

From the Plane Tree to the Gardens of Adonis: Plant and  
Garden Imagery in Plato's *Phaedrus*

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## Statement of Authorship

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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## Abstract

Since at least the time the Akkadian version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was preserved in clay tablets nearly four thousand years ago, human beings have weaved plants and gardens into their stories. The way they appear in myth and literature is often as diverse as it is fascinating: they might figure as settings, metaphors, analogies, or be imbued with symbolism. This particular treatment of plants and gardens is not limited to myth and literature though. In a number of Plato's dialogues he utilises them in a similar way. This essay sets out to think about the plant and garden images in one of Plato's dialogues; more specifically, the *Phaedrus*. It seeks to address the following question: what might the plant and garden images in the dialogue mean, and how are we to understand them in relation to the text? We will come to see that during the classical period the plants and gardens mentioned in the dialogue were associated with love, madness, chastity, sterility, death, and more; in short, the whole gamut of themes taken up in the *Phaedrus*. Since many of these vegetal images appear in the text as part of the dialogue's setting, this means that as Phaedrus and Socrates converse with one another, they do so surrounded by images of the very things they discuss. We will also discover that the setting of the dialogue seems to influence both the flow of conversation and the language that Socrates uses. It would seem that there is more to the plant and garden imagery in the dialogue than first meets the eye.

## A Note on Editions and Citations

All quotations from Plato's *Phaedrus* are taken from the Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff translation found in *Plato: Complete Works*. References to other Platonic dialogues are also from the *Complete Works* unless explicitly indicated in a footnote. References to the ancient Greek versions of the dialogues are taken from The Loeb Classical Library Editions. Stephanus numbers will be given in-text with full bibliographic details provided in the Bibliography at the end of the thesis.

Quotations from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are taken from the Penguin Editions translated by Robert Fagles. Ancient Greek passages are again taken from The Loeb Classical Library Editions of these texts. Unless explicitly stated, readers can assume the footnotes refer to the line numbers in the English translation. Should there be a major discrepancy between English *and* ancient Greek line numbers when quotations from *both* are presented, the English will be cited in the footnote first, followed by a semi-colon and the ancient Greek.

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## Introduction

Since at least the time the Akkadian version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was preserved in clay tablets nearly four thousand years ago, human beings have weaved plants and gardens into their stories. The way they appear in myth and literature is often as diverse as it is fascinating: sometimes a garden, field, or meadow might be a setting or backdrop, other times they may be used as an analogy or metaphor. In similar vein, plants might appear as analogies, metaphors, or be imbued with symbolism. As Michael Pollan famously wrote in his book *Second Nature*, a tree is a trope.<sup>1</sup> By this Pollan means that a tree is not simply a tree; it is a metaphor for life—of growth, change, death, and more.<sup>2</sup> This conception of plant life is certainly at play in *Gilgamesh*, but also Genesis, the *Odyssey*, and *Poetic Edda*, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> In *Gilgamesh*, Dilmun, the dazzling garden of sunshine where trees produce gemstones rather than fruit, figures as a kind of paradise for gods and immortals alike. It is a land of beauty, a land not meant for mortal men. Although Gilgamesh reaches the garden, he fails to gain immortal life and is forced to return to his native Uruk, where he will one day die.<sup>4</sup> Like Dilmun in *Gilgamesh*, the garden of Eden in Genesis figures as a kind of paradise,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 244.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Other examples might include *The Decameron*, *Orlando Furioso*, and *Candide*.

<sup>4</sup> The Akkadian version of the epic quite literally ends with a defeated Gilgamesh making his way back through the land of the gods to return to Uruk. See "The Standard Version," in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George (London: Penguin Books, 1999), Tablet XI. 300 – 330. For a similar interpretation of *Gilgamesh* (as well as a discussion of gardening that is near to this project's heart), see Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1ff.

a paradise which human beings are ultimately denied following the fall. In the *Odyssey* a mysterious plant known only as moly turns out to be symbolic of the limitations of human knowledge. While the plant appears in the mortal world, knowledge of it is reserved solely for the gods; human beings can neither dig it up nor name it without help from Olympus.<sup>5</sup> In the poems that make up the *Poetic Edda*, we learn that the Norse thought of the cosmos as a tree. Indeed, there are multiple references to a giant ash tree known as Yggdrasil, which is responsible both for sustaining all life in existence and connecting the earth (Midgard) with the realm of the dead (Hel) and the land of the giants (Jotunheim).<sup>6</sup>

The treatment of plants and gardens as settings, metaphors, analogies, and symbols is not limited to myth and literature though. A number of Plato's dialogues take up plants and gardens in these ways. In the *Symposium*, for example, Socrates reveals that Eros was conceived in the garden of Zeus (203c), while in *Euthyphro* he compares Athens' youth to a tender sapling, explaining that Meletus is simply like a farmer attempting to get rid of those things that damage the young shoots (2d – 3a). The place where the inclusion of plant and garden imagery reaches its highpoint though is the *Phaedrus*. When Plato writes that particular dialogue, he sets the bulk of it in a verdant landscape. We do not know why he chose to do such a thing, nor is it

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<sup>5</sup> See Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), Bk. 10. 320 – 341.

<sup>6</sup> "Grimnismal," in *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015), 29 – 35.

likely that we will ever know. But as Socrates and Phaedrus converse with one another on a hot summer's day, they do so surrounded by grass, trees, and flowers.

This essay, then, sets out to think about some of the references to plants and gardens that appear in the *Phaedrus*. In short, this essay is guided by a simple question: what might these plant and garden images mean, and how are we to understand them in relation to the dialogue?

To understand the importance of this question I would like to speak personally for a moment. The first time I read the *Phaedrus* I was rather excited to see all of the vegetal images in the dialogue—from the general landscape, to the plane tree, and the gardens of Adonis. Intrigued, I set out to discover what these references might mean and consumed copious works on Greek horticulture and botany. The more I learnt about plants and gardens in the classical period, the more it became apparent that the *Phaedrus* was full of references that were in fact connected to the larger themes of the dialogue. What at first seemed like, say, an innocuous landscape by a river, or a benign plane tree, quickly became symbols of Aphrodite, Helen, and the madness of love. Despite finding all of these connections between the vegetal images and the content of the dialogue, I was surprised to learn that the botanical story of the dialogue has largely gone unaddressed by philosophers, classicists, and Plato scholars alike.

As it stands, there is no significant body of scholarship dedicated to understanding the plant and garden imagery in the dialogue. What few works there are, tend to try and think about the gardens of Adonis image towards the end of the dialogue. Anne Cotton, for example, has written about the image and notion that in

the dialogue the cultivation or education of the soul is presented as a kind of gardening.<sup>7</sup> Robert Harrison and Dennis Schmidt have also developed similar arguments, both taking up the image of the gardens of Adonis and attempting to understand what Socrates means when he compares the cultivation of the soul to gardening. For both Harrison and Schmidt, Socrates' reference to the gardens of Adonis is used to stress the notion that the soul is a kind of soil in which one plants and nurtures philosophical ideas over an extended period of time.<sup>8</sup> As part of a discussion of images of desire in the dialogue, Anne Carson takes up the image of the gardens of Adonis and explains that like lovers, writers, and cicadas, gardeners often "find themselves at odds with time."<sup>9</sup> Like Harrison and Schmidt, she explains that Socrates conceives of the soul as a kind of soil receptive to the planting of philosophical ideas, which take a significant amount of time to root, germinate, and grow.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Harrison and Schmidt though, Carson will go on to link the cultivation of the soul to love, explaining that "Eros is the ground where *logos* takes root between two people who are having a conversation."<sup>11</sup> In other words, she notes that in the dialogue *eros* proves to be the impetus for philosophical discourse, which is ultimately responsible for the cultivation of the soul.

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Cotton, "Gardener of Souls: Philosophical Education in Plato's *Phaedrus*," in *Gardening: Philosophy for Everyone*, ed. Dan O'Brien (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 242 – 254.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Harrison, *Gardens*, 61 – 65; Dennis J. Schmidt, "The Garden of Letters. Reading Plato's *Phaedrus* on Reading," in *International Yearbook for Hermeneutics* 12, ed. Günter Figal (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 73 – 64; Dennis J. Schmidt, "From the Moly Plant to the Gardens of Adonis," *Epoche* 17, no. 2 (2013): 173.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 141.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

The most substantial discussion of plant and garden imagery in the dialogue is found in Laurialan Reitzammer's book *The Athenian Adonia in Context: The Adonis Festival as Cultural Practice*. Like Harrison, Schmidt, and Carson, Reitzammer emphasises the notion of time associated with the gardens of Adonis image, although unlike them she goes one step further and attempts to read the gardens of Adonis image back into the dialogue *as a whole*, claiming that the setting of the dialogue ultimately figures as a kind of garden of Adonis.<sup>12</sup> Like the gardens of Adonis which are ultimately sterile and unproductive, she says that Socrates and Phaedrus shelter under a tree that in the classical period was thought of as fruitless.<sup>13</sup> Further still, like the gardens of Adonis, which are wholly unsuited for the healthy growth of plants, Phaedrus' soul is not yet ready to be planted into.<sup>14</sup> What all of this means is that "Depending on how Phaedrus responds to Socrates's attempts to convert him to the philosophical life...the *kêpos* that Socrates tends has the potential to go in two opposite directions: to become 'more fruitless than a garden of Adonis' or, alternatively, to become a philosophically productive *kêpos*."<sup>15</sup>

In addition to these few accounts which emphasise the image of the gardens of Adonis, we find brief mentions of the landscape in the dialogue in works by John Sallis, Annette Giesecke, Silvia Benso, Kenneth Dorter, Michael Marder, Cynthia Freeland, and Andrea Capra. Sallis, for example, mentions the plane tree in passing in

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<sup>12</sup> Laurialan Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia in Context: The Adonis Festival as Cultural Practice* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 103 – 104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

*Being and Logos* and wonders whether there is any significance to the notion that it provides shelter from the sun.<sup>16</sup> Later in the book he will again think about the tree in passing, this time contemplating “how the tie with the beloved can, for the crossing of the river, provide that protection from the sun which otherwise might be supplied by something like a plane tree.”<sup>17</sup> As part of a discussion on the history of bucolic literature, Giesecke will speak about the ways certain aspects of the dialogue are prefigured through the description of the landscape. Although she will not develop her remarks in any significant way, she notes that Socrates’ movement from sobriety through to Bacchic frenzy in the dialogue is all prefigured in the references to the plane and chaste trees.<sup>18</sup> In addition to this, she will, along with Benso, claim that the setting beneath the plane tree figures as a kind of garden (I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter two).<sup>19</sup> In an article discussing imagery in the *Phaedrus*, Dorter, like Giesecke, will note that parts of the dialogue are prefigured through the landscape. Indeed, he notes that the chaste tree, taken with Socrates’ invocation of Hera at 230b (who he says the tree is associated with), signifies that Socrates is level-headed and sober when he first sits down to hear Lysias’ speech.<sup>20</sup> Marder, in his work *The Philosopher’s Plant*, will briefly note that the plane tree is meant to be a subtle reference

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<sup>16</sup> John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019), 113 – 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 130

<sup>18</sup> Annette Lucia Giesecke, *The Epic City: Urbanism, Utopia, and the Garden in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hellenic Studies 21, Harvard University Press, 2007), 87.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 114 – 115; Silvia Benso, “Gardens: Philosophical Con/texts, Environmental Practices,” *Call to Earth* 1, no. 2 (2000): 10.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Dorter, “Imagery and Philosophy in Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (1971): 281.

to Plato; the dialogue's author humorously inserting himself into the text and suggesting that his own legacy has eclipsed Socrates'.<sup>21</sup> In an article discussing imagery in the *Phaedrus*, Freeland will draw attention to the number of garden images in the dialogue—from the gardens of Adonis, to Socrates' description of the soul in the palinode as something which is planted into a human being.<sup>22</sup> Freeland will not, however, attempt to interpret any of these parts of the dialogue at length. Rather, her purpose in the article is simply to draw our attention to these aspects of the dialogue, to remind us that they exist, that there is significant use of garden imagery here. Finally, in his book *Plato's Four Muses*, Capra claims that the plane tree is a subtle reference to Helen,<sup>23</sup> and that the inclusion of the tree is further confirmation that Plato is engaging with the works of Sappho, Gorgias, and Isocrates on Helen, which he takes to be fundamental for an understanding of the palinode.<sup>24</sup>

The story that I intend to present here in this essay is a modest one. It will not redefine Platonic scholarship, nor will it necessarily challenge prevailing interpretations of the *Phaedrus*. Rather, what I am hoping it does is cause us to take the plant and garden imagery seriously—to not ignore it or assume it is a minor dramatic detail, but realise that we should be paying closer attention to it and potentially thinking about the dialogue in light of these images. We will come to see that many of

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4 – 5.

<sup>22</sup> Cynthia Freeland, "Imagery in the *Phaedrus*: Seeing, Growing, Nourishing," *Symbolae Osloenses* 84, no. 1 (2010): 65.

<sup>23</sup> Andrea Capra, *Plato's Four Muses: The Phaedrus and the Poetics of Philosophy* (Massachusetts: Centre for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University Press, 2014), 66 – 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

the plants mentioned in the dialogue were, in the classical period, associated with notions of love, madness, and chastity. Importantly, we will see that these images frame Phaedrus and Socrates' discussion, that the setting of the dialogue proves inspiring, that it seems to influence the very language Socrates uses almost as if Plato was attempting to portray how a person might have behaved in conversation while in the countryside.

To interpret the plant and garden imagery in the *Phaedrus*, we are going to have to keep in mind that Plato wrote *dialogues*. Calling attention to this fact might seem rather otiose—of course Plato wrote dialogues—but it is worth bringing up because in the modern academy we are used to writing in the essay or treatise format. In other words, we write in a way that is structurally different to Plato, in a way that rather than present an image of people philosophising, attempts to reduce a thought or an idea into a series of propositions. The essay format lacks the literary flourishes we find in the dialogues. Arguments might be presented in a dialogue, but just as much can be said in other ways—through setting, characterisation, and so on. Since a large number of the plant and garden references are part of the literary aspect of the dialogue—they form the setting—it is important we do not attempt to read the dialogue in the same sort of way that we might an essay or treatise. We have to remember that the dialogues are in many ways a kind of liminal text that is a collaboration between philosophical *and* dramatic writing.





Throughout the course of the year spent working on this project, I had several people ask me whether it was meant as a kind of encyclopaedic work about the plant and garden images in the dialogue. To allay any confusion, this is not meant as an encyclopaedic work. This essay is not broken into a series of entries that one can consult freely. While it does examine a vast number of the images in the dialogue, it does not consider all of them, nor does it pursue a reading of the dialogue based on all possible interpretations of an image (as we will see, some plants held multiple meanings in the classical period).

While we are on the subject of things this essay will not address, it does not attempt to grapple with the question of whether Plato could have possibly been aware of the symbolic nature of these plants. There are a few reasons for not addressing this question. Besides simply taking me too far from my task of telling the botanical story of the dialogue, it is impossible to say one way or the other whether Plato would have been aware of what they meant. Presumably as a well-educated Athenian in the fourth century BCE he would have known—and the argument could be made that the mere act of privileging these plants over others is proof that he knew what they meant—but regardless, there is no surviving evidence (if any ever existed) to suggest he did.



Before we begin, I would like to say a few words about the overall structure of the project. Ultimately, it is divided into three chapters. The first chapter tries to set the scene for readers by examining plants and gardens in ancient Greece more generally. To speak about plant and garden imagery in the dialogue, we are first going to need to familiarise ourselves with the way the Greeks thought about these things—in short, how they were exposed to and associated with them. More than two thousand years separates us from the world of the dialogue, and we need to be sensitive of the fact that the *Phaedrus* was composed in a different time and in a different place from our own. The point of this chapter, then, is to answer two questions in particular: first, what was a garden for the ancient Greeks? And second, how did the Athenians relate to plants? This chapter is not meant as a comprehensive account of plants and gardens in Greece, but by addressing these two questions it should provide us with a basic understanding of the way the Greeks related to the vegetal world. One final comment about the first chapter: for reasons that will become clear in time, it has been framed specifically as a discussion about gardening. Admittedly, narrowing the scope of investigation has its disadvantages, but I have chosen to structure the chapter in this way because, as we will come to see, Athenians were quite regularly exposed to plant life *through* various types of gardens.

Having addressed the way Athenians gardened and were exposed to plant life in the first chapter, the second chapter turns to the *Phaedrus* to take up a discussion of

some of the plant and garden images that are found therein. This chapter will move slowly and carefully through the opening pages of the dialogue in order to think both about the setting of the dialogue, and what the images of the chaste and plane trees might mean. Through the course of this chapter we will see that the trees frame Phaedrus and Socrates' discussion and that their very conversation is often echoed or mirrored by the plant life that surrounds them. Moreover, by paying close attention to the plant imagery in the dialogue, we will discover that the setting seems to prove inspiring, that some of Socrates' words have to do with gardening.

Rather than continue thinking about the setting of the dialogue, the third chapter will shift focus ever so slightly and turn to contemplate the reference to the gardens of Adonis that appears during the critique of writing. As we have seen above, most of the scholarship on the plant and garden imagery in the dialogue has turned to address this reference in some capacity. My reason for turning to this image is twofold. First, I want to understand it within the context of the dialogue, but more importantly, I want to add to the scholarship by suggesting that it shares a number of similarities with other aspects of the dialogue; particularly, those in the palinode.

## Chapter 1: Plants and Gardens in ancient Greece

Perhaps the best place to start this chapter is by acknowledging that we know very little about gardens in Greece, especially in the classical period. There is no single explanation as to why this is the case, but suffice it to say, scholars claim the greatest issue is the sheer lack of surviving archaeological evidence documenting gardens in contrast to other civilisations.<sup>25</sup> Seldom do we find pots or paintings of gardens in Greece, and when we do, they are typically of ritual practices related to the planting of the gardens of Adonis. Further still, there are almost no written accounts describing gardens. Theophrastus, will, of course, contribute greatly to our understanding of gardening practices when he comes to write *Enquiry into Plants* in the third century BCE, but until then, we are, as one historian puts it, left “listening for chance remarks in literature.”<sup>26</sup> Still, these “chance remarks” paint quite the picture, as we will see.



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<sup>25</sup>Marie Luise Gothein, *A History of Garden Art: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day, Volume 1*, trans. Mrs. Archer-Hind (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. LTD., 1928), 53; Maureen Carroll-Spillecke, “The Gardens of Greece from Homeric to Roman Times,” *The Journal of Garden History* 12, no. 2 (1992): 84; Tom Turner, *Garden History: Philosophy and Design 2000BC–2000AD* (Oxon: Spon Press, 2005), 76; Patrick Bowe, “The Evolution of the Ancient Greek Garden,” *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 30, no. 3 (2010): 208.

<sup>26</sup> Gothein, *A History of Garden Art*, 53.

In ancient Greek there are three words for garden: *aloe*, *kepos*, and *orchatos*. We do not know the precise etymologies of these words, although they are all found as far back as at least Homer, which is where the earliest surviving remarks on gardens in Greece are found. We will come to examine specific instances where these words are used in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in time, but for now let me just speak about the precise meanings of each of these terms. The first of these words, *aloe*, is commonly translated into English as garden, orchard or vineyard, but what it really indicates is the specially prepared ground or soil that one finds in all of these places.<sup>27</sup> Whether we call an *aloe* a garden, an orchard, or a vineyard is beside the point, when we come across the word what is being spoken of is “a fertile place, rich in trees and flowers, which has to be cultivated with care and order” by human beings.<sup>28</sup> The second of these words, *kepos*, refers to a garden, orchard, or plantation.<sup>29</sup> According to Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, it is the most “pregnant” Greek word for garden since it can refer to places as diverse as Elysium, the Isles of the Blessed, orchard gardens, royal gardens, gardens dedicated to the gods, public gardens, parkland, pleasure gardens, philosophers’ gardens, and vase gardens.<sup>30</sup> Maureen Carroll-Spillecke echoes much of this, noting that like the English word ‘garden,’ *kepos* is a “rather imprecise” term that could refer to a

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<sup>27</sup> The Liddell-Scott-Jones entry for *aloe* defines it as: any prepared ground i.e., garden, orchard, vineyard, etc. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon*, revised Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), *aloe*. Accessed October 15, 2020, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=aloh&la=greek#lexicon>

<sup>28</sup> Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, “Homer’s Garden,” *The Journal of Garden History* 9, no. 2 (1989): 86.

