**Sequence**

[00:00:00 **Aven:** Welcome to the endless knot podcast where the more we know

**Mark:** the more we want to find out

**Aven:** tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven

**Mark:** And I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about Roman gardens, but first, a couple of Patrion, patrons to think,

**Mark:** first of all, thank you to Dan Pugh of Bunny Trails, Will Fox of Exploring History on YouTube and the folks at Lexitecture. Thank you all so much. And thank you to Emma Paully, who's been editing and transcribing the interviews recently.

Now today, we're talking to Victoria, Austin on a topic, very appropriate for the spring weather and activities going on right now: gardens.

**Aven:** So Vicky has a PhD from King's College London, and has been teaching at the University of [00:01:00] Winnipeg since 2019, where she'll also be teaching next year. After that she's going to be heading to the US to become the Oden Postdoctoral Fellow in Innovation in the Humanities, within the Classics department at Carleton College. Congratulations!

Her most recent publication is "Columella's Prose Preface: a paratextual reading of de re rustica book 10" in Syllecta Classica. Her work focuses on Roman landscapes and gardens as well as mythological narratives and race and ethnicity in the ancient world. So without any further ado, let's talk to Vicky.

So, hi Vicky! Thanks for joining us today.

**Vicky:** Well, thank you for inviting me! This is a pleasure to talk about gardens today.

**Aven:** As we approach where-- depending when this goes out, it may or may not still be true, but we're in the spring and gardens are very much on all of our minds, growing things, finally. So, let's start there with-- that is one of your primary research [00:02:00] interests, is gardens in the ancient world. So, maybe you can talk about where you came to that interest from?

We often ask people about interesting connections in their lives. And one of the places that often comes up is where, you know, what coincidences or seeming fate drove you to the things you're in talking about.

**Vicky:** Absolutely. Well, I think I should make really clear to begin with that-- and this is a question that people kind of ask me all of the time. I say I'm researching gardens and they say, 'oh, well you must be a really keen gardener in reality'. And I have to very gently let them down and say, 'well, actually I cannot even keep a single plant alive'.

So this isn't-- I have to kind of say it's purely from a very theoretical standpoint that I am good at or interested in gardens. Anytime I've tried to do anything practical it's like, 'okay, this is where my expertise ends'. So yeah, very much on the theoretical side, but in terms [00:03:00] of, I suppose, how I came to the garden, specifically the ancient Roman garden in my research, during my Masters at King's College London, I started looking at Martial's Epigrams and I was really interested in the space of the city.

So, a lot of Martial's poems are all based on the city space and his opinion of the city. And then that feeds into a larger conversation in Latin literature about this contrast between the city and also the country and each of those two polar opposites have various ideological associations with them.

And then, when I was thinking about how to move that forward and thinking about, 'oh, well, these spaces are really interesting and we have that dynamic and oppositional 'city versus countryside', but then I started thinking, 'well, what about spaces that are neither one of those things, that don't really fit into either one of those categories really neatly?'.

And that's basically how I came to [00:04:00] garden space, because gardens can be everywhere and anywhere. And they're in this weird gray space between the city and the country, because they're green, but they're also cultivated. There's this 'wild versus tame' idea and all of those things. So yeah, I really came at it from thinking about in the literature, what different spaces can mean to different writers, particularly those ambiguous spaces that don't fit into neat categories.

And yeah-- and then, as I'm sure all PhD students know, you start off with an idea and I thought, 'well, gardens will maybe be one chapter or half a chapter' or a little thing in the research. And then it ended up being the entire research project. So that's how I came to gardens in the first place.

**Aven:** Yeah-- I find this even with undergraduate students or especially with undergraduate students, they always think that, you know, 'here's a topic, but I don't know if there'll be enough in that topic to write [00:05:00] about a whole essay on', and I always think 'No, no child. What you will find--'

And I do not say that out loud, cause it'd be deeply patronizing if I did, but is that what you will find in fact is every topic you think is maybe not big enough for a paper is actually too big for a dissertation.

