thrown after the flood by Pyrrha and Deucalion, may be a moot point. The stress on this alternative origin, however, does shift the tone and prepare the reader for what is to follow. For the task ahead, as he describes it, is indeed *durior* ('harder', *Rust.* 10.68); and a rather difficult and lengthy job, not just about composing the poem and ordering the

⁶ *labor omnia uicit / improbus*, 'insatiable toil dominated everything', Verg. *G.* 1.145 and Thomas (n. 1), 92–3.

⁷ J. E. Merceron, 'Cooks, Social Status, and Stereotypes of Violence in Medieval French Literature and Society', *Romania* 116.461/462 (1/2) (1998), 180.

⁸ A. Doody, 'Virgil the Farmer? Critiques of the *Georgics* in Columella and Pliny', *CPh* 102.2 (2007), 196.

garden.⁹ How Columella relates the same process in prose is straightforward. The ground must be broken up by the winter cold (*hiemis frigoribus...gleba soluat*, *Rust.* 11.3.11), the frost in effect burning the soil (*inurendum*, *Rust.* 11.3.13). Unlike in his verse treatment in Book 10, Columella moves on quickly in Book 11 to manuring in preparation for the early sowing. Here there is no mention of Mother Earth, no mythologizing or personification, merely blunt factual statements about the timetable for ordering a garden in the best possible manner.

It could be that Columella is describing rape. The Earth has not given its consent to be dug up and planted. Every farm had its master (*dominus*, *Col. Rust.* 1.2.2), who was expected not just to rely on his overseer (*uilicus*), but rather to exercise his own authority, a role that allowed for punishing those subservient to him (*Col. Rust.* 1.816). The *dominus* was naturally a man: learned (*Rust.* 1.1.1), inquisitive (*Rust.* 1.4.1), and possibly even affable towards his country (although not urban) slaves (*Rust.* 1.8.15). While Columella does not discuss the subject, to be a man also meant taking the active role in any sexual activity, whether it be consensual or not, heterosexual or homosexual. Catullus might therefore describe his rape of a boy as amusing (*res...ridicula et nimis iocosa*, ‘an incident...funny and droll to the extreme’, 56.4), but the subtext is that he has the power to do so, that he is the *dominus* of the *pupulum* (‘young lad’, *Cat.* 56.5), the verb *cecidi* (‘I struck’ or, in G. Lee’s translation, ‘banged’¹⁰) implying ‘a sexual act seen as a punishment’.¹¹ Like the farmer as *dominus* when ploughing his land, so a man could be seen as *dominus* when ‘ploughing’ his sexual partner.¹² When Pluto rapes Proserpina (*Ov. Met.* 5.391–404), clothing is certainly torn and the Earth left gaping. Gloyn explains that this violence shows that, unlike men, gods can conduct themselves with impunity and that those reading about violent acts must bear responsibility for this recurrent human problem.¹³ Instead, what Columella describes is the reverse: the mortal assault on the immortal Earth.

In the passage in question, Columella does not pursue the language of rape. He could, for example, have written about ploughing, the

⁹ Ash (n. 5), 332.

¹⁰ G. Lee (ed.), *The Poems of Catullus* (Oxford, 1990), 55.

¹¹ J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 145.

¹² *Ibid.*, 154.

¹³ E. Gloyn, ‘Reading Rape in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: a Test-case Lesson’, *CW* 106.4 (2013), 679.

euphemism not regarded as ‘vulgar or offensive in tone’.¹⁴ When the rape of women is described, there is often a palpable sense of horror. By contrast, male rape generally conferred merely shame, the victim incurring through his apparent passivity the opprobrium of effeminacy.¹⁵ In his account of the rape of Philomela by Tereus, Ovid compares the violence to an eagle seizing a hare ‘in its crooked talons’ (*pedibus...obuncis*, *Met.* 6.516), an image Columella could have developed with his reference to the prongs of a heavy rake (*grauibus...rastris*, *Rust.* 10.71). The white of the dove emphasizing her former state, Philomela is spattered with her own blood after being raped (*Ov. Met.* 6.529). If there is an initial suggestion of sexual violence in the tearing of hair and ripping of clothes, Columella veers away from it, the focus returning to the dominance of the male farmer over the passive Earth. The apparent brutality is essential for the production of foodstuffs and for the economic success of the landowner. Rather than rape, therefore, Columella appears to be referencing a scene of torture. Torture was, as Pagán stresses,¹⁶ a regular feature of Roman life. Thus Catullus (85.2) can exclaim *excruor* (‘I am being tortured’) even over his falling in love. Unlike rape, torture was within the bounds of legality. No responsibility need be borne by the reader for the violence as described.