<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the Liddell-Scott-Jones entry for *aloe* which emphasised the notion of ground, the entry for *kepos* is quite simply: garden, orchard, plantation. LSJ, *A Greek English Lexicon*, *kepos*. Accessed October 15, 2020, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=khpos&la=greek#lexicon>

<sup>30</sup> Ferriolo, “Homer’s Garden,” 86.

vegetable garden just as much as it could a flower garden, orchard, grove, park, or even tomb.<sup>31</sup> In short, then, *kepos* covers the gamut of things that might be called 'garden' in Greece. The final of these words, *orchatos*, refers to an orchard or garden, and in Homer at least, is often used interchangeably with *kepos*.<sup>32</sup>



Let me begin looking at the garden scenes in Homer by first turning to the garden on Achilles' shield in the *Iliad*. You know the story that leads up to the description of the shield: Achilles' retreat from the war has led to his beloved friend Patroclus donning his armour and impersonating him on the battlefield, before then dying at the hands of Hector. In the throes of grief, Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, hears his cries and attempts to console him. After learning of her son's strong conviction to re-enter the battle and avenge his friend's death, she asks that he wait until she has returned with new armour forged at the hands of Hephaestus, the god of fire and blacksmithery. After a brief exchange with Hephaestus, the god tells Thetis that he will indeed make her son new armour. What Hephaestus crafts though, is nothing short of astonishing. The god makes Achilles a giant shield, but unlike most Greek shields which were adorned with images intended to frighten foes on the battlefield,

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<sup>31</sup> Carroll-Spillecke, "The Gardens of Greece," 84.

<sup>32</sup> Ferriolo, "Homer's Garden," 88-89.

the shield Hephaestus makes Achilles is beautiful; it is covered with a moving image of all of life itself. On the shield we are told that the god forged all of the heavens, the sun, the stars, the moon, the earth, the sky, and the sea.<sup>33</sup> In addition to this moving image of the cosmos, he forges two noble cities on the shield and depicts all manner of human life from joyous festivities to juridical matters and even death.<sup>34</sup> It is in this image of human life that we encounter the first major garden description in Homer:

And he forged a thriving vineyard [*aloen*] loaded with clusters,  
bunches of lustrous grapes in gold, ripening deep purple  
and climbing vines shot up on silver vine-poles.

And round it he cut a ditch in dark blue enamel  
and round the ditch he staked a fence in tin.

And one lone footpath led toward the vineyard [*aloen*]  
and down it the pickers ran

whenever they went to strop the grapes at vintage—  
girls and boys, their hearts leaping in innocence,

bearing away the sweet ripe fruit in wicker baskets.

And there among them a young boy plucked his lyre,  
so clear it could break the heart with longing,  
and what he sang was a dirge for the dying year,

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<sup>33</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), Bk. 18. 565-571.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 18. 572-707.

lovely...his fine voice rising and falling low  
as the rest followed, all together, frisking, singing,  
shouting, their dancing footsteps beating out of time.<sup>35</sup>

This space is described as a vineyard and the word that is used in this passage is a form of *aloe*. As we have seen above, *aloe* is one of three words which can mean garden, referring to the prepared ground or soil of a place of cultivation. Next, we will notice that grapes are grown in an orderly fashion on poles, and that a fence surrounds the entire vineyard ensuring that what is inside is protected from external threat. The boundary fence secures this location, turning it into a place that is distinct from the natural world beyond its borders. Inside the vineyard the grapes which will become wine ripen, and children pick fruit, frolic, and make music. One is tempted to say that this vineyard is the kind of space conducive to a peaceable and happy life.

Whether or not the composer of the *Iliad* intended to convey an image of happiness, peace, and security in the image of the vineyard is hard to say, but what is clear is that this image stands in stark contrast with the image that is presented immediately after. Here we are told about a group of farmers and their cattle who are attacked by a pair of lions as they walk near a stream. It is a frightening image of the brutality of nature: we are told that the predators make off with a bull, ripping it open and eating its entrails before then being attacked by the farmer's dogs who are

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Bk. 18. 654-669; 561-571.



ultimately powerless to do anything; a life ends under horrifying circumstances.<sup>36</sup> There is no happiness here, no dancing children, but more than anything else what distinguishes this image of life from the one that precedes it is the absence of a fence; the farmers were not in a humanly made space, they were out in the wilderness and nothing was separating them, protecting them, from the dangers, the terrors, that lurk in the world.

The notion that fences have a protective role in Homer is established long before we ever come to the description of the vineyard on Achilles' shield. The Greek word for fence, *herkos*, first appears much earlier in the *Iliad* in a description of the mighty Ajax. Having spotted the towering figure on the battlefield, Priam asks Helen about this man. Her response is brief. Unlike the accounts of Agamemnon and Odysseus which immediately precede the account of Ajax, we learn nothing of the warrior's parentage or his past accomplishments in battle; all that we are told is that he is "the bulwark [*herkos*] of the Achaeans."<sup>37</sup> Why is Ajax a *herkos*? Beyond knowing that he is physically large, there is little to indicate why Helen calls him the defensive wall of the Achaeans at this stage in the epic, but presumably it is because he is able to bear the brunt of attack and protect what is behind him, in other words, that Ajax is both physically durable and highly skilled in battle. This, of course, turns out to be the case. In Book 7 when Ajax duels Hector, we learn that the Achaean hero has the upper hand for much of the battle. Despite being weighed down with bronze armour,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Bk. 18. 670-685.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Bk. 3. 274; 229-230.

despite carrying a body sized shield made from “heavy bronze over seven layers of oxhide,” Ajax never seems to struggle or fatigue.<sup>38</sup> When Hector hurls his spear at him, there is no indication that he is thrown back by the kinetic energy of the projectile as it comes to an abrupt stop in his shield, nor does anything suggest that he has difficulties holding on to his shield as the spear plunges into it. Moreover, there is no evidence to indicate that he is particularly bothered when Hector later stabs at him.<sup>39</sup> Ajax is especially durable. The same, however, cannot be said of Hector. Although the Trojan prince is tenacious and continues to fight after being “grazed” by Ajax’s sword,<sup>40</sup> it is clear he cannot last in this battle. Hence, when Ajax hurls a “boulder” at Hector—repayment with interest for the “rock” that had been thrown at him earlier—the Trojan’s knees buckle, the prince lands flat on his back with his shield crashing down on top of him, and Apollo is forced to intervene to bring him back to his feet.<sup>41</sup>

The word *herkos* will appear several more times throughout the course of the *Iliad*—in one passage, for example, the word is used to describe Menelaus’ belt, which protects the Spartan king from Paris’ well-aimed arrow,<sup>42</sup> while in another passage it is used to imply that teeth are the barriers holding back our words<sup>43</sup>—but perhaps the most interesting use for us to look at is found in a description of Diomedes in Book 5. It is a striking image: we are told of Diomedes’ assault, which is ferocious enough to

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 7. 252-253.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 7. 280-300.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 7. 303.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 7. 306-315.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 4. 147-157; 137-140.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 4. 404; 350.

cut through the ranks of soldiers on the battlefield much like a flash flood washing away a vineyard and the defensive barriers that protect it.

So they worked away in the rough assaults, but Diomedes,  
which side was the fighter on? You could not tell—  
did he rampage now with the Trojans or the Argives?  
Down the plain he stormed like a steam in spate,  
a routing winter torrent sweeping away the dikes [*herkea*]:  
the tight, piled dikes [*herkea*] can't hold it back any longer,  
banks shoring the blooming vineyards cannot curb its course—  
a flash flood bursts as the rains from Zeus pour down their power,  
acre on acre the well-dug work of farmers crumbling under it—  
so under Tydides' force the Trojan columns panicked now,  
no standing their ground, massed, packed as they were.<sup>44</sup>

Much like the vineyard on Achilles' shield, the vineyard in this analogy is surrounded by a *herkos*. Unlike the fence that surrounds the vineyard on the shield though, this defensive wall is ultimately overwhelmed by a force exterior to it and the vineyard sheltered inside succumbs to the relentless flood, to the awesome power of nature. In the end, the workers were only mortal; they did not have the power to stand against

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Bk. 5. 93-103.

the onslaught of nature that they were up against. While it is clear that a *herkos* is physically durable—that its primary function is to protect and defend—it is also clear from this passage that when they are the creation of a mortal, that they are fallible and “not always strong enough to resist an attack.”<sup>45</sup> Although the *herkos* seeks to carve out a space in the world and keep nature at bay—to disenchant it of its mystery, its uncertainty—the composer of the *Iliad* seems all too aware that this is beyond the scope of the human being. We can never truly tame the world or make a space safe. Regardless, a barrier wall seems to be our best defence mechanism—as imperfect as it is—from the uncertainty of nature, from the beasts that stalk farmers and their cattle.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in Homer descriptions of gardens made by mortals are always accompanied by a description of a garden fence.<sup>46</sup> When, for example, we encounter King Alcinous’ garden for the first time in the *Odyssey*, it is not a description of the plant life or the gardeners working under the sun that greets us, but an account of the size of the plot of land and the fence that secures it:

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<sup>45</sup> Ferriolo, “Homer’s Garden,” 87.

<sup>46</sup> For more on this claim see Ferriolo, “Homer’s Garden,” 87. In contrast to a mortal garden, here is how a divine garden appears in Homer: In Bk. 5. 65-85 of the *Odyssey*, we encounter Calypso’s grotto on the island of Ogygia. Although none of the Greek words for garden are used, the space clearly resembles a garden with its rich plantings of alder, poplar, trailing grape vines, violets, and parsley. What is not mentioned, however, is a boundary fence. There is good reason for this: since the grotto belongs to a nymph—a kind of personification of nature—there is no need for it to be secured by the one thing that humans utilise to keep nature at bay. Calypso is at home in wilderness; she has no need to carve out a space with a fence.

Outside the courtyard, fronting the high gates,  
a magnificent orchard [*orchatos*] stretches four acres deep  
with a strong fence running round it side-to-side.  
Here luxuriant trees are always in their prime,  
pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red,  
succulent figs and olives welling sleek and dark.  
And the yield of all these trees will never flag or die,  
neither in winter nor in summer, a harvest all year round  
for the West Wind always breathing through will bring  
some fruits to the bud and others warm to ripeness—  
pear mellowing ripe on pear, apple on apple,  
cluster of grapes on cluster, fig crowding fig.  
And here is a vineyard [*aloe*] planted for the kings,  
beyond it an open level bank where the vintage grapes  
lie baking to raisins in the sun while pickers gather others;  
some they trample down in vats, and here in the front rows  
bunches of unripe grapes have hardly shed their blooms  
while others under the sunlight slowly darken purple.  
And there by the last rows are beds of greens,  
bordered and plotted, greens of every kind,  
glistening fresh, year in, year out. And last,  
there are two springs, one rippling in channels

over the whole orchard [*kepon*]<sup>47</sup>—the other, flanking it,  
rushes under the palace gates  
to bubble up in front of the lofty roofs  
where the city people come and draw their water.<sup>47</sup>

The words *orchatos* and *kepos* are used interchangeably here to indicate the presence of a garden. Unlike the *aloe* we encountered on Achilles' shield, this space is far more complex and might best be described as a kind of kitchen or farmhouse garden. Nestled inside the boundary fence, trees produce fruit readily, orderly garden beds contain all manner of edible greens, there is a vineyard, which produces grapes for both raisins and wine, and a spring irrigates the land.<sup>48</sup> We might say that this *kepos* is a garden par excellence. Part of what seems to make King Alcinous' garden so successful as a garden is its orderliness.<sup>49</sup> In this garden we are not just presented with an image of flourishing life, but an image of humanity's attempt to provide structure and law to an otherwise chaotic world; left unchecked every one of these plants has the potential to become weedy, to proliferate and spread throughout the space, and compete with their neighbours for resources.

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<sup>47</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, Bk. 7. 132-154; 112-131.

<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that when we are told about the suffering of Tantalus in Bk. 11. 675-678 of the *Odyssey*, that the fruit trees which dangle above the wicked king's head are portrayed in much the same way that they are in King Alcinous' garden: "And over his head / leafy trees dangled their fruit from high aloft, / pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red, / succulent figs and olives swelling sleek and dark."

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of the orderliness of King Alcinous' garden, see Giesecke, *The Epic City*, 40. Part of what makes this garden attractive, says Giesecke, is that it mirrors the well-ordered Phaeacian polis that gave birth to it.

It is also important to acknowledge that although King Alcinous' garden is made and worked by mortal hands, that there are other forces—supernatural forces—at play in this space. Indeed, in the passage above we are told that the fruit bearing trees in the *kepos* will never tire, lose their dynamism, or die. How is this possible? Even the most vigorous of fruit trees yield a crop for but a short time each year and death is part of the movement of life that underpins the existence of all mortal beings both in Homer and more generally. The answer to this question seems to lie in the fact that King Alcinous and the rest of the Phaeacians are the descendants of the Olympian gods. If we remember back to the beginning of Book 5 when Athena is pleading with Zeus and the rest of the gods to help Odysseus return home, that Zeus reveals the Phaeacians are “close kin to the gods themselves.”<sup>50</sup> Although the inhabitants of Scheria are not gods in their own right, their close relationship with those on Olympus means that they receive certain privileges that others in Greece do not. The reason Phaeacian men and women excel at sailing and weaving respectively, for example, is because they are blessed by Athena.<sup>51</sup> But as for the garden which transgresses the movement that underpins life and produces fruit year-round, we are told that this is one of “the glories showered down by the gods / on King Alcinous' realm.”<sup>52</sup> The gods—or perhaps better put, the powers of the gods—are at work in this garden. Human beings might be responsible for designing this space, securing it with a fence,

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<sup>50</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, Bk. 5. 39.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 7. 127.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 7. 155-156.

giving it order, and irrigating it, but the success of this garden ultimately belongs to a set of forces that are supernatural or divine in origin. Without the gods intervening, the trees in this place would eventually become fruitless and die.

In contrast, the power of the gods does not dwell in Laertes' garden and it is clear the success of his plot owes quite a lot to human intervention. When we are told about the state of the garden in the final book of the *Odyssey*, there is no mention of divine intervention; the power of the gods is not at play here. Rather, the account that we are given evokes images of an elderly man working under the sun, moving from plant to plant and lovingly ensuring that all of their needs are met. We are told that "All's well-kept here; not one thing in the plot, / no plant, no fig, no pear, no olive, no vine, / not a vegetable" lacked Laertes' "tender, loving care."<sup>53</sup> While Odysseus was away for twenty long, arduous years, his father literally tended to the very Ithacan soil that his son had been deprived of and produced a bounty of delectable fruits and vegetables. As with all of the humanly made gardens in Homer, there is special mention of a fence here. One of the first things we are told in the description of Laertes' garden is that Dolius, Penelope's slave, is off collecting materials to build a wall that will "shore the vineyard up."<sup>54</sup> What is not clear from this description though is whether or not the garden currently has a defensive wall. Is the *herkos* damaged and in need of repair? Does an older *herkos*—perhaps one that is too damaged to repair—need pulling down and a new one built in its place? Is there no *herkos* at all, hence the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Bk. 24. 270.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Bk. 24. 248.



need to build one? Regardless of how we answer these questions, what is clear here is that a fence or defensive wall is one of the key characteristics to supporting the health of the garden. The wall is intended to shore the place up; in other words, it is ameliorative and betters the space in such a way that the garden would surely be worse off without it.

Here, then, is how the humanly made garden appears in Homer: it is an orderly, enclosed space, used for the cultivation of fruit trees, vegetables, and grapes. In their simplest form, Homeric gardens are what we might call kitchen gardens, for when a garden appears in Homer there is nearly always some nod towards its capacity to produce food. These spaces—although perhaps idyllic—were not intended to be enjoyed in much the same way a paradise or pleasure garden is; there is no mention of the cultivation of flowers, we hear nothing of landscape design in the creative sense, and the idea that one might pause, stop, and reflect on life under the shade of a tree seems entirely foreign. If the gardens in Homer are accurate depictions of garden life in Greece's archaic period, then it is safe to say that the appellation 'garden' designated a lot less than it does today. But what about classical Athens? What can be said of the gardens in this place at this historical juncture? It is to this question I will now turn.

In fifth-century Athens, few plants—and even fewer gardens—were grown within the polis walls. The explanations historians give tend to be twofold: a lack of physical space and access to water meant that few households had gardens attached to them,<sup>55</sup> while the general belief that nature was something that needed to be kept outside of the urban centre meant that many of the gardens which held religious, social, or practical significance were extramural and found outside of the city's fortified walls.<sup>56</sup> Within the polis walls, plantings tended to be limited to public places such as the Agora, or as we will see in chapter three, to rooftops, where plants were grown in pots to commemorate the short and tragic life of Aphrodite's lover Adonis.

According to Thompson, the plantings in the Agora were mostly herbaceous, with many of the species cultivated being familiar to us today; notably, rosemary, lavender, sage, pink savory, capers, oregano, marjoram, mustard, and basil.<sup>57</sup> In addition, Thompson goes on to note that only one poison was ever “planted” and grown in the Agora: this was the hemlock used in state executions.<sup>58</sup> While we do not know which species of hemlock was used by the state,<sup>59</sup> knowing that any species was

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<sup>55</sup> Turner, *Garden History*, 100; Carroll-Spillecke, “The Gardens of Greece,” 86; Thompson, *Garden Lore of Ancient Athens* (New Jersey: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1982), 6.

<sup>56</sup> Giesecke, *The Epic City*, xii.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *Garden Lore*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Based on surviving historical accounts from those who witnessed the executions, we are unsure whether *Cicuta maculata/virosa/douglasii* or *Oenanthe crocata* was used. The reported symptoms one experienced after ingesting the poison vary widely across accounts. Some of the symptoms said to have been experienced more closely resemble those induced by the former species, while other symptoms are more closely associated with the latter. For a detailed discussion of this, see Janet Sullivan, “A Note on the Death of Socrates,” *The Classical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2001): 608-610. Theophrastus also speaks of hemlock and its preparation in great detail; however, he provides no clear indication of a possible species. See *Enquiry into Plants II*, trans. Arthur Hort (London: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1916), Bk 9. 16. 6-8.