**Vicky:** Oh, a hundred percent! And in my thesis, it's basically centered around six key case studies, which are as three pairs basically, but I could have picked six completely different case studies and still-- it was really hard to choose them. And again, yeah, you think, 'oh, is there going to be enough here'?

'Is this too niche'? And then you realize, no, there is nothing-- definitely not--

**Aven:** It is niche enough!

**Vicky:** Not niche enough. And then it's like, 'oh, now we've got to narrow and narrow and narrow it down'. So yes, I think this is par for the course for all PhD journeys. I certainly went through that, 'is this enough?' to 'oh, this is too much' and 'how do I cut it down [00:06:00] to my chapters?' So, yeah.

**Mark:**  Especially when you have like, a topic or an image like that, that is so ripe for metaphorical interpretation and actually that's a terrible pun--

**Vicky:** Oh, I live for puns--

**Aven:** --was going to try to ignore it, but--

**Vicky:** --so many of my sentences in my research and when I'm talking about it, I find myself saying, 'oh, we're going to dig into this' or 'we're rooting for something'. And then I realize I've done it. I'm not even intending to, but it is, as you said, it is ripe for interpretation. So it's really far too easy to make those puns.

And even when I don't think I'm doing it, I then read something back and I notice another one, so... great.

**Aven:** So, okay. Let me ask you then what I'm going to bet is one of the hardest questions when you were making your thesis is, how do you define a garden?

**Vicky:** Yeah. So, this is basically the question that I began [00:07:00] my study with. I thought-- well, you know, you think when I'm doing my thesis, you've got to define your terms and be very clear about what you're talking about. So I was like, 'First of all, I need to come up with my own definition of what a garden is'.

And I thought, 'well, this will be straightforward, right? Everyone knows what a garden is!' But, turns out, that actually makes it really, really difficult because we become so familiar with these spaces. We can implicitly recognize them. But then, if someone asks you to come up with this very definitive set of characteristics for that space, it actually turns out that it's really, really hard.

And I spent a long time at the beginning of my research, looking at I think thousands of garden definitions and they really do range from--especially if you look at different time periods, different cultures, it is a really kind of broad set of characteristics. But [00:08:00] I really-- it seemed that there were always these two key characteristics that kept cropping up across all of them.

And that was this sense of cultivation, obviously, because you're taking nature and trying to turn it into something for a particular purpose, whether that be growing food in a very practical sense, or you want to grow some really nice flowers to look at, there's always this sense of cultivation in some sense.

And then spatially-- obviously that's something I'm really interested in-- there was also this sense of boundedness or being set aside in some way for a particular purpose. And that boundary can come in a very physical form. You know, we think of a white picket fence in the modern imagination. So yeah, these two ideas of boundedness and cultivation, that idea that it's set aside for a particular reason, that's-- those two ideas seem to be the two things that held all of these various interpretations together.

[00:09:00] So I kind of honed in on those two as my key focal points.

**Mark:** What about the concept of enclosure? Is that necessary to define a garden?

**Vicky:** Yeah, so from my perspective, and this is basically my entire thesis, is that I'm saying that yes, we define them intrinsically by a sense of enclosure or boundedness, but at the same time, we-- especially for the Romans, and this is obviously my area of speciality. They almost set up these boundaries specifically in order to then deconstruct them or play with them in some way, in order to have that play between the spaces, between these idea of opposites.

Obviously, I spoke about city and countryside. In order to play with those polar opposites, you have to have that defining line to begin with in order to play with it. So it seems like they intentionally set these boundaries up in order to then in some way make us question what [00:10:00] that boundary is doing and what it means, and in terms of physical access, metaphorical, ideological concerns.

And yeah, that's something that we want to think about across the board and yeah, you basically pinpointed my entire thesis there in that question.

**Mark:** So would a peristyle then count as a garden--

**Vicky:** Yes!

**Mark:** -- it had cultivation in it?

**Aven:** I mean, I think that's what--I'm just going to jump in before you answer that more fully and with actual knowledge, but I would bet that if you asked anyone who's generally studied Ancient Rome, that if you said Roman garden, that is what they would think of, that's what the peristyle is. The peristyle garden is like, the typical Roman garden for me.