Torture is described in rhetorical exercises. Rhetoric was at the centre of imperial government: in the senate house, in the law courts, in the governorship of provinces. Bernstein suggests that rhetorical exercises involving the application of torture gave future magistrates a grounding in how credible testimony might be if given under such duress.¹⁷ Typically, in order that they might speak the truth, slaves were subject to torture (*Tac. Ann.* 2.30 and 3.14). If a free person was tortured (e.g. the equestrian Nonius on the orders of Claudius, *Tac. Ann.* 11.22), it implied that the control of the state had been usurped, a tyrant now exercising complete control over formerly free citizens.¹⁸ In rhetorical exercises, liberty could be balanced against tyranny, women against men, control over passions against unreasonable feeling

¹⁴ Adams (n. 11), 154.

¹⁵ ‘...humiliation may be inflicted on an enemy or malefactor, or *one’s rank asserted* [my italics], by a sexual violation, particularly *pedicatio* (‘anal intercourse’), Adams (n. 11), 124.

¹⁶ V. E. Pagán, ‘Teaching Torture in Seneca *Controversiae* 2.5’, *CJ* 103.2 (2007–8), 176.

¹⁷ N. W. Bernstein ‘“Torture Her Until She Lies”: Torture, Testimony, and Social Status in Roman Rhetorical Education’, *G&R* 59.2 (2012), 166.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

of pride.¹⁹ In the garden, then, Columella is suggesting that men have necessarily to become master, if not tyrants, and dominate the soil. To do so is to assert their masculinity over the female Earth, tilling the land requiring no less energy than fighting in battle (Col. *Rust.* 1.*praef.*14). Columella's personification of Earth is particularly vivid. While Horace (e.g. *Carm.* 1.21.5 and 4.7.2) uses *coma* ('hair') to refer figuratively to foliage, Columella plays on its literal meaning of hair, adding clothes (*amictus*), back (*terga*), and inwards (*uiscera*) to underscore the image he is giving of Earth as a woman.

In his outline of the torture procedure, Seneca (*Controv.* 2.5.5–6) details scourging by whips, mutilation with instruments, burning with fire, twisting on the rack. Similarly, Theseus in Seneca's *Phaedra* (882–5) threatens the old nurse with being chained up and whipped until she reveals what his wife refuses to say. And Tantalus in Seneca's *Thyestes* (169–71) suffers such agonies of thirst that it is as if his blood is being boiled by fiery torches. A quaestor, who was suspected by the emperor Gaius of involvement in a conspiracy, had his clothes taken off and placed under the feet of the soldiers, the cloth affording a firmer foothold for whipping him, the blood otherwise likely to cause slipperiness (Suet. *Cal.* 26.4). Mosaics, too, depict a variety of public tortures, most notably being pierced by the claws of wild animals and torn apart, as spectacle in the amphitheatre.²⁰ By rendering its victims helpless, torture was regarded as passive, pathetic, and feminine.²¹ The Earth – to spare any squeamishness on the part of the gardeners, Columella has taken care to remove epithet of mother – is wholly passive. To designate the Earth as the mother of humankind may be wrong (*matri. . falsae*, 'supposed mother', Col. *Rust.* 10.58), yet there is no question about the Earth being other than female, the parent of the earlier race of Prometheus rather than the later race of Deucalion. The Earth has to be tortured to reveal her truths: hair torn, clothes ripped, back scored, sinews scored, the warm matter that has been dislodged piled up, everything to be burnt by the frost. These truths are the crops and the eventual harvest. Columella is adamant that it is wrong (*neque fas*, 'and it is impermissible', *Rust.* 1.*praef.*2) to think that nature

¹⁹ C. T. Mallan, 'The Rape of Lucretia in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*', *CQ* 64.2 (2014), 766.

²⁰ M. Carucci, 'The Spectacle of Justice in the Roman Empire', in O. Hekster and K. Verboven, (eds.), *The Impact of Justice on the Roman Empire. Proceedings of the Thirteenth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire, Gent June 21–24 2017* (Leiden, 2019), 214.

²¹ Pagán (n. 16), 176.

might be unproductive. That is too feeble and passive. Real Romans (*uera illa Romuli proles*, ‘the genuine descendants of Romulus’, Col. *Rust.* 1.*praef.*17) can do better. Thus, instead, gardeners must assert their masculinity and extract from the Earth, if necessary by torture, the truths of their labours.

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