*planted* brings with it a rather strange and contradictory image. We can imagine the toxic plant—or more likely, its seeds—being removed from its home somewhere in the depths of the wilderness, carried inside the polis walls, planted, and tended in order to ensure that it flourished. In tending to this plant, the person responsible for its health would have been simultaneously caring for an instrument of death. Perhaps they knew about the terrible secrets this plant held, perhaps they were oblivious to it all and were simply carrying out a task at the behest of someone with more authority; regardless, by nurturing this plant, they would have been nurturing something whose sole purpose in the polis was to forcibly end a human life.<sup>60</sup>

Outside of the city walls, one would have encountered a number of market gardens used to grow fruit, vegetables, and flowers.<sup>61</sup> Very little is known about these

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<sup>60</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that hemlock was cultivated for medicinal purposes in the classical period. Detailed accounts of the plant are scarce, but those that do mention it at length draw attention to its toxicity and its result in producing a speedy death. Theophrastus, for example, stresses that if a person consumes even but a small amount of the plant, that there is little that can be done to save them. Several authors also draw attention to the plant's toxicity in passing. In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, for example, Heracles will note that consumption of the plant is the fastest way into the underworld, while in his speech *Against Eratosthenes*, Lysias will note that Polemarchus was condemned to execution via hemlock. Later references to the plant in antiquity tend to simply draw attention to its toxicity. Lucretius, for instance, writes that "one may often see flocks of bearded goats growing fat on hemlock, which is rank poison to human beings." In similar vein to Lucretius, Strabo writes that the Ceians had a law which stipulated anyone who was unable to live well was ordered to drink hemlock to ensure that there be sufficient food for the rest of the people on the island. Pliny the Elder stands as a kind of outlier amongst the people who mention the plant in antiquity. He is the only one that claims there are several medicinal uses for the plant—from curing stomach aches, to acting as an anaphrodisiac when applied to the testicles during puberty. See Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants II*, Bk. 9. 8. 2 – 4, Bk 9. 16. 6 – 8; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, trans. David Barret (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), 116; Lysias, "Against Eratosthenes," in *Lysias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Massachusetts: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1967), 12. 17 – 20; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), Bk. 5. 900 – 901; Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. H. L. Jones (Massachusetts: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1924), Bk. 10. 5. 6; Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), Bk. 25. 95. Accessed October 12, 2020, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-eng1:25.95>.

<sup>61</sup> Giesecke, *The Epic City*, xii; Carroll-Spillecke, "The Gardens of Greece," 86.

gardens beyond their location; presumably, they might have looked something like Laertes' or King Alcinous' garden—that is to say, secured by a fence, well-ordered with plants divided into sections, and so on—but this is just speculation. How people interacted with them, what exact species were grown, and how they were grown all remains a mystery. Given what we know about the typical Athenian diet, Carroll-Spillecke has suggested that the gardens could have contained onions, laurel, myrtle, figs, apples, pears, berries, olives, beans, lentils, and garlic.<sup>62</sup> It is important to note that these market gardens were not necessarily farms. While they did provide food for the population of the city in much the same way a modern farm might, and while some of these gardens might have formed part of a larger farm,<sup>63</sup> for the most part the farms were further from the city walls than the market gardens.<sup>64</sup> In addition, we know that the farms surrounding Athens were used for the production of grain.<sup>65</sup> The market gardens were likely tended by men and women alike, while the farms would have been tended solely by men.<sup>66</sup>

Like the market gardens, many mysteries surround another type of garden: the Aphrodite gardens. We have some understanding of where these gardens were located. An account from Pausanias, for example, suggests that they were located

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<sup>62</sup> Carroll-Spillecke, "The Gardens of Greece," 89.

<sup>63</sup> See Giesecke, *The Epic City*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> See Carroll-Spillecke, "The Gardens of Greece," 86; Giesecke, *The Epic City*, xii.

<sup>65</sup> Giesecke, *The Epic City*, xii.

<sup>66</sup> Marcel Detienne notes that while women often gardened, they were not responsible for farming. See *Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 184.

along the Ilisos River.<sup>67</sup> We do not, however, know what they would have looked like. With that said, we can speculate as to what they might have looked like based on Sappho's depiction of an Aphrodite garden in an undisclosed location centuries earlier. Indeed, if the lyric poet's account is anything to go off of, then they most likely would have been planted with apple trees and roses. Here are her words:

Come to me from Krete to this holy temple,  
here to your sweet apple grove,  
altars smoking with  
frankincense.

Cold water ripples through apple branches,  
the whole place shadowed in roses,  
from the murmuring leaves  
deep sleep descends

Where horses graze, the meadow blooms  
spring flowers, the winds  
breathe softly...

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<sup>67</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W. H. S. Jones (London: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Harvard University Press, 1918), Bk. 1. 19. 2. Also see Richard Ernest Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 172.

Here, Aphrodite, after gathering...

pour into golden cups nectar

lavishly mingled

with joys.<sup>68</sup>

The image Sappho paints in this fragment is quite an idyllic one. She tells us of a holy temple which is surrounded by an apple grove, and one is tempted to say that the apple trees border the space in much the same way a traditional fence or garden wall does in Homer. Frankincense wafts in the air and water ripples through the branches of the fruit trees—presumably as a low hanging branch dangles in a nearby stream. As one ventures further inside, they find roses shadowing the space. We do not know what variety they are, although since they seem to envelop everything inside, we can assume that they are a type of climbing rose. This would make sense given that two of the most cultivated varieties of rose in ancient Greece—the dogrose (*rosa canina*) and the cabbage rose (*rosa centifolia*)—are both climbers.<sup>69</sup> If this interpretation is indeed correct, it would suggest that there would have been something for the roses

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<sup>68</sup> Sappho, "Fragment 2," in *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works*, trans. Diane J. Rayor and Andre Lardinois (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 27.

<sup>69</sup> Thompson, *Garden Lore*, 14. Presumably, roses would have been cultivated for a myriad of reasons. In the third century BCE, Athenaeus writes that the flower was often weaved into crowns and garlands as it was believed to "relieve headache." See Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists. Or Banquet of the Learned of Athenaeus* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 1079. Accessed October 10, 2020. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg.0008,001:15>

to climb, whether it was the apple trees themselves or some sort of humanly made structure that formed part of the surrounds of the temple.

The place that Sappho describes would have commonly been referred to as a *temenos*; in other words, a kind of religious garden in the broadest sense of the word *kepos*. *Temene* were areas cut off from the broader landscape by some sort of boundary wall or natural obstacle.<sup>70</sup> Like the gardens we have encountered so far, *temene* were intended for human use, although this is not to say that they were exactly alike. Despite the presence of apple trees in Sappho's account, these places were not kitchen gardens intended for the production of food. Rather, *temene* tended to be sacred spots "in Nature filled with divinity but inscribed by humankind for the purpose of interaction with the divine."<sup>71</sup> There were some exceptions to this—Herodotus, for example, uses the word *temenos* to speak of a tract of land that belonged to the Persian king Xerxes<sup>72</sup>—but for the most part *temene* were intended as a kind of meeting place for mortals and gods.<sup>73</sup> Despite being found in the natural world, *temene* were not part of the wilderness, but places that had been *built*, so to speak, by ascribing meaning to certain locations. While the *temenos* in Sappho's fragment is portrayed as "a garden that embodies the fertile, life-sustaining essence of Aphrodite," insofar as *temene* were locations in wilderness that had been turned into places, we could imagine them resembling anything in the natural world. This certainly seems to be the case for in the

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<sup>70</sup> Turner, *Garden History*, 72.

<sup>71</sup> Giesecke, *The Epic City*, 53.

<sup>72</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley (London: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Harvard University Press, 1969), Bk. 9. 116.

<sup>73</sup> See Herodotus, *Histories*, Bk. 2. 112 and Bk. 3. 142. Also see Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. 8. 57-56; 47-48.

*Iliad* we are told that Gargaron peak—a mountain—is the location of a *temene* dedicated to Zeus; the great Olympian god “taking his throne on the mountaintop.”<sup>74</sup>

In contrast to the market and Aphrodite gardens, we know quite a bit about the public parkland that sat outside the polis walls. The most famous of these, the grove dedicated to the mythic hero Hekademos, sat approximately two kilometres from the northwest walls of Athens,<sup>75</sup> contained a gymnasium with ample space for intellectuals to gather,<sup>76</sup> was well watered thanks to the statesman Cimon,<sup>77</sup> and was full of convolvulus flowers and olive, poplar, plane, and elm trees.<sup>78</sup> Although the grove was dedicated to Hekademos, it was actually sacred to Athena, Zeus, Prometheus, Hephaestos, Hermes, Herakles, and Eros, and is best known—to this day—as the location of the Academy.<sup>79</sup> It was here, presumably under the shade of the trees, that we are told Plato first pursued philosophy before then relocating to a private garden somewhere near Colonus.<sup>80</sup> Despite, however, moving to a private garden, the Academy was so well known as a place frequented by Plato and his students that the comedic poet Epikrates took aim in one of his works: “I saw a crowd of young men in the gymnasia of the Academy, earnestly trying to define whether a

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<sup>74</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. 8. 57-56; 47-48.

<sup>75</sup> Turner, *Garden History*, 83; John M. Camp, *The Archaeology of Athens* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>76</sup> Debra Nails, “The Life of Plato of Athens,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 6.

<sup>77</sup> Gothein, *A History of Garden Art*, 65; Carroll-Spillecke, “The Gardens of Greece,” 91.

<sup>78</sup> Aristophanes, “The Clouds,” in *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 1002-1010.

<sup>79</sup> See Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens*, 219ff.

<sup>80</sup> See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Pamela Mensch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Bk. 3. 5.



pumpkin is a vegetable, a grass, or a tree, while Plato stood benevolently by encouraging them.”<sup>81</sup> The account is clearly satirical and mocks Plato and his students in much the same way Aristophanes’ account of Socrates mocks the philosopher in *The Clouds*. Yet presumably the Academy would have fostered all kinds of discussion on plant life and the natural world. It is hard to imagine otherwise. Under the shade of a plane tree, convolvulus dancing in the breeze, Plato and his friends would have been exposed to a small, safe dose of nature—this is the power of a garden.<sup>82</sup>



Within its fortified walls Athens might not have been a garden city, but this is not to say that its people were unfamiliar with plants or gardens. For the most part, Athenians would have only come into contact with plant life when they left the city’s walls. The plantings in the Agora would have acted as one point of intramural exposure, as would the pot plants dedicated to Adonis, but it would not have been until they left the urban centre that they would have been exposed to the various

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<sup>81</sup> Epikrates, “Fragment 11,” in *The Fragments of Attic Comedy After Meineke, Bergk, and Kock*, ed. and trans. John Maxwell Edmonds (Leiden: Brill, 1957), 355.

<sup>82</sup> Plato, of course, was not the only philosopher to make use of gardens and public parkland. When Aristotle left the Academy, he took up residence in a space named after its sacred groves to Apollo Lyceus: The Lyceum. Here, he founded his school and is said to have housed the world’s first botanical garden. Theophrastus inherited this space shortly after Aristotle’s death. Likewise, Epicurus famously taught philosophy from his kitchen garden. It was there that his students learnt about the ways of nature and of life and death. For more on the relationship between philosophy and gardening see Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens*, 219-235; Damon Young, *Philosophy in the Garden* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012), 5-12; Harrison, *Gardens*, 71-82.

gardens and public parkland that surrounded the city. Given the close proximity of some of these places to the city (i.e., the Academy), the walk would not have been particularly long; nonetheless, one still had to commute to these places as they were not a part of the traditional urban household. Of course, given that these places contained market gardens, religious sanctuaries, or sites for physical and intellectual development, Athenians would have visited them fairly regularly. Gardens in ancient Greece might not have been as diverse as they are today, however, we get the sense that what they were varied widely. From the orchards, vineyards, and kitchen gardens in Homer, to the market gardens, Aphrodite gardens, and even public parkland of Athens, these were all places that could have been captured in that pregnant word *kepos*.

## Chapter 2: Beneath the Plane Tree

Before I come to look at where the dialogue is set, it is worth establishing how exactly Phaedrus and Socrates end up where they do in the countryside. The dialogue does not, after all, begin with images of love, madness, and chastity in the background; rather, it begins quite modestly with Socrates simply running into Phaedrus in an undisclosed location (more on this later) and asking his friend where he has been and where he is going (227a). The pair, it would seem, had not planned to meet on this day, so Socrates is curious to know where Phaedrus is headed. This opening question, while brief, sets the whole dialogue in motion. As it turns out, Phaedrus is about to go for a walk “outside the city walls” on the recommendation of the physician Acumenus (227a). Much of his morning, he explains, has been spent “sitting” at Epicrates’ house listening to the orator Lysias (227a). Presumably, he is now quite stiff, and the walk is meant to help reinvigorate him—get the body moving, so to speak—after several hours of inactivity. As he continues explaining, Acumenus once told him that a walk in the country is meant to be more “refreshing” than a walk through the “city streets” (227b). Phaedrus does not elaborate, he does not say why a walk in the country might be more refreshing than one in the city, but it is not particularly hard to imagine why that might have been the case. The country would have been quieter, the air would have been less polluted from people cooking over fires and working in forges in the urban centre, and being more sparsely populated would have meant that one could

walk uninterrupted, breeze on their face for miles on end. A walk in the city might have provided some of the physical benefits of walking, but one would have no doubt had to deal with a melange of distractions.<sup>83</sup>

As mentioned, we never learn where Socrates and Phaedrus are when they meet; in fact, it is not stated anywhere in the dialogue. Subsequently, scholars have interpreted the beginning of the dialogue in a number of different ways. Hyland, for example, has said that the pair are “outside the city walls” when they meet, that their starting point is already out of the city,<sup>84</sup> while Wycherley, on the other hand, suggests that they meet in the city, probably somewhere near the house of Epicrates.<sup>85</sup> This, he continues, would mean that they could have left the polis through the nearby Gate of Aigeus to the north-east of the Olympieion.<sup>86</sup> The situation is difficult to interpret. On the one hand, they could already be in the country when they run into one another—Socrates does mention that country walks are good for one’s health at 227b, so he may already be walking outside the walls himself, although this seems unlikely given what we know of him. On the other hand, it is not inconceivable that they might have met somewhere inside the walls and then left through a nearby gate. Perhaps when

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<sup>83</sup> What is remarkable about this opening exchange is not so much that Phaedrus is going for a walk outside the city, but that in the lines that immediately follow Socrates will agree with his reasons for going. Indeed, Socrates says that Acumenus is “right” about walks in the country (227b). Considering Socrates will choose death over leaving the city in the *Crito*, and that he will later in this dialogue confess that he does not venture into the country because trees have little to teach him (230d), acknowledging that Acumenus is right seems somewhat out of place and we cannot help but genuinely wonder to what extent Socrates is familiar with the countryside.

<sup>84</sup> Drew A. Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 64.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Ernest Wycherley, “The Scene of Plato’s ‘Phaidros,’” *Phoenix* 17, no. 2 (1963): 91.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

Phaedrus is first spotted, he was headed to the gate—hence Socrates’ inclination to ask where he is going. In any case, the fact remains that Plato never has anyone reveal where they are in the beginning. While we are eventually told where they will end up when Phaedrus spots the plane tree in a few pages time, we are never explicitly told whether they meet *inside* or *outside* the city.

It is strange that Plato never clarifies where the pair meet, especially given that he will put a considerable amount of detail into describing the setting of the dialogue in a few pages time. Indeed, he writes that Socrates and Phaedrus turn off the road to walk along the Ilisos (229a), that at one point their location puts them several stades upstream from an altar dedicated to Boreas (229c), and that where the pair finally settle is full of vegetal life, complete with fragrant botanicals wafting in the air (230b – c). If Plato had wanted us to know where the pair first meet, presumably he would have had a character tell us. He could of, like he does in the beginning of the *Charmides* or *Lysis*, had someone explicitly mention where they are.<sup>87</sup> Unlike those dialogues the beginning of the *Phaedrus* seems deliberately vague. We know where some of the people in the dialogue have been (Phaedrus has been at Epicrates’ house listening to Lysias) and where people are going (Phaedrus is going for a walk outside the walls and Socrates will eventually agree to accompany him a few lines later), but not where anyone is in that present moment. In regard to the present, all we know is that Socrates

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<sup>87</sup> In the *Charmides* Socrates meets his interlocutors at the palaestra of Taureas, opposite the temple of Basile (153a). Likewise, in the *Lysis*, Socrates first meets Hippothales and Ctesippus by a little gate near Panops spring (203a).

is with Phaedrus. But perhaps that is the only detail that matters. Perhaps Plato believed where the pair set off from mattered very little for the life of the dialogue. Perhaps the opening two lines where Socrates asks Phaedrus where he is coming from and where he is going tell us what is most important. It is not *where* they meet one another that matters, but that they have run into one another, that this chance encounter took place after Phaedrus had been with Lysias, and that Socrates and Phaedrus will end up taking a walk together in the countryside. The fact their current location is not given seems to point towards this.

In the lines that immediately follow, Phaedrus will ask Socrates whether he would like to accompany him on his walk (227b). It should be noted, however, that Phaedrus does not ask Socrates to join him out of courtesy; rather, he invites him because Socrates wants to know how Phaedrus spent the morning with Lysias (227b). Phaedrus, it seems, is determined to take his walk, so inviting Socrates to accompany him is a matter of convenience; he can take his walk whilst telling the philosopher about his morning with Lysias—kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. Socrates, of course, will accept the invitation, but it is what he says when he does that is worth paying particular attention to. Paraphrasing a line from Pindar's first *Isthmian Ode*, he tells Phaedrus that learning how the pair spent their morning together is “more important than the most pressing engagement” (227b). In other words, nothing is more important than finding out what the pair discussed; even if he needed to be somewhere else, he would still choose to listen to Phaedrus. There is almost a sense of urgency here—as if Socrates' love of *logoi* compels him to learn what they discussed.

Of course, later in the dialogue Socrates will heavily imply this is the case when he tells Phaedrus that the book containing Lysias' speech is the perfect thing to "lead" him "all over Attica" (230e), but for now, at this point in the dialogue, it is not yet clear. With his reply to the invitation complete, the pair agree to set off together, Phaedrus asking Socrates, curiously, to "Lead the way" (227b).<sup>88</sup>

Given that Phaedrus has already said he would tell Socrates what Lysias discussed should the philosopher accompany him on his walk, we might expect the account would proceed unproblematically. This, however, is far from the case. Phaedrus begins telling Socrates what Lysias discussed only to be interrupted.<sup>89</sup> Unimpressed by Lysias' thesis, Socrates quips: "What a wonderful man! I wish he would write that you should give favours to a poor rather than to a rich man, to an older rather than a younger one—that is, to someone like me and most other people: then his speeches would be really sophisticated, and...contribute to the public good" (227d). This comment marks the first use of irony in the dialogue. It serves to indicate, as Sallis explains, that Socrates is aware of the broad political intentions behind the speech, that what Lysias has really composed is a speech that belongs "to that arsenal of means by which men attempt to persuade others...to serve their own advantage."<sup>90</sup> In short, the speech is entirely self-serving and benefits no one but the orator. No

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<sup>88</sup> There is quite a bit of foreshadowing in this sentence. As the dialogue progresses, it will be Socrates who leads Phaedrus through the account of love, the discussion of the soul, and writing.

<sup>89</sup> At this stage, Phaedrus mentions that Lysias' speech is about the seduction of a good-looking boy by a non-lover, and that one should gratify those who are not in love with them rather than those who are (227c).

<sup>90</sup> Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 110.

doubt this is one of the reasons Socrates is still quite eager to listen to the speech, telling Phaedrus that he is prepared to walk the sizeable distance to Megara and back if that is what it takes (227d).<sup>91</sup> Following this statement, we might assume Phaedrus would continue reciting the speech, that he would begin to explain why Lysias believes you should gratify a non-lover over a lover, but something else happens instead and the account of the speech is temporarily brushed aside in the process. What happens is this: Phaedrus claims that an ordinary person such as himself is incapable of reciting the speech from memory in a way that does it justice (228a). Socrates, however, knows Phaedrus quite well and does not believe what he has just said. He explains that not only is it likely that Phaedrus heard the speech, begged Lysias for a written copy, and then spent several hours poring over the text learning it by heart, but that the written copy of the speech is on him right now, tucked inside his robe (228a – b).<sup>92</sup> As it turns out, Socrates' suspicions about Phaedrus are correct, and he will explain that he has no intention of letting Phaedrus rehearse the speech on him when Lysias is 'there' with them (228d – 229a). Having outed Phaedrus, we might now assume that the speech is poised to return, that Phaedrus would take off from where he was interrupted, but, again, this would be the wrong assumption.

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<sup>91</sup> By modern standards, it is approximately forty kilometres to Megara from Athens (or eighty kilometres round trip).