**Vicky:** Yeah. A hundred percent. And yeah, that is, I think when people have an image, if they do, of a Roman garden, you think of that domestic peristyle garden --

**Aven:** --which, maybe if you could just define that--

**Vicky:** Yeah. So basically a peristyle [00:11:00] garden is a garden mostly located in a central-ish space in a domestic house. We see this a lot in Pompeii and Herculaneum, and this is probably why it's captured our imagination so much.

And it's basically a central kind of courtyarded space where all of the plants and the flowers are in the center. And then it's surrounded by colonnaded portico and often with columns around it. And that's where you get this idea of the peristyle from, because 'peristyle' really refers to that architectural surround, but then it's become a byword for the entire garden space.

So I think when people have this image of a Roman garden, that tends to be the default space that they're imagining. But, more that I look into it, this is only one type of garden space. And that idea of the peristyle garden, just in the terminology, that's more of a modern invention. You know, Vitruvius does use the term peristyle a [00:12:00] few times, but he uses it interchangeably with a host of lots and lots of different terms. And it's really-- I think it was in about 1920 or something-- and a German scholar really first came up with this idea of the peristyle garden as this overarching term. And then it was picked up in the 1940s by Grimal, who's a famous French scholar on Roman gardens. And it's really only since then that that's become this byword for all Roman domestic gardens, when actually that's only one very specific type in the Roman imagination.

**Aven:** Maybe that's a good place to ask you-- you know, we always like to pretend that we are still occasionally a podcast about language, even when we're really interested in other things-- to make that connection. What are the main terms? What are the main Latin words that mean garden? In any kind of-- or that could be used to mean garden.

**Vicky:** Yeah, so the basic [00:13:00] word for garden in Latin is 'hortus' and that is the basic term that if you looked up in a Latin dictionary, it would come up with that term. This is where the complexity really starts because it soon becomes very apparent when you look at the literature that that is only one of many, many terms, and each term has its own different ideological connotations.

So although 'hortus' in our modern conception has become this byword for, 'oh, that means garden in Latin', it's actually really only referring to the very basic traditional vegetable plot, essentially, in the Roman literature.

**Aven:** The kitchen garden.

**Vicky:** The kitchen garden, exactly. So this idea that you would have a little garden at the back of your house in order to grow vegetables, maybe have some flowers, but the flowers would still be fairly practical, because you'd use them for religious purposes in garlands and things like that. But yeah, very much the idea of self-sufficiency and it's a productive [00:14:00] space. It's there for growing your own produce in order to sustain yourself. And then maybe, if you're lucky and you have a surplus, then you may be able to sell some of it.

**Aven:** And-- just to jump in there. What's the word? What's the-- sorry, moving us out of Latin for a second Greek word for growing things? Like even now, if you just mean like, greens for your food, it's 'khorta', right?

**Vicky:** Yeah, Yeah and also 'khortos' in the Greek, is the Greek term, primarily used as a space, an enclosed space used for growing food or fodder. It's mostly used in the Greek, the term's primarily used in relation to animals. So, I think in Homer, it's used to designate kind of an area in the courtyard where the cattle were kept.

So there's that kind of idea with the produce from the space, mostly linked to that livestock, whereas in the Roman, obviously from that we then get 'hortus'. In that sense, in the Latin sense, it seems [00:15:00] more about domestic space and food production for people as opposed to animals. That seems to be the main distinction.

But both terms have this idea of it's a kind of enclosed domestic space used for productive-ish reasons.

**Mark:** So coming back to the peristyle then, that is a really interesting situation of, you know, in terms of its enclosure, it's both inside and outside in really important ways.

**Vicky:** Yeah, absolutely. So, this is something that really fascinates me because of the interplay between the inside and outside and often in slightly later houses, when the idea is more fully thought through and houses are actually designed specifically with this peristyle garden in mind, they tend to be in this very central location in the house.

So you have to-- they're almost like a transitional space. You've got to either move through it or go round it to get to [00:16:00] various elements of the house. And as you said, so then structurally it's very much interiorized, I suppose, by the surrounding bits of the domestic space, but it's still open to the air.