<sup>92</sup> Given the themes of the dialogue, it is worth pointing out that this line of questioning is loaded with sexual connotation. In the *Lysistrata*, for example, Cinesias will ask the Spartan herald what the curious bulge under his cloak is. Of course, he already knows the answer for he is, like all of the men in the play, suffering from the same affliction – an erection (985 – 989). For a detailed discussion on the phrase and the notion of unveiling or seeing beneath someone's clothing in the Greek world, see Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 21-23.



Phaedrus will not recite the speech until they reach their final destination: a plane tree that he has now spotted in the distance (229a). Why? At this stage in the dialogue it looks as though it is for practical reasons: now that Phaedrus has been outed, that he has a written copy of the speech on him, they need somewhere to sit down and read it. While they could read it as they walk, it is summer, the day is growing hotter, and the tree looks like it will provide ample shade (229a – b). Further still, there is “grass” where the tree is, and the pair can “sit or, if [they] prefer, lie down” (229b).

The pair will now set off for the tree, but unlike earlier when they *first* set off on their walk, Phaedrus will lead Socrates. Indeed, Socrates explicitly asks Phaedrus to “Lead the way” to the tree (229b). This reversal is easily overlooked but it is important to note because while Phaedrus *is* the person in front leading, he seems to know very little about the country. Not only will Socrates eventually have to interrupt the conversation that they are having to question whether the tree they are now standing in front of is the plane tree that they had seen earlier (230a), but it turns out to be Socrates, not Phaedrus, who is more knowledgeable about the countryside. Almost as soon as the pair agree to walk towards the tree, Phaedrus asks Socrates whether the stretch of the Ilisos they are now walking along is where the god of the north wind, Boreas, abducted the princess Orithuia (229b). Socrates will not answer the question at first, instead brushing it aside with the terse “So they say;” however, after more prodding from Phaedrus he explains that this is not in fact the spot, that it is actually “two or three hundred yards downstream, where one crosses to get to the

district of Agra" (229b – c). Further still, it is there, he says much to Phaedrus' surprise, that there is an altar to Boreas (229c). In addition to this, he will go on to explain there are good reasons for rejecting the myth altogether, although since he is not in the business of rationalising myths when he is still yet to fulfil the Delphic inscription of knowing oneself, he simply moves on (229c – 230a). It is important to note though that these remarks about the Orithuia myth do not mean that Socrates is rejecting *all* myth—that would be quite an outrageous thing to suggest when the philosopher will, later in this dialogue, employ both the myth of the charioteer in the palinode, as well as the myth of Theuth in his commentary on writing. As John Sallis puts it, Socrates sustains a more "essential" relationship to myth.<sup>93</sup> By this he means that Socrates' relationship to myth is first and foremost predicated on the notion of knowing oneself. Rather than discuss the legitimacy of myth, Socrates treats it as something which may help him understand himself. We see this quite clearly when Socrates mentions the mythical creature Typhon. Until, he says, he truly comes to know himself, to understand his being, he could be anything: on the one hand he could be like a peaceful animal, on the other, it could turn out that he is something "more complicated and savage than Typhon" (230a), the one hundred headed monster born from the Earth that would have gone on to rule over mortals and immortals alike if not for Zeus taking early notice of its power and slaying it with his lightning bolt.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 116.

<sup>94</sup> See Hesiod, "Theogony," in *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 805-872.

With that, the pair's walk comes to an end and they arrive at the setting proper. Once Socrates learns that they have in fact arrived at the tree, he expresses his delight with the location. His remarks are worth quoting in full here:

By Hera, it really is a beautiful resting place. The plane tree is tall and very broad; the chaste-tree, high as it is, is wonderfully shady, and since it is in full bloom, the whole place is filled with its fragrance. From under the plane tree the loveliest spring runs with very cool water—our feet can testify to that. The place appears to be dedicated to Achelous and some of the Nymphs, if we can judge from the statues and votive offerings. Feel the freshness of the air; how pretty and pleasant it is; how it echoes with the summery, sweet song of the cicadas' chorus! The most exquisite thing of all, of course, is the grassy slope: it rises so gently that you can rest your head perfectly when you lie down on it. You've really been the most marvelous guide, my dear Phaedrus (230b – c).

It turns out that there is far more going on here than either Phaedrus or Socrates could see earlier. Of course, the plane tree stands before them in all of its tall and broad might, but it also turns out that there is a *vitex agnus-castus* or chaste tree; its blooming flowers creating a lovely perfume. Moreover, it turns out that the space around the two trees is not untamed wilderness, it has been touched, transformed even, by the inclusion of statues and offerings dedicated to the Nymphs and the local river god Achelous—human beings have been here. A chorus of cicadas chirp overhead, and of

course, there is the grassy slope that the pair could see earlier. Here, at the site of the plane tree, Socrates is enamoured, calling the whole site beautiful.<sup>95</sup>

I would like to examine some of the things that are found in this space. The plane tree seems like a good place to start since it is the first, as well as most substantial thing, we are introduced to. First and foremost, plane trees were known—as they are today—for being large, broad, and shady.<sup>96</sup> Their name in Greek, *platanos*, is derived from the word for broad or wide (*platus*); it is also this same word from which Plato's name (*Platon*) is derived. It is for this reason Marder suggests that the plane tree is meant to symbolise the dialogue's author and that Plato is being deliberately humorous by having the dialogue's two primary characters refer to a tree that has a similar name as him.<sup>97</sup> In addition, he thinks that Plato has them sit under this tree because Socrates' legacy has been eclipsed by Plato's own.<sup>98</sup> I do not want to discuss the legitimacy of this interpretation here because I doubt we would ever reach a conclusion without asking Plato himself; nevertheless, the etymological link is worth

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<sup>95</sup> Interestingly enough, this marks the first place in the dialogue where a cognate for beauty is explicitly mentioned. Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 65.

<sup>96</sup> In one of Aesop's fables (*The Travellers and the Plane Tree*), a group of travellers take shelter from the midday sun under a plane tree. As they rest beneath the great tree, one of them looks up at its canopy and proclaims that plane trees are useless for human beings since they do not produce fruit. In response, the plane tree chastises the traveller, saying that they are "ungrateful;" at the "very moment" they shelter under the tree they have the audacity to say that it is good for nothing. Interestingly, the whole scene is rather reminiscent of the opening of the dialogue. See Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, ed. Rev. T. James (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1876), XVI. Reitzammer draws our attention to the fable and uses it to stress the point that the setting of the dialogue is meant to resemble an Adonis garden. Like those gardens, she says that here we are presented with an image of a fruitless plant. See *The Athenian Adonia*, 105.

<sup>97</sup> Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

keeping in mind if only because it is something that a reader in antiquity would have noticed.

Looking more broadly at Greek mythology, the plane tree is connected to Helen, the figure of beauty, seduction, and betrayal that spawned the Trojan war. In Book 2 of the *Iliad*, as Odysseus reflects on how long the war will last, he mentions the prophecy that the seer Calchas had divined some nine years earlier. As it turns out, nine years prior, on their way to Troy, the Argives had made a series of offerings to the gods at an altar under the shade of a plane tree in Aulis.<sup>99</sup> As a result, a snake, sent by Zeus, appeared before the armada, slithered from the altar, and climbed the tree.<sup>100</sup> Moving through the canopy, the snake made its way to a sparrow's nest where eight chicks and their mother were roosting. As the predator moved in, the birds began to chirp in panic; it was no use, the snake reared its fangs and struck, devouring all nine of them.<sup>101</sup> But just as quickly as the snake had appeared and killed the sparrows, so too did it leave the world; Zeus striking it down, turning it to stone.<sup>102</sup> Ten animals died in total. In response to the terrible scene they had just witnessed, Calchas proclaimed that the war would last nine full years—one year for each sparrow—before then being settled in the tenth, when the walls of Troy would fall, and the Argives would ultimately reign victorious.<sup>103</sup> So, it was under the plane tree the Argive

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<sup>99</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. 2. 350 – 360.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 2. 362-365.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 2. 370 – 374.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 2. 377.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk 2. 380 – 395.

contingent learnt that it would take ten long years for the war to end, an event which would, most importantly, mean the return of Menelaus' wife Helen.

Whether or not the Greeks took this scene from the *Iliad* as an indication that plane trees might be a symbol of Helen is near impossible to say, but it is nonetheless interesting to note that she continued to be associated with the tree well after Homer. In Sparta, for instance, her urban shrine was located "near the Platanistas (plane trees)."<sup>104</sup> Further, Theocritus, writing in the third century BCE, refers to a plane tree as Helen's tree. Indeed, in his *Epithalamium of Helen and Menelaus*, the twelve maidens sing that carved into the bark of a plane tree is the inscription "I am Helen's; worship me."<sup>105</sup> There is also a mention of Helen and the plane tree in the second century AD, with the geographer Pausanias telling us about the Helen cult at Rhodes and its relation to the figures Polyxo and Tlepolemus. According to the legend he preserves, Helen made her way to Rhodes to seek the help of her friend Polyxo sometime after the war had ended. In a cruel twist of fate though, a twist of fate brought about by the death of Polyxo's husband Tlepolemus in the Trojan war, Polyxo murdered Helen by hanging, tying the noose around her neck and suspending the rope from the limb of a plane tree.<sup>106</sup> It was for this reason, Pausanias explains, that the "Rhodians have a sanctuary of Helen of the tree."<sup>107</sup> In addition, we find an indirect connection in

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<sup>104</sup> Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44.

<sup>105</sup> Theocritus, "The Epithalamy of Helen" in *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, trans. J. M. Edmonds (London: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1919), 229.

<sup>106</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3. 19. 10.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

Athens—in fact, it was right where Plato taught in the Academy. As we saw in the previous chapter, the grove dedicated to the mythic hero Hekademos—the same grove that was the site for the Academy—was planted with plane trees. As it turns out, one of the things Hekademos was known for was helping rescue a young Helen from the Athenian king Theseus. Plutarch tells us that when Helen’s brothers came to rescue her, the Athenians played dumb; all of them except, of course, Hekademos. Rather than pretend he knew nothing about her abduction, he told the brothers exactly where they could find her: in the town of Aphidnae.<sup>108</sup> Because of his role in the rescue, Plutarch explains this is why the Spartans chose to leave the Academy alone when they “laid waste” to the rest of Attica during the Peloponnesian War.<sup>109</sup>

What might we say the plane tree in the dialogue is then? Is it Helen or Plato (or perhaps even something not considered)? As we saw above there are certainly those who argue that it is a nod to Plato, but it is also the case that there are those who say it is Helen—Andrea Capra, for example, has argued that “Helen is present in the very landscape of the *Phaedrus*, given that Plato’s celebrated plane-tree seems to be designed deliberately to evoke the arboreal cult of Helen *dendritis*.”<sup>110</sup> Asking whether the tree is Helen or Plato (or even some third option) though is the wrong question to ask. Choosing one or the other forecloses the possible interpretations of the text. It is

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<sup>108</sup> Plutarch, “Theseus” in *Plutarch’s Lives: Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Pubicola*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Massachusetts: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1967), Bk. 32. 1-4.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Capra, *Plato’s Four Muses*, 59. For a more detailed discussion, including the ways in which the *Phaedrus* engages with other texts that are about Helen, see 59-87, and especially 65-69.

the case that Plato's name in ancient Greek shares the same root as the word for the tree, and it *is* the case that the plane tree was associated with Helen, even if only tacitly, as far back as Homer. Perhaps it is best to think of the tree as a framing device which alludes to multiple interpretations of the text based on how it is taken up. On the one hand we could think through what it means for Socrates to make the claims that he does in front of an image of Plato; on the other, we could think about the discussions of love and madness and what it might mean for them if they are presented in front of an image of Helen. There are many avenues to pursue based on how the tree is interpreted.

Let me now turn to look at the chaste tree. The first thing that needs pointing out is that chaste trees are not, in fact, trees. Rather, they are shrubs which, if left unchecked over many years, have the potential to become treelike. Second, they are, as their name might suggest, in some way associated with chastity. There are two words for chaste tree in ancient Greek: one is *agnos*, the other *lugos*.<sup>111</sup> According to the Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon, the former word, the word we find here in the dialogue in Socrates' description of the setting, is the one associated with chastity thanks to its close relation to the word for chaste or pure.<sup>112</sup> Why the Greeks named

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<sup>111</sup> The latter word is typically only found in Homer and Euripides, and is often used to refer to the plant's branches. In the *Iliad*, for example, the word is used to describe the type of branches Achilles binds Priam's captured sons with (Bk.11. 123). Likewise, in the *Odyssey* (Bk. 9. 478) and *Cyclops* (226), it is used to describe what sheep and lambs are bound with.

<sup>112</sup> The word for chaste tree is ἄγνος, while the word for chaste is ἀγνός. Hence, Liddell and Scott write in the entry for *agnos* that the word is "Associated with the notion of chastity from the likeness of its name to ἀγνός." See LSJ, *A Greek English Lexicon*, *agnos*. Accessed October 15, 2020, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=agnos&la=greek#lexicon>



the tree using a word so similar to the word for chaste is hard to say, but it probably had to do with the fact the tree was used as an aphrodisiac. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder tells us that ancient Athenian women placed chaste tree leaves on their beds to help ward off temptation during the Thesmophoria.<sup>113</sup> Celibacy was an important part of the festival, so this, says Burkert, was “reinforced by the special composition of the bedding on the ground.”<sup>114</sup>

Finally, there are the statuettes dedicated to the Nymphs and Achelous. There is little to say here since it is clear what they symbolise; however, it is worth pausing and thinking about what their presence might mean for this place. In other words, since their inclusion indicates that this spot is not simply untouched wilderness, what is it? It is not, it seems, manicured like the market gardens we saw in the previous chapter. Although statues and offerings are present, Socrates says nothing that would indicate people have been readily tending the land and plants that are there. We can assume, then, that the grass is somewhat wild, and that the two trees have been left to

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<sup>113</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), Bk. 24. 38. Accessed October 15, 2020, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-eng1:24.38>

The Thesmophoria was a particularly old religious festival with origins dating back to the stone age. Held in honour of the goddess Demeter, it was only celebrated by sexually active women, who, for the duration of the festival, practiced celibacy. Interestingly, every husband was expected to send his wife to the festival whilst also paying for any expenses associated with her participation. For a detailed account of the Thesmophoria, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1987), 13, 242 – 246. Also see Sarah Iles Johnston, “Demeter, Myths, and the Polyvalence of Festivals,” *History of Religions* 52, no. 4 (2013): 374 – 378; Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 78 – 79.

<sup>114</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 244.

grow without intervention.<sup>115</sup> There is one very good reason for believing this is the case: as we have just seen, chaste trees are not trees; they simply have the potential to become treelike. That Socrates indicates it is large enough to provide shade seems to suggest the plant has been left to grow unimpeded for quite some time. If one plant has been left to grow, it seems safe to assume they all have. Still, what might we call this spot that seems to be both unmanicured yet touched by human hands?

As we saw in the Introduction, there is very little scholarship on the landscape beneath the tree. There are, we will recall though, two scholars who believe that it is a garden. The first of these scholars is Giesecke. She explains that the religious privileging of this spot means that it has been “inscribed, demarcated and separated from the general landscape.”<sup>116</sup> In other words, the inclusion of religious iconography has turned this piece of land into a *place*. To this she adds: “Phaedrus and Socrates further inscribe this locale by specifically choosing it as a resting place, thereby privileging it [above others]. Their seemingly casual intervention in the landscape is in fact a deliberate act of placemaking...What they have done is create a garden.”<sup>117</sup> What is not clear from Giesecke’s account though is whether she thinks this place is a garden *before* Phaedrus and Socrates intervene and place make, although this would ultimately have little bearing on an interpretation of the dialogue itself since she thinks

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<sup>115</sup> I say “somewhat wild” because it is not hard to imagine that a spot such as this could have signs of grazing. Athenians kept goats on the outskirts of the city; these animals were known for stripping the landscape of all sorts of vegetation. The 5<sup>th</sup> century poet Eupolis immortalised the hungry goats of Athens in his comedy the *Aiges*. For more, see Thompson, *Garden Lore*, 21.

<sup>116</sup> Giesecke, *The Epic City*, 87.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

it is a garden once the pair arrive. The second scholar to suggest this site is a garden is Benso. In similar vein to Giesecke, she writes that the landscape is no longer wilderness, “statues and urns of various deities reveal the discrete presence of human beings, who have sanctified the natural sacredness of the place through the more accessible signs of institutionalized religion.”<sup>118</sup> Further still, she adds that it is no great surprise that Plato would choose to set a dialogue about beauty, desire and love “in a garden, where an overabundance of sensual stimulations inundates the mind as well as the body.”<sup>119</sup>

In light of some of the discussion in the previous chapter, it is hard to overlook the possibility that the area Phaedrus and Socrates settle in is indeed some kind of garden, perhaps a *temenos*. Both Giesecke and Benso point to the religious aspects of the site as one of the key features that makes it a garden, so it would make sense to call it a *temenos*. Moreover, as the dialogue progresses it becomes clear that the gods do seem to be ever present in this space; not only will Socrates go on to invoke several gods by name whilst there (i.e., the Muses, Pan, and so on), he will explicitly say that “There’s something really divine about this place” as he blames the Nymphs for his first speech on love edging closer and closer to dithyramb (238d).

With that all said, there are some reasons a person might push back against the *temenos* angle. As we saw in the previous chapter, *temene* were cut off from the rest of the landscape by a natural feature—be it a cliff face, mountain, forest, stream, and so

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<sup>118</sup> Benso, “Gardens: Philosophical Con/texts, Environmental Practices,” 10.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

on—so a person less sympathetic to the *temene* interpretation might claim that no such dividing feature is found here. They might acknowledge that while the Ilisos is nearby, it hardly constitutes a dividing feature since Socrates and Phaedrus are able to easily wade through it. They may even go on to say that even if the river crossing is more difficult at other times of the year, that this does not guarantee the site is a *temenos* since we have no idea what is on the other side of the grassy hill; there could be some kind of natural blockade there, but it is just as likely that it is connected to the rest of the landscape—we simply do not know. It is also especially telling, they might say, that Plato never has anyone refer to this place as a *kepos* despite the Greek word for garden having a wide range of meaning that could have included something like this. The first use of that particular word, they will say, does not appear until much later in the dialogue—towards the end, in fact—when Socrates compares writing to the gardens of Adonis at 276b.

Regardless of whether the site is some kind of garden or not, it is hard to deny that it conjures imagery which reminds us of one. To a modern reader it has some of the traits of a typical garden—trees, grass, statues—while to an ancient one it might, at least *prima facie*, resemble a *temenos*. The imagery is made especially more potent when we remember that gardens *were* readily associated with love in the Greek world, and that some of those gardens—the Aphrodite gardens—were located along the

Ilisos as well.<sup>120</sup> So, here in the countryside there is a doubling of love imagery: first there are the trees themselves which are connected to chastity and Helen, then there is the place they are situated, a place that even if it is not a garden, manages to resemble something connected to the Greek gods of love. The question is what might these images do to the dialogue? That is what the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to.



The pair now get comfortable and Phaedrus will begin reading Lysias' speech. Written in first person, the speech is told from the perspective of a non-lover as he addresses the boy he is trying to seduce. Now, before we begin, it is worth bearing in mind that the speech is gendered and skews heavily towards the homoerotic. While many of the arguments presented in the speech could be taken and applied to any sort of relationship, the speech itself is not about relationships generally but those between two men. More specifically, the speech seems to be connected to the pederastic tradition. Whether or not the non-lover in the speech is meant to be an imaginary character or Lysias himself is hard to say — Sallis, for example, has claimed the former,

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<sup>120</sup> And this is to say nothing of Eros who is associated with gardens from conception. Indeed, Socrates tells us in the *Symposium* that he was conceived in "the garden of Zeus" (203b). It is also worth noting that when we encounter a young Eros playing jacks in the *Argonautica*, that it is in the garden of Zeus. See Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, trans. R. C. Seaton (London: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1912), Bk. 3. 115.

while Schmidt has suggested the latter—but regardless, the non-lover begins the speech by explaining that just because he is not in love with this person, does not mean that he should not be able to get what he wants (231a).<sup>121</sup> Rather, as the speech will eventually go on to show, the fact he is not in love with him is *precisely* the reason he should get what he wants. The speech ultimately addresses a myriad of issues the non-lover believes are present in a typical relationship—from a lover’s regret (231a), to public embarrassment (232a – b), jealousy (232c), the problem of loving someone for their body and the loss of desire that inevitably follows when that body changes (232e – 233a), as well as the dangers of over-praising one’s beloved (233a – b)—but the real problem, the crux of the issue for the non-lover, is the lover’s madness. According to the non-lover, lovers are mentally ill and driven to do things *because* of their desire for the other person; they know they are “not thinking straight” and admit that they cannot get themselves “under control” while in love (231d). The non-lover paints the desire one feels for their beloved almost like an addictive narcotic. The lover yearns and acts for their beloved—this is why they cannot bear to see them with anyone else (232c) and will “praise” them even when it is not the best course of action (233a)—yet the moment their desire leaves them, the moment they are no longer under the influence of this ‘substance’, they are overcome by the cold steely hand of regret and “wish [they] had not done” what they had while in love (231a).

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<sup>121</sup> See Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 118; Schmidt, “The Garden of Letters,” 68.

In contrast, the non-lover says that non-lovers do not succumb to the mind-altering desire that lovers experience. Without desire they are completely in control: they will not neglect their own business because of love (231b), nor will they be jealous of others spending time with the 'beloved' (232d). In fact, should the boy choose the non-lover over a lover, they will receive someone who is a "master" of themselves, someone who has "not been overwhelmed by love" (233c). In other words, entering into a 'relationship' with a non-lover means spending time with someone who devotes themselves to the other "with no thought of immediate pleasure," a person who plans "for the benefits that are to come," someone not quick to anger, and who is prepared to forgive and help prevent the 'beloved' from making wrong decisions (233c). In short, the non-lover is better in every way. Where one finds shortcomings in a traditional relationship thanks to the lover/beloved dynamic, they would, presumably, be hard pressed to find anything of the sort in a relationship with a non-lover since non-lovers are not subject to the same problematic forces that a lover is.<sup>122</sup>

It is at this point the non-lover in the speech will address one potential question that the boy listening might have: whether there can be adequate friendship without *eros*? The answer, it turns out, is yes. The non-lover explains that our relationship with our parents and children is one devoid of *eros*, as are our relationships with close friends, which do not come from erotic desires but something "quite different"

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<sup>122</sup> Of course, what the non-lover says here is not entirely true, they must have some degree of erotic desire if they are prepared to argue that they are worth spending time with—and indeed this is something we will see Socrates later comment on when he delivers his first speech.

altogether (233d). He fails to say what that different thing is, but reading between the lines we can assume he means they stem from notions of *storge* and *philia*; in other words, familial affection and friendship. Hence this is why even with the absence of *eros*, human beings are able to form genuine connections with one another. But a question still remains: who should we spend our time with? The non-lover is sceptical of the notion that we should give to those who are most in need. While it might make sense to tend to those who are the neediest since they will be especially grateful, he is not sure this is how things really work, noting that if “it were true that we ought to give favour to those who need it most” then “we should all be helping out the very poorest people, not the best ones” (233d). “No,” he says, the most appropriate thing is “to grant your favors to those who are best able to return them” in kind (233e). In other words, the non-lover suggests that we should be thinking in terms of an exchange economy i.e., I do things for you because you are able to do them for me too. The response is hardly surprising: the non-lover has already explained that part of the appeal of being in a relationship with him is that he thinks not of immediate pleasure but the benefits that might be reaped sometime in the future. Claiming that one should give preference to people who are best able to reciprocate favours seems like a rather logical extension of this position. He, presumably, thinks of the future because he knows that if he chooses an appropriate boy and puts in the work now, that he will be rewarded at a later date. It is almost as if he thinks of a relationship as an investment which accrues interest over time.



I want to pause here a moment and think about Lysias' speech in relation to what we saw earlier in the chapter regarding the two trees which Socrates and Phaedrus shelter under. It is remarkable how much the trees are able to echo or mirror what is said in Lysias' speech thanks to the web of relations they introduce to the dialogue. Let me address the plane tree first. We see much of the position of the lover in the plane tree thanks to its connection with Helen. Now, admittedly, what we find in the tree is not of a homoerotic nature, but nonetheless the tree echoes the notion that lovers act irresponsibly, that they are not in the right frame of mind, and that they are compelled to act according to their desires.

The picture becomes clearer if we briefly turn to the myth of Helen's supposed abduction. While there are multiple versions of the tale, the one we will be looking at here—if only because it is one of the oldest that we know of—is found in the surviving fragments of Stasinus' epic *Cypria*. The account in the epic begins on Olympus: Zeus and Themis are mischievously plotting to bring about the Trojan War while the other gods are feasting following the marriage of Peleus.<sup>123</sup> What happens next is arguably the most important part of this story since it sets the rest of it in motion: an argument breaks out between Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. The three goddesses, it turns out, quarrel because Eris has asked which one of them is the most beautiful.<sup>124</sup> With the argument raging on—and no doubt aware that what he is about to say will in fact

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<sup>123</sup> Stasinus, "Cypria," in *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1982), 489.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* 491.

cause the Trojan War—Zeus tells Hermes to lead the three goddesses to the Trojan Prince Paris, who he has chosen as their arbitrator.<sup>125</sup> All of the goddesses will attempt to secure Paris' vote through bribery, but it is Aphrodite who offers the prince the most compelling prize—the fair Helen's hand in marriage—and so he declares the goddess of love the most beautiful of the three.<sup>126</sup> With the dispute settled, Aphrodite tells Paris to set sail for Sparta, which, of course, he does. Once there he is welcomed into Menelaus' home and "gives gifts to Helen."<sup>127</sup> After a short time, Menelaus leaves his palace and sets sail for Crete, but not before—foolishly, in hindsight—"ordering" his wife to look after Paris while he is away.<sup>128</sup> It is while he is away that Paris wins Helen's heart—Aphrodite bringing the two of them "together" in erotic bliss—before they then sail off together for Troy, where they will be married.<sup>129</sup> Although it might not seem like it at first, Helen is actually a willing participant in the affair. It is true that she is Paris' prize and Aphrodite is responsible for their initial *liaison amoureuse*, but, crucially, Helen retains a significant amount of agency throughout this encounter. "When Aphrodite 'leads' Helen to Paris," writes Blondell, "the verb [*sunagei*] indicates not external coercion but the force of Helen's own desire, which brings about a catastrophic failure in the essential womanly virtue of *sophrosune*, or self-control."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. This is actually a very interesting moment in the story because, as Blondell notes, Paris votes for Aphrodite without ever knowing what Helen looks like. It is almost as though Helen's beauty is so prodigious that he does not need to see her to know that she is the ultimate prize. See *Helen of Troy*, 33.

<sup>127</sup> Stasinus, "Cypria," 491.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Blondell, *Helen of Troy*, 36.

In other words, if Aphrodite is guilty of anything here, it is simply of stoking the flames of passion and enabling a situation where Helen's desire for Paris reached its tipping point. In short, she simply gave in to temptation—the allure of Paris proving too great to suppress. To put it another way, we might say that her desire for Paris was mind-altering, maddening even. Rather than think about what their union might mean, she was overcome by her feelings for him, by the overwhelming pull of *eros*. From this union, as we know, comes the great war, and with the great war, Helen's regret and loss of desire for Paris.<sup>131</sup> The plane tree, by virtue of its association with Helen, then, is connected to a story quite literally about the dangers of love; a story that at its philosophical core is not far removed from the one in Lysias' speech. As Phaedrus reads a speech about the dangers of love, the tree shading him stands as a constant reminder of the criticisms lobbed against the lover; it operates quietly, subtly, in the background of the dialogue. A reader of the dialogue with knowledge of the plane tree, then, is simultaneously assaulted on two fronts: as they read Lysias' speech and 'hear' the non-lover's words sound out on the dangers of love, they are confronted with an image of a tree that tells them a similar story. There is sensory overload in this natural landscape.

In similar vein, we find much of the position of the non-lover echoed in the chaste tree that also provides shade to Phaedrus and Socrates. As we saw earlier, the

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<sup>131</sup> When Aphrodite appears before Helen in the *Iliad* and instructs her to have sex with Paris after he has been whisked away from the battlefield, she replies—defiantly—with the following: "I'll never go back again. It would be wrong, / disgraceful to share that coward's bed once more. / The women of Troy would scorn me down the years. / Oh the torment—never-ending heartbreak!" (Bk. 3. 475 – 478).

tree was commonly used as an anaphrodisiac to help ward off sexual desire. The tree was meant to help ensure that one stayed cool, calm, and collected; in short, that they retained some degree of rationality and remained level-headed when confronted with the overwhelming pull of erotic desire. The sort of person this plant produced then is precisely the sort of person that the non-lover says he is, that what he brings to a 'relationship' is level-headedness. Of course, there is one major difference between the tree and the non-lover which needs pointing out here. The non-lover might be level-headed, but he is still seeking sexual gratification. At the end of the day he is not making the case for chastity, and hence is *not perfectly* mirrored in the tree, but nonetheless it is hard to deny that there are a great number of similarities between the character and the qualities thought to have been induced by the tree. Much like the lover and non-lover who the speech argues stand in opposition of one another, so too do the trees that shade Phaedrus and Socrates as they read this speech stand in symbolic opposition of one another.

Returning to the dialogue, Phaedrus will now turn to Socrates and ask whether he has heard anything more "superb" than Lysias' speech (234c). Socrates, it will turn out, is not impressed by the speech. While he revels in "ecstasy" thanks to the way the speech made Phaedrus radiate "with delight" as he read it aloud (234d), he says that he doubts even Lysias would be "satisfied with it" for it appears as though he has "said the same things two or even three times, as if he really didn't have much to say about the subject, almost as if he just weren't very interested in it. In fact, he seemed to...be showing off, trying to demonstrate that he could say the same thing in two

different ways, and say it just as well both times" (235a). Of course, Phaedrus will disagree with Socrates in the lines that follow; he believes the speech is perfect and that the genius of it has to do with the fact Lysias has included only the most relevant details (235b). Socrates, however, cannot get behind Phaedrus' claim. For starters, he believes that he has heard better speeches on love, although off the top of his head he does not remember who composed them—perhaps the great poets of old such as Sappho or Anacreon (235c). More importantly though, Socrates feels this way because he is adamant that he can create a speech "even better than Lysias'" (235c). Why he feels that he can create an even better speech is another question entirely, and it is one that he himself does not know the answer to, instead stating that "I am well aware that none of these ideas can have come from me—I know my own ignorance" (235c). No real answer will be given to this question as the dialogue progresses—Socrates suggests that perhaps he has listened to so many people speak that their words have filled him up and that he cannot remember who has said what (235d)—yet one cannot help but wonder, given what is to come, whether he feels he can create a better speech because the Nymphs have already started to seize hold of him, to take him into their grasp long before he ever complains they have caused him to lapse into epic verse at 241e. Whatever the case may be, Phaedrus will now press Socrates to deliver this better speech, although the philosopher appears reticent; he is not quite ready to start. Rather than begin this speech, he steers the conversation ever so slightly afield in order to lay the groundwork for an account, telling Phaedrus that he should not think he is claiming "that Lysias failed in absolutely every respect and that [he] can make a

speech that is different on every point from" his (235e). No, his speech must borrow a few of Lysias' points because they are so essential to the topic; namely, that the non-lover is rational and the lover irrational (236a).



With the scene set for a new speech on love, the plane tree returns. Phaedrus has again pressed Socrates to deliver this new speech, although the philosopher continues to show resistance: "Oh, Phaedrus, I was only criticizing your beloved in order to tease you—did you take me seriously? Do you think I'd really try to match the product of his wisdom with a fancier speech?" (236b). Unfortunately for Socrates, Phaedrus knows just what to do to make him talk: he will swear an oath to never again recount a speech for him (236d – e). It is who Phaedrus invokes in the course of this oath, however, that proves both equally surprising and fascinating. Up until now the pair have primarily sworn to Zeus,<sup>132</sup> but at this particular point in the text Phaedrus bucks the trend and thinks about "which god" he needs to swear his oath by (236e). One might assume that the god Phaedrus would want to invoke here is Hermes since he is associated with language, but instead he chooses the plane tree that they shelter under, telling Socrates that he needs to make his "speech right next to this tree [platanon] here" (236e).

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<sup>132</sup> See Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 123.

Why might Phaedrus invoke the tree instead of a god? Is it simply a case that the tree is there, that it stands as a kind of witness to his oath, or is there something else going on? Phaedrus does not tell us, nor does Socrates for that matter, but it seems unlikely that the tree is invoked simply because it is some sort of benign witness. We have to remember that Phaedrus first wonders *which* god he should choose *before* then settling on the tree. For whatever reason, the tree is important enough to preference over the pantheon of Olympian gods. Earlier in this chapter we saw that the tree seems to appear as a framing device which alludes to multiple points of interpretation, and while that might well be the case, here it seems as though the tree has taken on the qualities of a specific person. If the tree ever was meant as a multifaceted device, it would seem that status comes to an end here. Some might say that this is meant to be another humorous moment in the dialogue, that Plato has Phaedrus mention the tree because it is another nod to himself as the author of the text, but this answer is not particularly compelling for one key reason: as Capra reminds us, when trees are personified in the Greek world, they are *always* feminine and most often “stand for, or are the embodiment of, divine creatures.”<sup>133</sup> Within the context of the Greek world of the dialogue, it seems much more likely that Phaedrus is invoking the tree because it is connected to a divine female figure. The question is who might this figure be? Who would be important enough to swear this oath on? Aphrodite would be a logical guess given her proximity, as we have seen in the previous chapter, to other plant species

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<sup>133</sup> Capra, *Plato's Four Muses*, 66.

(i.e., roses and apples), but as far as we know plane trees were not associated with any of her cults. Artemis might also be a good guess given that she is the goddess of nature, although it makes little sense to invoke her since she is famously known as the virgin goddess; if anything, she would be more closely associated with the chaste tree than the plane tree. In addition one might think of Hera given her connection to the garden of the Hesperides, but again, much like Aphrodite, she is never directly associated with plane trees. No, the only figure to fit all of the relevant criteria (i.e., female, considered divine, associated with love, plane trees, and so on) is Helen.<sup>134</sup> A symbol of the daughter of Zeus would be the perfect thing to swear an oath in front of in order to solicit a speech on love since she is quite literally associated with the most well-known story about erotic love in ancient Greece.<sup>135</sup> Now that the oath has been sworn in front of the tree—in front of a symbol of Helen—Socrates will concede and move to deliver his speech (236e).

Before beginning this speech, however, Socrates will do something unusual: he will cover his head (237a). Why? Socrates worries that he will be “embarrassed” should he catch sight of Phaedrus while he is presenting his argument; moreover, were such an event to occur, he explains that it is likely it will cause him to “lose the thread of [his] argument” (237a). Socrates veils himself because he wants to present the speech without being put off by Phaedrus’ presence. This situation is strange.

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<sup>134</sup> Besides being the daughter of Zeus, Capra has a rather compelling series of arguments explaining why we should think of Helen as a divine figure. See *Plato’s Four Muses*, 65 – 67.

<sup>135</sup> Interestingly, Capra takes this whole scene as “confirmation” that Helen is the figure in the tree. See *Plato’s Four Muses*, 67.



Socrates is rarely flustered in other dialogues, yet here he admits that being in Phaedrus' presence might pose a problem. Sallis explains that when Socrates covers his head, it is because he is aware the speech he is about to give is an inadequate portrayal of love; in other words, "Socrates' covering his head during the speech amounts to his adopting a kind of mock anonymity by which to dissociate himself from the speech."<sup>136</sup> As Sallis continues, it is important that here in the inferior speech about love he fails to have "vision of his beloved."<sup>137</sup> This might well be the case—and I have no intention of challenging Sallis' claims—but it is also important to acknowledge that the act of covering one's head was most often associated with women; more specifically, brides. Carson notes that throughout the Greek world mock abduction of the bride formed a central part of a wedding ceremony and that the vase painters who depicted these ceremonies often portrayed the bride as an unwilling participant who tries to pull a veil across her face.<sup>138</sup> The similarities between Socrates and the Greek bride are remarkable: both are unwilling participants, and both attempt to veil themselves. Perhaps most interestingly, Socrates veils himself after Phaedrus has sworn by the plane tree—in short, after he has sworn by a tree associated with *the* abducted bride of Greek mythology.

We could examine Socrates' first speech at this stage, but for my purposes what follows the conclusion of the speech is far more relevant, so we will pick up the

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<sup>136</sup> Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 123.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 24 – 25.

dialogue from there. Having just completed his first speech on love, Socrates tells Phaedrus that he “won’t hear another word from” him (241d) despite there still being quite a bit left that the philosopher could discuss. Phaedrus notices this almost immediately and points out that he only delivered half of the speech: he spoke about the lover at great length, but by comparison has said very little about the non-lover (241d). When Socrates is pressed on the issue, he reveals that he stopped because the rhythmic structure of his account was edging closer and closer to epic (241e). One might not think the rhythmic structure of the speech would matter much here, but as Socrates knows, it has certain implications for the content of the speech.<sup>139</sup> Epic poems are meant to glorify their characters, not attack them. When Socrates utters the final line of his speech and compares lovers to wolves and boys to lambs, his sentence resembles the metrical structure of an epic. Problematically, then, if he is meant to be critiquing lovers here, he cannot utilise a verse style that is intended to praise its characters. But why does the metric structure change? Ultimately, Socrates believes the Nymphs are at fault; in this *temenos* like space beneath the plane tree, Phaedrus has exposed them to him, and they have begun to work their magic, to possess him (241e). Socrates, therefore, stops his speech in order to ward off full blown Nympholepsy. This is a particularly interesting scene in light of what we saw in the previous chapter. Indeed, one of the ideas we encountered in Homer had to do with the notion that teeth are a barrier against words. In much the same way a garden fence

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<sup>139</sup> Socrates implies that he is aware of the relevance of metrical structure to content when he says: “even though I am criticizing the lover, I have passed beyond lyric into epic poetry” (241e).

kept nature at bay, teeth were thought to prevent one's words from spilling out into the world. To a certain extent it would appear that by keeping his mouth shut, the philosopher is able to erect a kind of *herkos* to ward off the influence of the Nymphs at work in this place. Still, he is aware that his speech is incomplete and decides to finish it, albeit in a single sentence to avoid being further possessed: "So, I say instead, in a word, that every shortcoming for which we blamed the lover has its contrary advantage, and the non-lover possesses it" (241e). Socrates, then, ends his speech much like Lysias does: for every problem identified with the lover, the non-lover stands in opposition problem free.<sup>140</sup>



Thinking that his speech is now finally done, Socrates gets up and attempts to leave to return to the city. Phaedrus will make a fuss and explain that the midday sun is too ferocious; he should stay until it is cooler and the two can discuss the speeches in the meantime (242a). Socrates will indeed stay here under the plane tree, but it is worth noting that the reason he stays is not because of Phaedrus; rather, he stays because his

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<sup>140</sup> It is worth noting that while Socrates ends his speech similarly to Lysias', this does not mean to say that the speeches themselves are the same. It has been suggested that the non-lover in Socrates' speech begins, unlike his counter-part in Lysias', by attempting to define what love is (237b – 238c). Furthermore, the non-lover in Socrates' speech effectively collapses the lover/non-lover distinction in Lysias' speech by noting that all men have a desire for "beautiful" things (237d). Finally, the non-lover in Socrates' speech points out that there may come a time when the beloved becomes the lover. Should a lover lose their desire for the beloved, the beloved may chase after them in pursuit—essentially making them the lover and the lover the beloved (241a – b). Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 124 – 128.

mysterious “divine sign” or *daimon* comes to him just as he is about to cross the river and prevents him from making the journey (242b). As Socrates puts it, just as he was preparing to cross, his *daimon* warned him that he had committed “some offense against the gods” and that he was going to have to atone for it before he could leave this place (242c). What is the offense he believes he has committed? At first, he is unsure, but upon reflection comes to realise that part of the offence has to do with the speech that Phaedrus carries with him, and the other part is thanks to his own speech—both of which he describes as strange or monstrous (242d).<sup>141</sup> What is not immediately clear in this scene, however, is whether the offence has to do with the speeches being spoken in this specific place beneath the plane tree, or whether it is simply because these speeches exist. Put another way, it is not clear whether these speeches would be considered offensive if they were spoken in, say, the Agora, a private residence, or anywhere else for that matter, or whether it is because of where they were read here in the dialogue. Given that just before Socrates begins his palinode he will instruct Phaedrus to tell Lysias to compose his own palinode (243d), it seems as though the speeches are simply offensive, although without clarification we cannot rule out the possibility that where they are spoken is part of the problem too. In any case, the reason the speeches were horrible is because they were borderline impious. Note, though, that Socrates never calls them impious, they are “close to being impious,” but never *explicitly* impious (242d). The issue, according to Socrates, is that

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<sup>141</sup> The word Socrates uses here is *deinoteros*. Woodruff and Nehamas translate it as “horrible,” but this does not quite capture the sense of the word that has to do with things that are fearful or horrifying.

while the two speeches were about love, neither of them once mentioned the god of love Eros (242d). Moreover, despite love being a god, the two speeches spoke about love as if it were a bad thing (242d). For this offense Socrates explains he is going to need to “purify” (*katherasthai*) himself by delivering a new kind of speech, the kind of speech that Stesichorus knew about and composed after “speaking ill of Helen” (i.e., the palinode) (243a – b).<sup>142</sup> Stesichorus, we will recall, lost his eyesight after criticising Helen, only for it to be returned immediately once he delivered his palinode. So, what Socrates is proposing he needs to do here in order to prevent angering the gods is compose a palinode of his own; he needs to take back what he said previously and provide a new account in order to avoid suffering divine punishment.