So it's outside. Yeah, that play on inside and outside is something that we see, not just in the archeological evidence, in areas like a peristyle garden, but we also see in descriptions of gardens, I'm thinking of Pliny the Younger's villa letters. He has lots of descriptions of his gardens. Many of them, he really highlights that play between inside and outside, ideas of, you know, you have a painting on a wall inside of a nice landscape scene. And then it essentially is like, coming to life because it seamlessly blends into the actual plants on the outside of the room. And so you've got this idea that yes, they're separated in some way, but they become very integral to the domestic space and yet they're also outside and [00:17:00] interiorized and yeah, I find that it's really interesting.

And again, that also brings into the discussion this debate of public versus private space in a house as well, because-- you know, who's going there? When are they going there? Who gets access to it and when, or why and all of those associated questions.

**Aven:** So we did interrupt. --do you want to come back to that, but we interrupted you or I interrupted you in talking about what the Latin terms are. So we have 'hortus', what are the other terms that get used then?

**Vicky:** Yeah. So, 'hortus' in the plural is 'horti', that actually means something entirely different. So the transition from that singular to plural form on a very basic level does seem to mark the shift from that productive space in the singular 'hortus' to a more aesthetic type space for pleasure in the plural 'horti'.

I would think of 'horti' more [00:18:00] like a grand public park. You know, the big kind of gardens in the center of Rome owned by-- you know, Julius Caesar had his own 'horti', Pompey did as well. Maecenas had his own gardens, those type of, kind of big landscaped areas in the city. Again, they tend to be termed 'horti' in the plural and they're very much, you know, they've moved very much away from those original productive connotations. And so I think we in a modern sense would think of them more like public parks. But yeah, in the Latin 'horti' in the plural signifies these kinds of grand, ostentatious pleasure gardens in many ways.

**Aven:** To be fair, that's true in English too. Even in, as you've been talking about it, I have a 'garden', but I would go to the 'gardens'--

**Vicky:** Yes, exactly.

**Aven:** --you know, there are many gardens and I would always think of those as being public spaces, very heavily managed and ornamental [00:19:00] that are meant as places for people to-- for recreation to happen. But I would not say that I have, even though I have two gardens, one in the front and the back, I wouldn't call them my gardens. You know, it wouldn't be-- would mean something different--

**Vicky:** I hadn't even thought of that, yeah. Probably because as I said, I cannot garden, so I never saw the distinction myself. But yeah, you're absolutely right that this distinction between, and I liked what you said about the recreational aspect, because I think these larger, open, slightly more public spaces. And again, we have this interesting divide between public and private space and--

**Aven:** controlled access--

**Vicky:** --controlled, yeah. All of these

**Aven:** But not intimate.

**Vicky:** Yeah. And I think that recreational aspect and pleasure, that's very much 'horti' in the plural and, in many ways and kind of alongside 'horti' is another term for these grander public spaces in particularly the city of Rome and that's 'porticus' and we have, for example, Porticus Liviae.

And these are [00:20:00] essentially again, enclosed spaces, a grand public scale version of a peristyle garden in that you have a large green or landscaped recreational pleasure space in the center, and then it's surrounded in some way by a portico, hence 'porticus', very much modeled on the Greek gymnasia idea that you've got this central space for recreation and then it's framed by the architecture around it.

**Aven:** For a strolling about--

**Vicky:** Exactly! For promenading. If you did promenade in ancient Rome, you would probably be doing it in a 'porticus'. So yes.

**Mark:** So 'horti' and 'porticus', then, they imply a kind of civic function, since they're not private. What about a religious function? What would you, how would you refer to that kind of garden space?

**Vicky:** Yes. So religion, the religious aspect of gardens is something that I'm particularly interested in because especially in the [00:21:00] Roman evidence that I've looked at, there's a really interesting intersection, I suppose, between garden space and sacred space in general, in that they share the idea of being set aside for a particular purpose.

You know, you get again, boundedness, either literal or metaphorical in some way, that idea of you've entered into something different. And you've crossed the line somehow into a different kind of space. And so with that in mind, I think it's probably unsurprising that gardens do feature a lot in many sacred or religious contexts.