Socrates now prepares himself for the palinode. He starts by noting that unlike last time, he will not cover his head (243b). Furthermore, as we have already noted, he instructs Phaedrus to tell Lysias that he needs to write his own palinode, to take back what he said in his own speech. Socrates, interestingly in light of the plane tree behind him, will now begin his speech by directly quoting the opening line of Stesichorus’ palinode on Helen, that is to say, he begins with the declaration that there is “no truth to that story” (244a).<sup>143</sup> Following this, he swiftly moves to explain that while a non-lover might be rational, in control of their emotions, and so on, this does not mean to

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<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, this is the first and only place in the dialogue where Helen is explicitly mentioned by name. Even more interestingly, in Plato’s whole oeuvre the figure will only be mentioned in one other place—in the *Republic* at 586c—and much like here in the *Phaedrus*, her name is only brought up because Socrates mentions Stesichorus.

<sup>143</sup> A few lines earlier Socrates tells us that Stesichorus’ opening declaration was: “There’s no truth to that story: / You never sailed that lovely ship, / You never reached the tower of Troy” (243a – b).

say that madness is inherently “bad” (*kakon*) (244a). Rather, the madness the lover experiences “is given as a gift of the god,” so it cannot be bad (244a). Before he even expands on his claims by talking about the prophets and their divine madness (244b – 244c), or the madness a poet experiences thanks to the Muses (245a), we can see how this speech differs from Lysias’. Socrates has completely overturned the notion that madness is bad by aligning it with the gods. If someone wants to claim that madness is indeed bad, then they would have to argue—much to their detriment—that the gods themselves are bad.

At this stage we could move through the palinode closely, looking at Socrates’ account of the immortality of the soul and his likening of its elements to a charioteer and winged horses, but instead I want to skip ahead a little bit to the part of the text where he talks about the transmigration of the soul because we will find an interesting connection to gardening. To give a little bit of context, Socrates has just finished discussing the way the souls of the gods nourish themselves i.e., by heading skyward towards the rim of heaven and gazing into the space that is there; the space, he assumes, that must be full of something like pure being (247c). Following this, he moves to address the way the imperfect or ungodly souls nourish themselves. The scene he paints is one of mayhem. Some souls—those who closely follow a god and are most like them—are able to poke their head “outside” the rim in order to catch a glimpse of what is there, but it is only ever a glimpse because their “horses pull...violently in different directions” and cause them to see “some real things” while missing “others” (248a). As for the other souls—by this Socrates means those who are

neither like a god or follow them closely — they struggle to keep up. It is a melee. “The remaining souls,” he says, are all eagerly straining to keep up...they are carried around below the surface [of the rim], trampling and striking one another as each tries to get ahead of the others. The result is terribly noisy, very sweaty, and disorderly” (248a – b). It is from this point on then, that Socrates discusses the transmigration of the soul. He begins by noting that what a soul manages to see beyond the rim of heaven has various consequences for it. Those who manage to see what is beyond the rim will remain safely in the heavens until they are required to undertake the journey to the rim again, while those who fail the task will become human beings (248 c – d). It is here things get interesting. According to Socrates, the fallen souls that managed to see the “most” while in heaven, “will be planted [*phuteusai*] in the seed of a man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love” (248d). In short, those souls that managed to see the most will become philosophers, lovers of beauty, and those who follow the Muses. The word that we should pay particular attention to here is *phuteusai* or planted.

The word *phuteuo* has an interesting history in ancient Greek. Like the English word “planted” it has a kind of double meaning: on the one hand it refers to the notion of implanting something, as we see clearly in Socrates’ use of it. On the other hand — and it should be noted this is by far its more common usage — it refers to the planting of fruit trees and crops. The earliest examples of this word are found, as one might expect, in Homer. In the *Iliad*, for example, a form of the word is used in Andromache’s account of the death of her father. Slain by Achilles in battle at Cilicia, she tells Hector

that the Achaean warrior treated his body respectfully, that he did not strip the corpse of its armour, instead burning it together, and piling a mound above his ashes.<sup>144</sup> With his body buried, the “nymphs of the mountain planted [*ephuteusan*] elms around it.”<sup>145</sup> We find similar usage in the *Odyssey* as well, with Odysseus saying the cyclopes “never plant [*phuteousin*] with their own hands or plow the soil.”<sup>146</sup> But the horticultural usage of this word is not solely limited to Homer, we also see it early on in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*: “For when someone whose work falls short looks towards another, towards a rich man who hastens to plough and plant [*phuteuein*] and manage his household well then neighbour views with neighbour as he hastens to wealth.”<sup>147</sup> In addition, we find the same usage in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* when Socrates playfully asks Ischomachus how one should “plant” (*phuteusomen*) an olive tree.<sup>148</sup> More examples could be listed here, but the point that the word is closely associated with trees and the horticultural arts seems clear enough.

It is almost as though Socrates’ use of the word in the *Phaedrus*, then, is inspired by the place that he finds himself in. The word is commonly associated with trees, and here under the shade of the two trees in the dialogue, and in a place that itself resembles a garden, Plato has chosen to have him say this particular word. This should not come as a great surprise though for as Hyland has shown, the place a dialogue is set impacts its content in a number of ways: “A dialogue that takes place at a trial, or

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<sup>144</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. 6. 495 - 497.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>146</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, Bk. 9. 121.

<sup>147</sup> Hesiod, “*Works and Days*,” 22.

<sup>148</sup> Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, Bk. 19. 13.



on the day of one's death, will have an altogether different nuance and impact from one that takes place, say, at a private party or while walking in the country."<sup>149</sup> It is not inconceivable to assume that the place Socrates finds himself—beautiful and lush as it is—has managed to influence his choice of words. If we think about our own conversations with friends and family, they are often impacted by where we find ourselves. A hike through a forest with friends might result in the conversation having more tree or nature metaphors than usual, just as looking up at the stars at night might cause us to wax lyrically about our place in this ever-expanding universe. The point is that where we are or what we are looking at manage to influence and shape how we think and talk. To be sure, Plato could have had Socrates say what he does here in other ways. He could have had him use a verb like *eiserchomai*, which means to literally enter or go into something.<sup>150</sup> Alternatively, he could have had him describe the union of the soul and body in similar fashion to Timaeus in the dialogue that bears his name i.e., where a body is “sculpted” around the soul instead (*Tim.* 69c), but he does not, instead choosing the word that has clear horticultural and botanical connotations.

In the pages that follow Socrates' account of the planting of the fallen souls, we encounter another description with horticultural connotations. While describing what happens when a Zeus follower encounters beauty through the sight of a beautiful boy,

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<sup>149</sup> Drew A. Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 16.

<sup>150</sup> According to the Liddell-Scott-Jones entry for the word, it is most often used in relation to buildings, but can also include the way something more abstract like courage ‘enters’ a person. See LSJ, *A Greek English Lexicon*, *eiserchomai*. Accessed October 15, 2020, [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dei\)se%2Frxomai](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Dei)se%2Frxomai). For an example of the latter usage of this word, see Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. 17. 179.

he explains that they become physically ill, breaking out into sweats and a high fever (251b). The reason they become ill whilst looking at a beautiful boy is because “the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings” (251b). In the lines that immediately follow, Socrates continues with this description noting that:

the heat warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long ago closed off with hard scabs to keep the sprouts [*blastanein*] from coming back; but as nourishment flows in the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul...Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition. Like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are all aching and itching—that is exactly how the soul feels when it begins to grow wings. It swells up and aches and tingles as it grows them. But when it looks upon the beauty of the boy and takes in the stream of particles flowing into it from his beauty (that is why this is called ‘desire’), when it is watered and warmed by this, then all its pain subsides and is replaced by joy. When, however, it is separated from the boy and runs dry, then the openings of the passages in which the feathers grow are dried shut and keep the wings from sprouting (251b – d).

Although Socrates will compare the sensation of growing wings to the sensation a child feels when they are teething, the account of the re-growth of the wings figures

almost like the growth of a plant in a garden; beauty is a kind of nourishment which irrigates or waters the wings and allows the feathers to sprout from their roots. Even Socrates' choice of words here has certain horticultural connotations like in the passage above about *phuteusai*. When he says *blastanein*, he uses a word that is associated with the growth, bud, or sprouting of a plant.<sup>151</sup>

This will not be the last time the setting appears to influence elements of the dialogue either. There are two more notable instances in the text. The first of these follows the conclusion of the palinode and involves the cicadas who are quite literally in the plane tree above Phaedrus and Socrates. Following the conclusion of the palinode, the pair discuss speechwriting generally and very quickly narrow in, as Socrates puts it, on the question of what makes something a good or bad piece of writing (258d). In the sentence that immediately follows this question, Socrates does something rather interesting: he asks Phaedrus whether they really need to think about the question at all. Phaedrus is initially surprised. "Why else should one live," he says, "if not for pleasures of this sort" (258e). Socrates does not provide any sort of reason for querying whether they even need continue; presumably, he is growing tired since he has just finished delivering his lengthy speech and the heat of the

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<sup>151</sup> In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, for example, the word appears in a discussion about plants and farming. As the Leader breaks the fourth wall and explains to the competition judges what they can expect should they *not* award the comedy first place, he notes the moment their olives and vines sprout that they will be cut down (1124). Likewise, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the word appears when the Chorus gathers around Oedipus and speaks about the greatness of Colonus. They note that the olive flourishes in the city's soil and nurtures, mothers, all of its citizens. See Sophocles, "Oedipus at Colonus," in *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, trans. F. Storr (Massachusetts: The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1962), 697.

midday sun is now at full bore. Socrates, however, comes round to the idea of pressing on once he hears the cicadas in the tree above him. As he says:

I think that the cicadas, who are signing and carrying on conversations with one another in the heat of the day about our heads, are also watching us. And if they saw the two of us avoiding conversation at midday like most people, diverted by their song and, sluggish of mind, nodding off, they would have every right to laugh at us, convinced that a pair of slaves had come to their resting place to sleep like sheep gathering around the spring in the afternoon. But if they see us in conversation, steadfastly navigating around them as if they were the Sires, they will be very pleased and immediately give us the gift from the gods they are able to give to mortals (258e – 259b).

The reason the philosopher is prepared to carry on the discussion is because he knows that the cicadas are able to bestow a gift on mortals and that if the pair continue their discussion they may be rewarded with this gift. What is the gift? Socrates explains that the cicadas used to be human beings who lived before the Muses were born. Once the Muses were born, however, these people were so enamoured with the “pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink” and died (259c). As a gift from the Muses, they were reborn as cicadas (259b). In their new bodies, Socrates explains that they have no need for nourishment, sing from the moment they are born, and when they die let each of the Muses know which human beings have been honouring them (259c). If,

for example, a person devotes themselves to the art of dance, they tell Terpsichore; if it is love, Erato; and if it is the “special kind of music” that is created when one leads a “philosophical life,” Calliope and Urania (259d). So, it seems as though Socrates suggests the pair should continue their discussion in the hope of being rewarded by the cicadas because it might mean they will tell Calliope and Urania about him and Phaedrus. The sound of the cicadas in the tree reinvigorates him because it brings with it the potential for divine reward.

The second instance we encounter is found in Socrates’ discussion of writing towards the end of the dialogue. To give a little bit of context, Socrates has just finished recounting the myth of Theuth when he comes to talk about the calcification of the written word. Once language is codified and written down, he says, it just sits there on the page; if you return to a text and ask it a question it simply gives you the same answer over and over again “forever” (275d – e). More problematically, he claims that when something is written down it is incapable of knowing who it should talk to and who it should remain silent for; anyone who is capable of reading can theoretically pick it up, read it, and critique it, regardless of whether they understand what is written there or not (275e). But, says Socrates, there is a more “legitimate” kind of discourse (276a). It is not written down on the page with ink; rather, it is written into the “soul of the listener” (276a). What Socrates is speaking of here is the spoken word, the “living, breathing discourse” of man (276a). It is from this discussion, then, that Socrates comes to mention the mysterious gardens of Adonis. He utilises them in an analogy, comparing writing to the planting of one of these gardens (276b). I will come

to look at the gardens in more detail in the next chapter, but the point he makes is basically that like these gardens writing is not a serious endeavour. No one serious about the cultivation of plants would plant their seeds in the gardens of Adonis, just like no philosopher would attempt to cultivate their soul through writing. The gardener might plant an Adonis garden for amusement, just as the philosopher might write down reminders—keep a “garden of letters,” as Socrates put it (276d)—for themselves when they are older, but they would not attempt to utilise these things seriously. The reason this entire scene is worth mentioning here is because of the way it appears in the dialogue. While the analogy is apt and Socrates points out quite a lot of similarities between writing and the gardens, one cannot help but notice that he mentions these gardens almost out of nowhere. One moment he is talking about writing and discourse being a form of writing in the soul, the next he is mentioning gardens which at first glance have no connection to the discussion at all. If, however, we remember that a dialogue’s setting can impact its content—as we saw above in the discussion of *phuteusai*—it starts to make sense why a horticultural analogy might be used in the dialogue. This is not to say that the analogy itself is not the best possible analogy, but that as Socrates walks outside the city walls through the country—the place of gardens and farms—as he settles under the plane tree in a place that resembles a garden, it seems as though he is presented with multiple points of influence for an analogy of this sort.

The point of this chapter was to show the ways plants and gardens seemed to interact with the dialogue, to frame its conversations, and inspire what is said. As we saw, much of Lysias' speech is echoed by the trees that stand behind Phaedrus and Socrates thanks to their association with Helen and chastity. Moreover, at times it appears as though Socrates' language is inspired by the place he finds himself in, and that the flow of the conversation is occasionally related to elements in the landscape. If not for the plane tree Socrates might not have been compelled to deliver his first speech on love, and if not for the cicadas overhead in the tree, the pair might not have pressed on following the conclusion of the palinode. Plant imagery is abundant in this dialogue, it is on every page whether it is mentioned explicitly or not, and it plays more of an intricate role in the text than we might first assume.

### Chapter 3: The Gardens of Adonis

In order to think about the image of the gardens of Adonis, I will once again need to address how it appears in the dialogue, albeit at greater length than we saw in the previous chapter. Socrates has just finished recounting the myth of Theuth, which first introduces the point that writing fails to generate true knowledge. According to the myth, Theuth—the Egyptian god of wisdom and writing—tells King Thamus about a wonderful new artform he has just invented. This art is, of course, writing. According to the god, his new invention will help aid the Egyptian peoples' memory since he believes it is a kind of "potion for memory and for wisdom" (274e). In short, Theuth suggests that writing will ensure people never forget what they know. Upon reflection, however, the king explains to Theuth that it will not in fact help improve one's memory. Rather, it will have the opposite effect, those who learn to write will eventually become forgetful since they will no longer put their memory to practice and instead put "their trust in writing" (275a).<sup>152</sup> We can think of one's memory here

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<sup>152</sup> One genuinely wonders whether the myth of Theuth is actually Egyptian or whether Plato has created it solely for Socrates' to present in conversation. There are no known accounts of this myth outside of Plato, and Plato has Phaedrus question whether it is a legitimate myth or whether Socrates has simply made it up. Recently translated philosophical writings from Ancient Egypt seem to suggest that writing was in fact one of the greatest pursuits a person could endeavour to undertake. In a text from the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the author, unnamed but believed to have been Irsesh, an Egyptian merrekh or lover of wisdom, argues that writing is the only thing capable of conferring immortality on a person. Buildings and monuments decay, family names are forgotten, but a written text, the author explains, lives on. Writings make a person "remembered in the mouth of the reader. A book is more effective than a well-built house or a tomb-chapel in the West [afterlife], better than an established villa or a stela in the temple!" (287). When everything else is gone, a person's "writings cause them to be remembered" (287). See "Be a Writer," in *Writings from Ancient Egypt*, trans. Toby Wilkinson (London: Penguin, 2016), 284 – 288.



as if it were like a muscle in the body; that is to say, one must put it to work—subject it to exercise—or else it will weaken and eventually atrophy. So, Thamus believes that without proper ‘exercise’, without regularly utilising one’s memory, the ability will start to deteriorate over time. The issue with writing, he says, is that it is not “a potion for remembering, but for *reminding*” (275a).<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, Thamus notes that writing is only the “appearance of wisdom, not its reality” (275a). In other words, just because someone is able to write does not mean they understand what they have put down on the page. A small child learning to write the alphabet is a good example of this sort of thing. Just because they are able to write letters down does not mean they understand the ways those letter forms can be arranged into words, those words into sentences, and so on. To express the same idea another way: someone might listen to a lecture—perhaps on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*—write down what is said verbatim, yet still fail to understand the content that is discussed. This is because the act of writing does not automatically grant someone instant knowledge. While it may *lead* someone to eventually understand what is said, that is another point entirely and one that is not discussed in the myth. In addition to all of these concerns, the king notes that because people are able to read and write, they will discover new things “without being properly taught” about them, and as a result “imagine they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing” (275a). In other words, Thamus fears that should one overcommit themselves to writing, they may well become a

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<sup>153</sup> My emphasis added.

dilettante. Being able to read and write might change a person's world, but it does not guarantee that they will be any wiser for it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly since he is the one who introduces the myth, Socrates' criticisms of writing, which he presents in the lines that follow, are awfully close to Thamus' own. Part of Thamus' objection has to do with the promiscuous nature of the text—anybody can read it regardless of whether they understand its content—and this is exactly what we see in the dialogue when Socrates comes to address writing, explaining that it “doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not” (275e). Equally problematic though, he explains that once something as mobile as speech is written down it then has a very different kind of temporality. No longer ephemeral, it becomes static, affixed to a page, and preserved, potentially, forever. In this new codified form, words give the same answers over and over again; should a person ask a text a question, it will reply with what is written there on the page by its author (275d – e). But, says Socrates, there is a more “legitimate” form of writing, one that is alive, so to speak, and is able to generate genuine or true knowledge; this form of writing takes place not on a page, but in the soul, and it trades ink for discourse (276a).

It is with all this in mind that Socrates mentions the gardens of Adonis. The whole scene is worth quoting in full:

Socrates: Absolutely right. And tell me this. Would a sensible farmer, who cared about his seeds and wanted to yield fruit, plant them in all seriousness in

the gardens of Adonis in the middle of the summer and enjoy watching them bear fruit within eight days? Or would he do this as an amusement and in honor of the holiday, if he did it at all? Wouldn't he use his knowledge of farming to plant the seeds he cared for when it was appropriate and be content if they bore fruit eight months later?<sup>154</sup>

Phaedrus: That's how he would handle those he was serious about, Socrates, quite differently from the others, as you say.

Socrates: Now what about the man who knows that is just, noble, and good? Shall we say that he is less sensible with his seeds than the farmer is with his?

Phaedrus: Certainly not.

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<sup>154</sup> I have modified the translation of this paragraph. Nehamas and Woodruff say that the gardens bear fruit within "seven" days rather than eight, despite the Greek word for eight—*okto*—being used in this passage. They do this again when Socrates says how long it takes for a farmer to produce a harvest. Most other translators, as well as the commentators on the gardens of Adonis, refer to eight days and months, rather than seven. See, for example, Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 276b; Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully (Indiana: Focus Philosophical Library, 2003), 276b; Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 103 – 104; Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 91 – 92.

Socrates: Therefore, he won't be serious about writing them in ink, sowing them, through a pen, with words that are as incapable of speaking in their own defense as they are of teaching the truth adequately (276b – c).

To understand Socrates' analogy we will first need to come to understand the gardens of Adonis— which in and of itself requires some understanding of the myths of Adonis and the festival that honoured him. For now though, let me offer some preliminary remarks on the passage. I will expand on this explanation in time, but it will nonetheless be useful at this stage to at least explain the basic structure of Socrates' analogy. Put simply, the idea is that there is a difference between the forms of gardening and those same differences are comparable to the differences between writing and discourse. In short, writing is like sowing gardens of Adonis, and a farmer exercising his skill and sowing seeds is more akin to the philosopher utilising discourse to sow seeds in the soul. The point that Socrates is trying to make here is that one form of writing is a serious pursuit, while the other is simply done for expediency. What, however, is not particularly clear is how these two types of gardens, which are analogous to the two types of writing, differ. What exactly does one do when they plant gardens of Adonis and why is that a less serious pursuit than planting seeds like a farmer? Socrates, of course, notes that the length of time each garden takes to grow is different and that the Adonis gardens are planted in the middle of summer, but apart from those two small details, which we will have to unpack further as the chapter progresses, we learn very little about the differences

between the gardens. Readers today get a sense of the analogy's meaning (i.e., as a non-serious pursuit) through Socrates' description, but not a complete picture. Without understanding what these gardens were or why they were planted it is difficult to see why Socrates might invoke them to illustrate that one form of writing is deficient for the cultivation of the soul, while the other sufficient. Let me start unpacking the analogy by addressing a simple question: who is Adonis and why does he have a type of garden named after him?



Adonis is perhaps best known as Aphrodite's dead lover, but that is only a small part of his interesting and ultimately tragic tale. Like Oedipus' children, Antigone and Ismene, Adonis is the by-product of an incestuous relationship with a parent. Unlike Oedipus' children though who are conceived before their parents ever know that they are related, Adonis is conceived following a daughter's deliberate pursuit of her father. Indeed, according to an account from the fifth century BCE which comes to us by way of Apollodorus, Adonis' mother, an Arabian princess by the name of Smyrna, is said to have been madly in love with her father King Cinyras.<sup>155</sup> Her obsession,

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<sup>155</sup> Apollodorus, "Library," in *Apollodorus' Library and Hyginus' Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology*, trans. R. Scott Smith and Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), 67. Later versions of the myth will refer to Smyrna as Myrrha. See, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004), Bk. 10. 298 - 501.

however, is far from natural; cursed by Aphrodite, the young princess has no control over her urges and cannot help but love her father.<sup>156</sup> Her desire proves so maddening that she recruits her nurse to help her seduce her father.<sup>157</sup> Concealing her identity from him, she sleeps with him for “twelve nights” before he finally realises who his new mistress is.<sup>158</sup> Disgusted by what he has been tricked into doing, the king attempts to kill his daughter.<sup>159</sup> Smyrna, however, is ultimately able to get away, and with the help of the gods, who take pity on her, is transformed into a myrrh tree; her unborn child—Adonis—nestled safely inside.<sup>160</sup>

According to the same account of the myth, Adonis matured in the ‘womb’ for nine months until one day the tree “split open” and he “was born.”<sup>161</sup> Given that he develops in the tree, we can think of Adonis as the fruit of the myrrh tree. Why might this matter? As it turns out, Adonis’ association with the tree proves to be one of the most crucial aspects of his life story. Myrrh resin was used to create perfume in the ancient world, so as the ‘fruit’ of the myrrh tree, as the thing nestled inside it, its resin coursing through his veins, Adonis is quite “literally...perfume.”<sup>162</sup> As the personification of perfume, his very nature is enchanting and seductive. It is no

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<sup>156</sup> Apollodorus, “Library,” 67.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* contains one of the more graphic depictions of this scene: “Filled with her father’s unhallowed seed, she withdrew / from the chamber, / bearing the fruit of her monstrous crime in her impious / womb” (Bk. 10. 468 – 469).

<sup>159</sup> Apollodorus, “Library,” 67.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. Given that the dialogue prominently features the plane tree, it is interesting that there will be a reference to a type of garden which is connected to a tree equally symbolic of the madness of desire.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 63.

wonder then that shortly after being born he will charm not one but two goddesses. When Aphrodite first discovers the infant following his birth, she is so taken with him that she bundles him up and hides him in a chest before giving him to Persephone “for safekeeping.”<sup>163</sup> Like Aphrodite, Persephone is said to have been taken with the child, hence when the time finally came to give him back, she refused.<sup>164</sup> As in Stasinus’ account of the myth of Helen in the previous chapter, Zeus, we are told, was forced to intervene here, ruling that the boy would spend one third of his year in the underworld with Persephone, one third of the year above ground with Aphrodite, and one third of the year on his own—although he ultimately eschews this final part of the ruling, adding his own time to Aphrodite’s.<sup>165</sup>

Adonis is associated with plant life from birth, but this connection to the vegetal realm is one that we find in the myths surrounding his death as well. Two plants in particular come to be associated with the figure in death: lettuce and anemones (windflowers). According to a version of the myth of Adonis’ death in circulation in the fourth century BCE, the figure was “laid out in a lettuce bed by Aphrodite” after being fatally gored by a boar.<sup>166</sup> In antiquity, lettuce was thought of as a cold wet vegetable responsible for impotence and sterility,<sup>167</sup> so we might say that when Aphrodite lies Adonis’ corpse out on a bed of lettuce, she is in a sense signifying that his appeal has come to an end; devoid of life, this ‘perfume’ has lost its potency, its

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<sup>163</sup> Apollodorus, “Library,” 67.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Euboulos, quoted in Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 67.

<sup>167</sup> See Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 68

alluring fragrance now only lingering in one's heart and mind. The figure who was perfume personified is no more, never able to entice or charm again. As Bion will have Aphrodite say when he comes to write his *Epitaph for Adonis* in the first century BCE, "Let all perfumes die: Adonis, your perfume has died."<sup>168</sup> As for the anemone, this flower will come to be associated with Adonis from at least the first century BCE. It may well have been present in versions of the myth in circulation in the classical period, but the earliest surviving account we have of it is found in Bion's *Epitaph*. As Aphrodite weeps, an anemone sprouts from the earth:

The Paphian sheds as many tears as Adonis  
sheds blood; on the ground all turn to flowers:  
his blood gives birth to the rose, her tears to the  
anemone.<sup>169</sup>

Later on when Ovid recounts the myth in the *Metamorphoses*, he will note that Adonis' blood is responsible for the bloom of the anemone. Rather than copy Bion's account and claim that the flower sprouts from Aphrodite's tears as she watches her beloved die from exsanguination, the Roman notes that Venus mixed nectar with Adonis' blood in order to create a flower that would act as an annual reminder of *her* grief.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Bion, *Bion of Smyrna: The Fragments and The Adonis*, trans. J. D. Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 129.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk. 10. 720 – 737.



It is not hard to imagine the plant flowering for a short time before being swept away on the wind, its petals drifting into the ether and acting as reminders of the beautiful thing that has just departed this world, making it slightly bleaker than it once was. It is easy to see how a tragic love story like Aphrodite and Adonis' might be symbolised by a short-lived flower. In life and death Adonis is associated with plant life, the two bookends of his life marked by a connection to the vegetal realm. Given the myriad of connections to the plant world, it hardly seems surprising the figure would come to be associated with a type of garden in the classical period.

The gardens of Adonis, as Socrates alludes to, were planted as part of a celebration. To be more precise, they were planted as part of a summer religious festival in Athens dedicated to Adonis known as the Adonia.<sup>171</sup> As with the Thesmophoria which we briefly looked at in the previous chapter, the Adonia was practiced *exclusively* by women.<sup>172</sup> Interestingly, the festival was not sanctioned, instead being celebrated in private on the "periphery of the official cults."<sup>173</sup> Today we believe that the festival was an elaborate recreation of Adonis' funeral, with the women effectively taking the place of Aphrodite and grieving on her behalf.<sup>174</sup> As a part of this process, the women would take to their rooftops to lament Adonis'

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<sup>171</sup> It should be noted that while the festival may have been celebrated outside of Athens, evidence is spotty. Most of the written accounts of the festival come from classical Athens.

<sup>172</sup> See Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 3.

<sup>173</sup> Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 65.

<sup>174</sup> Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 25. Reed also notes that the women became Aphrodite during the festival. In an article on the Adonia he writes that "once a year, in the privacy of her own home, she could be Aphrodite" (346). For more see Joseph Reed, "The Sexuality of Adonis," *Classical Antiquity* 14, no. 2 (1995): 317 – 347.

death.<sup>175</sup> In a sense, we can compare the festival to the anemone that pops up in later versions of the account of Adonis' death: the festival is an annual event that signals Aphrodite's grief over the loss of her beloved. In addition to all of this, surviving accounts of the festival seem to suggest that it was somewhat raucous. In one example, which is believed to have originally been from the fourth century BCE, a woman, writing to her friend insisting that she come celebrate, notes that they "will get drunk with all [their] lovers" during the festival.<sup>176</sup> Aristophanes depicts something similar in the *Lysistrata*. When the Magistrate comments on the women's protest, he does so by noting that it is awfully a lot like the times when the women are gathered together "signing to Adonis on the roofs of houses."<sup>177</sup>

It was as part of recreating Adonis' funeral, then, that women would plant seeds in little pots, which they would then carry up ladders to their rooftops to be closer to the sun.<sup>178</sup> What would the women plant in these gardens? According to Detienne, they would plant lettuce, wheat, barley, and fennel.<sup>179</sup> Now, as Socrates notes in his analogy, these gardens grew rather quickly; in fact, they grew *unnaturally*

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<sup>175</sup> Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 22.

<sup>176</sup> Unknown, quoted in Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 65.

<sup>177</sup> Aristophanes, "Lysistrata," in *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 390. For a discussion of the festival as a kind of riotous affair, see John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191.

<sup>178</sup> Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 106. It has been suggested this act may well have been an attempt to recreate the part of Adonis' life where he was forced to travel between Persephone and Aphrodite. In other words, the movement from high to low imitates the same sort of movement that Adonis would have been forced to undergo as he journeyed from Hades to earth. See Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 20.

<sup>179</sup> Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 107.

quick, as it takes the better part of the year for these “seeds to reach fruition.”<sup>180</sup> In order to reach sexual maturity and go on to produce seeds of their own, all of these plants would have needed to be left to develop over a long period of time. The typical growing season for them ran between two festivals: the Pyanopsion and Thargelion. One would plant during the Pyanopsion in October just “before the winter rains,” tend to their plants over the next seven months, then harvest in May following the Thargelion, which signified it was finally time to harvest the “cereals of Demeter.”<sup>181</sup> Grown over a period of eight days and out of season in the summer, it is no wonder the plants sown in the gardens of Adonis never reached maturity. Equally problematic, the speed at which the plants in these gardens developed meant that they were never able to take root.<sup>182</sup> As a result, they would die under the heat of the Greek sun;<sup>183</sup> their life as short and as poorly rooted in the earth as Adonis’ own. In essence, the gardens were effigies.<sup>184</sup> Like Adonis they died young, never produced any fruit of their own, and were tended to by ‘Aphrodite’.

But they resemble Adonis in another way: like him, their very existence violates nature. Rather than mature over a period of eight months, the plants sown as part of the festival had their growing season compressed to a mere eight days. This, as Detienne has put it, means that the growing of the plants in these gardens can “be seen

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 102, 109.

<sup>184</sup> In some instances, small figures of Adonis may have even been buried in the pots. See Ronda R. Simms, “Mourning and Community at the Athenian Adonia,” *The Classical Journal* 93, no. 2 (1997-1998): 129.

as a kind of violence done to nature.”<sup>185</sup> But the violence, as Detienne has shown, extends well beyond the growing season itself and also includes the appearance of the plants and the very manner in which they were sown. Indeed, “The plants of Adonis do not grow in land suited to the sowing of seed or in land suited to planting; they germinate in pots, in bowls, in clay vases, in shards, in baskets and wicker receptacles, all of which are filled with earth...but earth which is no more than a derisory reflection of the real earth which nourishes men and is a secure foundation for them.”<sup>186</sup> Like Adonis, who fails to put down roots, so too do these gardens fail to grasp the earth. To be more precise, the plants sown in the gardens fail to put down roots twice: being grown in pots they are deprived of the real earth, which as Detienne points out is what secures men, yet they also fail to root in the simulated earth of the pot.<sup>187</sup> In addition, the plants *appeared* healthy, as if they could compete with the plants sown in the ground, yet that was far from the case. These plants “guaranteed no harvest at all” since they were sterile; their “illusory vigour revealed only [their] impotence, [their] inability to produce fruit, and [their] brilliance was all the more of a deception in that its excessive violence brought about its total exhaustion; no sooner green than desiccated.”<sup>188</sup> The women celebrating the Adonia might have, as one commentator

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<sup>185</sup> Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 104.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>187</sup> There is an implied reference to the rootlessness of the gardens in Epictetus’ *Discourses*. Indeed, as part of a discussion about philosophical education, the philosopher notes that contrary to the gardens of Adonis, one must “Let the root grow” if they are to develop properly. See, Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion and Fragments*, trans. George Long (New York: A. L. Burt, 1900), 398. Cf. Bk. 4. 8. 36.

<sup>188</sup> Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 106.

has put it, demonstrated a significant amount of horticultural “knowledge” by getting the plants to sprout and grow in such a short period of time,<sup>189</sup> but they were nonetheless dead from first bud. They were dead in the sense that they would shortly be left to die, but even more importantly, their very existence as something which violates natural life means that they ultimately “end in the death of a sterile life.”<sup>190</sup> Like Adonis, their very existence was monstrous. Sown under unusual circumstances their ‘conception’ foreshadowed their end.



We are finally in a position to unpack Socrates’ analogy. When the philosopher claims that a farmer would not plant gardens of Adonis unless he was doing so solely for fun, what he is really saying is that the farmer does not sow these sorts of gardens because they are wholly unproductive and violate nature. They do not follow the seasons, are sterile, and like Adonis, are cut down before reaching maturity. The point that Socrates is alluding to here in this part of the text is that the farmer knows when to plant things, they know how to take care of their seeds, to nurture them over a long period of time and see them develop in such a way that they remain fertile and eventually produce seeds of their own. They are planted with a different kind of

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<sup>189</sup> Schmidt, “From the Moly Plant,” 174.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

intentionality than the gardens of Adonis. At the end of the day, what all of this means for an understanding of the analogy is that writing is inherently *infertile*. Like the gardens of Adonis, Socrates is saying that writing does not have the generative properties that the more serious form—discourse—has. Writing, like the gardens of Adonis, “is no more than a shadow, an εἰδωλον, a corpse of living speech.”<sup>191</sup> On the page, writing lacks the movement it once had as spoken word; it trades mobility for fixity. The reason the philosopher is like the farmer, then, is because their ‘seeds’ do in fact have these generative properties. Nestled in the soil that is the soul, these ‘seeds’ flourish in a similar sort of way to those sown in a proper plot. Where the farmer tends to their seeds by watering, fertilising, and eventually pruning, the philosopher challenges premises and responds to questions. In both of these images—of *logos* and the garden—we encounter an image of the movement of life. Moreover, we encounter an image of care: both philosopher and farmer endeavour to nurture what is planted, to see that it lives out its proper lifecycle. The philosopher does not attempt to cultivate themselves through the sterile art of writing because, as Carson has put it, “Serious thoughts need different cultivation and time to grow.”<sup>192</sup> If, however, they are “planted as seeds of living speech in the ground of an appropriate soul, they will take root, ripen, and bear fruit as knowledge in due season.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>192</sup> Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 142.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

So far in this chapter we have seen how the gardens of Adonis are like writing and how the serious gardening of the farmer is more akin to the philosopher sowing seeds through words, but there are further similarities between gardening and philosophy to which Socrates never explicitly points. At the end of the day both the gardener and the philosopher hope to develop something and to see it flourish. The gardener wants a healthy garden, while the philosopher is concerned with the care of their soul. But what Socrates does not point out in his analogy is the fact that both of these things are continual projects which are never truly completed. No matter the type of garden, there is always work to do. To prevent it from falling into a state of disrepair—from becoming unadulterated nature—it needs to be tended by human beings. If it is a *temenos*, someone needs to visit the site and make offerings, while if it is a more conventional garden—a market garden, perhaps—someone needs to till the earth, water the plants, cull weeds, trim plants, pick fruit, battle pests, and so on. Something similar can be said for the soul: one needs to strive to care for themselves each and every day as this task only comes to an end in death—a point that Socrates makes abundantly clear at 64a in the *Phaedo*. To care for the soul in the same way a gardener might care for a garden is difficult. It is not a sprint and there is no hilltop to climb; it takes time and energy to let things flourish. To continue marching forward until death, there must be, as Alcibiades learns from Socrates in the dialogue that bears his name, “no giving up” or “slacking off” (*Alc I*. 124d). One needs to take this attitude towards cultivation on as their way of life.

The image of the gardens of Adonis appears in the dialogue as part of an analogy about writing, but as it turns out, it shares a remarkable number of similarities with other elements of the dialogue. At this point I should acknowledge that a philosopher and a classicist have made this observation before. The former, for example, has noted in passing that the gardens are connected to the “whole gamut of themes” in the dialogue,<sup>194</sup> while the latter has, as we saw earlier in the Introduction, argued that the setting of the dialogue takes on the characteristics of an Adonis garden.<sup>195</sup> There is not enough space here to perform a detailed comparison between the gardens and the whole of the dialogue, so I will spend the remainder of this chapter looking at two small aspects of the gardens. The first of these has to do with the fact that they were planted by women, while the second has to do with the image of fertility contained in the gardens.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, the gardens were planted exclusively by women. At first blush this might not seem like a terribly noteworthy point since as we

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<sup>194</sup>See Schmidt, “From the Moly Plant,” 174.