So in a domestic setting 'lararia', which are kind of your basic shrine that you would have in your house. In Pompei, I think it's something like almost a third of them are found in garden spaces. So it seems that it's a very popular location for these 'lararia' for your family, I suppose, your family shrine, day-to-day religious practice. Tomb gardens [00:22:00] are also a very, very popular thing and also planted temple enclosures.

So this idea that you have a garden alongside a tomb, alongside a sacred space, there does seem to be quite a lot of greenery associated with those sacred ideas. So yeah, in that sense, I think there is a lot of crossover and because of that emphasis on boundedness, I think that for one makes these two things go well together.

And then also in the Roman imagination, you know, their very deep seated, religious, sacred ideas, there's a lot of tie in with agriculture and the idea of the 'lucus', which is like a sacred grove. And so you have all these overlaps and I-- you know, there is quite a lot of debate in scholarship about these types of tomb gardens or sacred groves, whether we deal with those under the umbrella of garden space, [00:23:00] or if it's sacred space or if it's both or neither, you know, it's this own-- and I kind of fall on the side that we can term these sacred spaces as garden space, but at the same time, we have to think about how the sacred and the garden elements intersect with one another. So again, boundaries again.

**Aven:** Yeah, because that's really interesting. The 'lucus' or that-- there's so many, there's a fair number, especially when you talk about the 'native' in quotes, the more Italian rather than the imported stuff, so much of that is tied to landscape. So much of those are tied to a spring or a grove, and there's also a weird or an interesting liminality there because they're notionally wild, right? Those are wild spaces--

**Vicky:** Yeah.

**Aven:** --in the origin stories of it, or at least my understanding of the sort of sacredness of those spaces. Aren't they-- you know, you think of the Aeneid and Latinus going-- cause I only think in [00:24:00] literature because I don't actually know anything about real life-- but you know, you think about Latinus going out to sleep in the grove and get his prophetic dream. The whole point is you're going outside of the city into the wild. It's not a cultivated space, but at the same time, it is a managed space because there's a shrine there and it's a set aside religious space.

So if you're going to have a 'lucus' that goes along with a temple, by the time of say Republican Rome, it's almost certainly going to actually be a very cultivated space, but does it hold any, does it still hold on to a sense of being a wild space? You know, that it's not productive in that same way that isn't meant to be used or wasn't planted by or managed by humans in the same way.

**Vicky:** Yeah, and actually this is kind of --once I've finished my current research project-- what I want to, this is something that I kind of touched on a little bit in my PhD, that's now been developed into a monograph, but this idea of-- particularly I looked at the Augustan period and [00:25:00] Augustus' use of green space in the city and this overlap of the sacred and the profane and all these kinds of things.

I think that idea of the 'lucus', you know, do we think of that as a garden? Or was it originally, as you said, that kind of-- it's sort of wild, but then at some point they do become, in the maintenance of these spaces, you may have identified it initially as, 'oh, well, this is just kind of sprung from the earth naturally, and this is just a beautiful space', but the minute you start maintaining it as that space, is that the point that it becomes a garden? I find that really fascinating.

And particularly in the Augustan period when you look at domestic wall painting as well, you get this whole genre of the kind of sacro-idyllic type scene that is very much like a 'lucus'. You know, these kind of floating panels where you've got this sense that there's maybe a big old tree and there's maybe a few shepherds or rustic figures, a little temple or a statue that they're [00:26:00] worshiping at the side.

Is this meant to be, do we class this as a garden painting? Is it something else, like where does that sacro-idyllic and garden space? I find that a really, really interesting overlap. And how do we-- where is the line between those two things? Like, how much cultivation is enough cultivation for it to transition into that garden-y definition, I suppose.

**Aven:** And we get back here to that original problem of defining-- you know, it's the 'is the hot dog a sandwich?' problem. Everybody knows what it is or what it isn't, but that actually is where the boundaries are--

**Vicky:** Yeah. I mean--

**Aven:** --hardest.

**Vicky:** --And I've really come to the conclusion when I've been researching gardens that it's much easier to say what one is not than actually what one is, because it's like, 'well, it's not that, it's not wild. It's not this, it's not that'. But then when you're actually trying to say what it [00:27:00] is, that's really difficult.