<sup>195</sup> See Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 103 – 111. As she notes: “Phaedrus and Socrates take their rest and converse on the banks of the Ilissus River just outside the city walls of Athens, the setting begins to resemble a garden of Adonis. As the sun beats down on the pair, Phaedrus takes on characteristics of the plants around him, while Socrates is figured as a cultivator of young Phaedrus. Depending on how Phaedrus responds to Socrates’s attempts to convert him to the philosophical life (and the dialogue equivocates here), the *kêpos* that Socrates tends has the potential to go in two opposite directions: to become “more fruitless than a garden of Adonis” or, alternatively, to become a philosophically productive *kepos*” (103 – 104).



saw in the first chapter, women often gardened in Athens; however, despite being gardeners, they were not typically associated with all of the seeds that were planted in the gardens of Adonis. This is because two of the plants—wheat and barley—are cereals; in other words, they are grains, the sort of plants that we might expect to be *farmed* since they yield an abundant harvest and are able to sustain a population for long periods of time. Farming, we will recall, was reserved for the men of Athens, so the planting of these seeds would have fallen squarely within their domain.<sup>196</sup> During the Adonia, however, things seem to have been different. By becoming Aphrodite as part of the festival in order to mourn Adonis, they would plant seeds that they seldom had the prerogative to plant; it is almost as though the festival allowed women to reverse typical gender roles. Why? The answer ultimately has to do with the plants themselves. While the species grown might have fallen under two distinct categories—cereals and garden plants<sup>197</sup>—and while they might have had different growing requirements, with only fennel liking the brute force of the summer sun,<sup>198</sup> *all* of these plants symbolically became lettuce in death.<sup>199</sup> In other words, they all became the sort of plant that was gardened; in short, the sort of plant a woman might sow. After they had withered away, the women would gather their pots and throw

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<sup>196</sup> See Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, 105.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 107 – 109. Technically speaking fennel could be thought of as its own separate category since it is a spice; however, Detienne has shown that within the context of the gardens of Adonis, we need to treat it first and foremost as a garden plant since like lettuce it was readily cultivated in ancient gardens (108).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

them into a body of water (either a spring or the ocean).<sup>200</sup> This simple act was metamorphic: the plants became as cold and as wet as lettuce; submerged in water, they would have mimicked the same traits as “the plant [i.e., lettuce] which stands for the impotence and tragic death of the lover of Aphrodite.”<sup>201</sup>

That there was ultimately a reversal of gender roles in the planting of the gardens of Adonis should come as no great surprise though for Adonis’ life contained a number of these sorts of reversals. Myths about his life do not portray him as the archetypal male hero. The story of his life is not the story of a great warrior—he is no Achilles, Odysseus, or Jason—rather he is a vulnerable beauty, a boy (*koros*), who in many ways comes to resemble an abducted maiden. Greek mythology is full of accounts of girls (*kore*) being abducted by gods while in isolated places like a garden, meadow, or field. The story of Europa’s abduction at the hands of Zeus is perhaps one of the best-known examples,<sup>202</sup> but we also come across another one right here in the dialogue. If we remember back to the part of the dialogue where Phaedrus and Socrates are walking towards the plane tree, we will recall that Phaedrus asks whether the quiet stretch of the Ilisos they are now walking along is where Boreas abducted

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Europa was abducted by Zeus whilst out picking flowers in a field. Zeus appeared before her as a bull with a crocus in his mouth. The flower was meant to lure the young woman towards him. She fell for his trap and he picked her up off her feet, threw her onto his back, and fled. For the full story see Hesiod, “Catalogue of Women,” in *The Shield, Catalogue of Women, Other Fragments*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2007), Fr. 89. Persephone’s abduction also comes to mind here. Like in the tale of Europa, the girl was out picking flowers in a meadow when she was seized by Hades and swept away. For more, see “Hymn 2 to Demeter” in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1914), 1-19. Accessed December 1, 2020, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0013.tlg002.perseus-eng1:2>

the princess Orithuia (229b). Of course, it turns out not to be, but the whole scene, much like the Europa story, demonstrates the danger the Greeks thought isolated spots in nature posed for young women. We see many of these same tropes echoed in the myths about Adonis' life. As a fragile new-born baby at the foot of a tree, he catches the eye of a god and is placed inside a chest before then being given to Persephone. In short, Adonis is removed from society. Although Aphrodite might well have saved the child—it is not hard to imagine what would have happened to an infant left alone in the wilderness—he is nonetheless abducted from the mortal realm and only returns once Zeus intervenes and issues his edict. Unlike the more familiar narrative where a male god abducts a maiden, here things are reversed, and it is a boy who proves vulnerable at the hands of a female god in an isolated spot in the natural world. Adonis' relationship with Aphrodite is a complicated one, not least of all because it shuns the traditional Greek dynamic of a dominant male partner. The figure is abducted as an infant, yet even as he ages, he remains subordinate to the goddess and never manages to assert any sort of masculine dominance over her. As Reitzammer points out, unlike a more traditional relationship between a mortal man and woman where the latter would have been subordinate to the former, a relationship with a divine being brings with it a number of changes, not least of all a change in gender hierarchy; it is “the human participant—in this case the male—[who] is subordinated”

in a relationship with a goddess.<sup>203</sup> To think of it another way, “He whom a goddess loves ceases to be a phallic man, enters instead a state of permanent detumescence.”<sup>204</sup>

A number of the role reversals we find contained within the image of the gardens of Adonis are echoed in the dialogue. Phaedrus, like Adonis, shares certain similarities with the abducted maidens of mythological past.<sup>205</sup> While he is not at threat of being abducted by a god—Zeus is not going to appear, transform into a bull, and whisk him away like Europa—he does seem to want to do what all maidens are said to have been doing right before being abducted: frolic in an isolated natural spot. Right before Phaedrus spots the plane tree towards the beginning of the dialogue, he comments that he is “barefoot today” like Socrates (229a). This detail is easily overlooked since it seems like it does not amount to much at first, but in the lines that follow it quickly becomes apparent that Phaedrus mentions it because he wants to play in the river. Since he is barefoot it is easier for him to walk “right in the stream,” and to get his “feet wet,” which, he tells Socrates, would be “very pleasant, especially at this hour and season” (229a). The notion that the river is something someone might play in (or along) is further strengthened a few lines later when Phaedrus asks Socrates whether it was along this stretch of the Ilisos that Oreithuia was abducted. This part of the river which Phaedrus seems to be admiring, is, as he puts it, the “right” spot “for girls to be playing nearby” (229b). Phaedrus is not a girl, and we admittedly do

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<sup>203</sup> Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 34.

<sup>204</sup> Winkler, *The Constraint of Desire*, 204.

<sup>205</sup> A number of scholars have recognised that Phaedrus shares certain traits with young women. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 207 – 208; Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 106 – 108.

not see him play in the river, but like Oreithuia, he does ultimately wind up relaxing beside it. More to the point, like the princess, he plays beside it; indeed, he engages with Socrates in the play of the dialogue.

Phaedrus demonstrates other characteristics commonly found in abducted maidens. When these girls are abducted, they are most often on the cusp of womanhood. It would seem that they prove desirable to their abductors because while they resemble women physically, in this transitional period between girlhood and womanhood—which we would today call adolescence—they have yet to lose the innocence or naivety of a child. We see this quite clearly in the story of Europa. When Zeus approaches her disguised as a bull, his “saffron-scented” breath wafting in the air from the crocus in his mouth, she does not question whether this strange animal might pose a threat to her or her friends who are also in the meadow; rather, she naively walks up to it and goes to climb on the animal’s back without hesitation.<sup>206</sup> That simple act of (foolish) trust, that act a more mature woman, skilled in the ways of the world might have hesitated towards, seals her fate and she is whisked away across the sea, eventually being given as a bride to the king of the Cretans.<sup>207</sup> Interestingly, then, we see a similar sort of structure of naivety and vulnerability in the figure of Phaedrus, although for him it will have to do with the fact he is on the cusp of a philosophical maturation. Despite his name meaning bright or shining in

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<sup>206</sup> Hesiod, “Catalogue of Women,” Fr. 89.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

ancient Greek,<sup>208</sup> Phaedrus is not uncommonly bright or intelligent. Although he will often notice when people say or do things that are significantly amiss—such as when Socrates prematurely abandons his first speech or when he tries to pass off the story of Theuth as an actual Egyptian myth—he is nonetheless routinely impressed by the content of the inferior speeches which denigrate Eros, and it is only once someone (i.e., Socrates) has pointed out that they are in fact problematic, that he changes his mind. To a certain extent we might say that Phaedrus is impressionable, that while he loves speeches, he is not necessarily inclined to question the finer details of them himself and assumes that if they were composed by an expert speechmaker such as Lysias that they must be good. If not for Socrates bumping into the young Athenian, listening to him recount Lysias' speech, delivering his own speech, then taking it all back and delivering a new opposing speech in the form of the palinode, he may well have gone on believing that Lysias' speech was indeed good. Like the abducted maidens, there is a certain kind of naivety and innocence about him that makes him vulnerable. In the dialogue he is confronted with a monumental task: he must choose how he wants to live.<sup>209</sup> In other words, he must decide whether he wants to occupy the austere, logical world of the non-lover, or the maddening world of the lover, the world which ultimately leads to the care of the soul through the recognition of beauty in one's beloved. His choice is fraught with danger; it will shape the very course of his life. Not

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<sup>208</sup> For a discussion of his name, see Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 106.

<sup>209</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum has written at length about Phaedrus' choice in the dialogue. See *The Fragility of Goodness*, 205 – 213 (especially, 207 – 210).

yet wise enough to know what might be best for him, he is faced with a decision beyond his years. What will he choose? We do not know. The dialogue, as Reitzammer puts it, “equivocates here,” and we never learn whether Socrates successfully sets Phaedrus on the path towards philosophy.<sup>210</sup> This ambiguity, no doubt, was intended by Plato as his contemporaries would have been aware of the fact that the historical Phaedrus was forced to flee Athens after being accused of sacrilege by profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries.<sup>211</sup>

Now, as for the similarity that we find between the dialogue and the image of fertility contained within the gardens, I will once again need to turn to the part of the palinode where Socrates discusses the planting of the mortal souls. We will recall that at this point in the text Socrates has already discussed the cycles of the heavens, the nourishment of the soul at the rim of the heavens, and the way souls damage their wings (247a – 248b). It is off the back of this account he mentions that the souls with damaged wings, no longer able to soar through the heavens, shed their wings and fall to earth (248c). In this fallen state the souls are then planted into the seed of a human being (248d). In effect, the souls are described as a kind of seed which are planted into the seeds of human beings. Those that were able to see the most whilst in heaven become philosophers, lovers of beauty, and those educated in the arts, whilst the rest of the souls become just kings and commanders, sophists and tyrants, and everything

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<sup>210</sup> Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia*, 104.

<sup>211</sup> For a discussion of Phaedrus’ profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries see Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 232 – 234.

in between, based on how much they were able to see (248e). Depending on how the souls live whilst on earth, will then determine what happens to them (249a). At this point in the dialogue Socrates seems to equivocate and it is unclear whether he is speaking about souls generally or the souls of the Zeus followers (i.e., the philosophers, lovers of beauty, and so on), but regardless he explains that it is difficult for a soul to regrow its wings. For starters, it must live its life on earth justly if it is to improve and receive a better “fate” (249a), but more importantly, the regrowth of the wings will be tied to remembering those instances of true beauty that it saw in the heavens. There may be times when the soul is on earth and it sees something—“a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well”—and it “warms him up and waters the growth of his wings” (251b). The issue, however, is that few souls remember what they saw in heaven. Indeed, while

nature requires that the soul of every human being has seen reality; otherwise no soul could have entered this sort of living thing...not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here [on earth]—not souls that got only a brief glance at the reality there [in heaven], not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here [to earth] that they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice so that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are



beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing (249e – 250b).

So, it would seem that Socrates divides the souls into two categories: those who are able to remember and those who cannot. To put it another way, we can think of the souls—who we will remember are planted into human beings—almost as though they are fertile and infertile seeds. The fertile souls are the ones that can remember, while the infertile ones are the ones that cannot.

This image of fertility and infertility reminds us almost immediately of the opposition between the serious garden and the gardens of Adonis. The souls, like the seeds planted into the two types of garden, have the potential to flourish, but it is just that, potential. Whether they flourish will depend on where they are planted and what they are subjected to. In similar vein, some souls, the fertile souls, will regrow their wings early and return to the heavens assuming of course that they managed to lead a philosophical life for three thousand years (249a). As for the other souls, they will not be as fortunate. Since they, like the seeds in the gardens of Adonis, are subjected to things that impede flourishing—as Socrates puts it in the passage above, some have difficulty remembering because they failed to adequately see what was beyond the heavens, while others were simply corrupted when they fell to earth and had forgotten about their time in the heavens—their wings may never bloom early and they will be forced to wait the full ten thousand year period it takes for them to grow back normally (249a).

The reference to the gardens of Adonis proves to be a fascinating moment in the course of the dialogue. While Socrates introduces the image of the gardens of Adonis as a way to stress the point that writing is inherently sterile, we saw that Adonis gardens in fact share a number of similarities with other aspects of the dialogue. Phaedrus, for example, shares quite a bit in common with Adonis: both figures often taking on the characteristics of vulnerable young women. Perhaps more interestingly though, the soul figures both as soil and seed. In the palinode the soul is described in such a way that it comes to resemble a seed which may or may not flourish. Later, however, Socrates will come to describe the soul as a kind of soil that one plants seeds into through discourse, seeds which are philosophical in nature and have the potential to cultivate the soul so long as the soil is well prepared and receptive to those seeds. One genuinely wonders why the soul is described in both ways here in the dialogue because it seems to make a lot more sense to describe it as a kind of soil which is receptive to the planting and cultivation of ideas. Perhaps this is more evidence that Socrates is meant to be inspired by the landscape when he describes the soul as a seed in the palinode. Or perhaps the soul is first a seed and then becomes soil once it is planted into someone.

## Conclusion

This project was motivated by a simple question: what might the plant and garden images in the *Phaedrus* mean, and how are we understand them in relation to the dialogue? To begin to answer this question I first looked at the ways the ancient Greeks were exposed to plants and gardens. In the first chapter we saw that gardening for the Greeks was a practical pursuit; seldom done for pleasure, people gardened for religious purposes and to cultivate fruits, vegetables, and flowers for consumption in day-to-day life. As it turned out, it was also far less common for an Athenian to encounter vegetation inside the city walls. While certain plants were cultivated in the Agora, for the most part plants were extramural. Given the way Athenians related to plants and gardens, it is not difficult to see why a dialogue set outside the city limits would be set in a verdant landscape.

Outside the city walls one would have encountered all manner of vegetation— from convolvulus and roses, to olives, oaks, plane trees, and more, yet despite the sheer number of plants that one would find in the countryside, only a handful of them are actually portrayed in the dialogue, and only two of them stand behind Phaedrus and Socrates as they converse on a hot summer's day. At first the inclusion of these two trees seems puzzling. When Plato could have chosen from hundreds, if not thousands of available species of plants, why did he settle on a plane and chaste tree? We may of course never know the answer to this question, but we can certainly

speculate. The trees, as we have seen, are connected to a number of aspects of the dialogue and oftentimes echo Phaedrus and Socrates' conversation. At first blush, these trees might appear as benign images of plant life in the background of the dialogue, but a close examination of them in the classical period reveals that nothing could be further from the truth.

The plane tree in particular can be read in multiple different ways—from a subtle reference to Plato, to an image of Helen. In the end I pursued this latter interpretation and attempted to think through what an image of Helen might do to the dialogue. As it turns out, we encounter a number of interesting things. For starters, as Socrates and Phaedrus listen to Lysias' speech, they do so in front of a tree that echoes the madness of the lover and the inherent dangers associated with love. As we saw in the myth about Helen's abduction in the *Cypria*, Helen succumbs to her temptation for Paris; she sleeps with him not because she is abducted but because of a failure of the womanly virtue of *sophrosyne*. As Phaedrus reads Lysias' speech, a speech that positions the non-lover against the lover and claims that being in love is ultimately harmful, we have an image of that very thing operating in the background of the text. Readers of the dialogue are assaulted on two fronts here: they read Phaedrus' speech whilst simultaneously being confronted with this image.

But if the plane tree is a symbol of the madness of love, then the chaste tree stands opposite it literally and figuratively as a symbol of sobriety and chastity. Indeed, it was quite literally used as an aphrodisiac to quell sexual desire. The tree was meant to produce a person that was cool, calm, and collected; in other words, the

sort of person that the non-lover presents himself as. But of course the similarities between the chaste tree and the non-lover are not perfect. We do have to bear in mind that the chaste tree was meant to help prevent sexual desire, while the non-lover is seeking sexual gratification.

These trees were not the only vegetal images in the dialogue. In fact, the setting itself, that is to say, where these trees were located, seemed to resemble a type of ancient Greek garden known as a *temenos*. While Socrates notes that the setting is sacred to the nymphs and local river god Achelous, readers of the time would have no doubt been aware that it was along the Ilisos one found the gardens dedicated to the goddess of love Aphrodite. Again, we cannot know whether Plato was deliberately playing with this knowledge, but at the very least we find yet another veiled plant and garden image that is in some way connected to one of the major themes of the dialogue.

In addition we found that there were a handful of subtle references to plants and gardens. When Socrates comes to discuss the soul, he utilises horticultural language. For starters, we are told the fallen souls are planted into the bodies of human beings. Although the word *phutesai* had multiple meanings at the time, it was most prominently used when referring to the planting of fruit trees. Furthermore, when Socrates comes to describe the regrowth of a soul's wings, he describes it almost like one would the watering of a garden. He explains that the wings are nourished by irrigation channels when they encounter beauty on earth. Again, it is difficult to say why Plato might have chosen to portray things in this way, but one possible

explanation has to do with him portraying a very human aspect of conversation that has to do with being influenced by one's surroundings. Given the way that Socrates describes the soul in the palinode, it is almost as though he is so inspired by the landscape, so influenced by where he finds himself, what he sees, smells, hears, and feels, that he has employed horticultural and botanical terms while conversing with Phaedrus.

The final significant plant and garden image that we considered was the gardens of Adonis. These gardens introduce a particular kind of image to the dialogue: an image of sterility, an image of the violation of nature, an image that is ultimately contrary to the movement of life. Socrates introduces these gardens to stress this very point: writing is like the gardens of Adonis because it lacks the movement that is contained in something more fluid and alive like discourse. As we came to see though, the image of the gardens of Adonis is actually an interesting one to discuss in relation to other aspects of the dialogue. Indeed, these gardens point to a rather interesting gender dynamic, which as it turns out is in the dialogue itself. The gardens were sown by women, yet the seeds they planted into them fell under the domain of men. In the planting of the gardens there is a kind of role reversal. But of course this is not all that surprising for Adonis' relationship with Aphrodite itself exhibited many of these role reversals. Adonis figures as a vulnerable maiden. And it is this aspect of the gardens that we see in the dialogue. Indeed, Phaedrus is at times portrayed like a vulnerable woman. More interestingly though, the gardens of Adonis introduce an image of sterile seeds into the dialogue, an image that we can see in the discussion of the

planting of the soul. Socrates portrays the soul kind of like a fertile and infertile seed. Although all the souls are planted, not all souls have the opportunity to flourish and regrow their wings before ten thousand years.

Plant and garden imagery abounds in the *Phaedrus*. As we have seen it is present in nearly every scene of the dialogue through the two trees that Socrates and Phaedrus eventually shelter under. This in and of itself might not be much to get excited about, but a careful examination of these trees in the classical period (and after) reveals that they are in fact connected to the themes of the dialogue. Moreover, there is the image of the setting itself, and the influence the natural setting seems to have over Socrates' use of language. What at first seem like minor dramatic details actually appear as more significant references. When Socrates first describes the setting beneath the plane tree with wonder, Phaedrus comments that it is clear he seldom travels beyond the city walls. In response, Socrates tells him that since "landscapes and trees have nothing to teach" him (230d), there is little reason for him to be in the countryside surrounded by vegetation. Socrates might not learn anything from the plant life outside the city walls, but the same cannot be said of us.

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