I'm kind of thinking about that shared-- if we think about words and terms as well-- with this overlap between sacred and garden space. The Latin 'colere', you know, we can-- that's where we get 'cult' and 'cultivate' from. And there's that shared association of, you know, it can be translated as 'to worship' or 'to cultivate'.

So just in the very language, you've got those two meanings bound together in the same word, idea of cultic and cultivation. So yeah, I find that there's just so much to be said, and I think it's a really under appreciated element of language and there just seems to be so much evidence of this sacro-idyllic space in the Roman imagination.

But I don't think it's been approached so much from the kind of garden angle in scholarship before. So I think that's again, a productive angle to [00:28:00] tackle it from.

**Aven:** So-- when I think about what I-- looking at literature, cause I know you started from Latin though gone elsewhere, but of course that's where my mind goes to. So the 'horti', the gardens definitely feature, I mean, in Augustan poetry, there's a number of places where they feature in various ways.

I know in other later literature and you already mentioned Pliny, he's a big place where this turns up. You have the villa garden or the garden space connected with the-- so this is outside of the city, so you're already outside of the city, but then there's a villa. And then there's a notional distinction between the productive-- not necessarily an actual distinction, but a notional distinction between the productive parts of a villa or a productive villa and a villa for recreation.

And I want to come back to the terms that would be used for that in a moment. But is there a specific garden term? Like would those gardens-- would anything at the villa be called a 'hortus'? Would there be with the recreational ones? Is there a specific term for that? Cause that [00:29:00] might be a peristyle garden, but it's also something much more than that.

**Vicky:** Yeah. So if we take Pliny's villa letters as an example, he does use the term 'hortus' once, I think it's once across the two main ones are his letter 2.17 and 5.6, they're his two main ones. And in 2.17 he does use the term 'hortus' and it is very, very specifically used in that productive, original vegetable garden type way.

All the other times that he mentions green spaces, he doesn't use 'horti'. And he doesn't use 'hortus' again. This is where Pliny being very Pliny, if you've read any Pliny, he just brings in like a whole host of predominantly Greek terms to kind of civilize--. Yes. You know, so things like 'xystus', for example, these are very obscure Greek, mostly again architectural terms, and then he's kind of using them to-- and this is where the [00:30:00] liminality aspect comes from, because it's like, 'is he referring to the architectural structure around the space or is this like the whole space that he's talking about'?

It's really, really difficult and challenging to--and one of the things that's frustrating is when you try and map the terms that we see in the literature to the spaces that we see in the archeological evidence, like they don't necessarily map on neatly to one another and particularly Pliny, I think, you know, and this is very much something that he does in general, he's using specific terms to reflect on his personality. So these kinds of Greek-isms, this is all about showing himself to be a very educated scholarly man. And it's all about trying to evoke that kind of ancient Greek philosophical association with the garden.

So it's really, and because we don't have a ton of comparable literature with these extended [00:31:00] villa garden references, it's really hard to tell, is it just Pliny that's using these terms? Or is this like a, is this a Pliny-ism? Are these widespread? Is he just trying to show off? You know, how unique are the terms that he uses? And yet I think that's one of the frustrating things about the literature, in that we have a whole host of terminology. One, it doesn't necessarily neatly map onto the kind of material evidence, but also words are used, terms are used in different ways by different people. So it's the interchangeability of these terms that really annoys me when I'm looking at the language. Cause you know, sometimes they'll use villa to denote, especially in legal texts, they'll use villa to denote the entire complex.

Sometimes it's very specifically divided. Like villa will just note the actual buildings versus you'll then have farmlands, that will be a different term. Sometimes, you know, villa and gardens are [00:32:00] interchangeable and so it's never really-- they can't even seem to be unambiguous in the terminology, which you would think in legal stuff would be clear because there's lots of boundary disputes about villas and stuff in legal texts.

But it's never really clear, I find, when I'm looking at these descriptions of domestic spaces where one type of space begins and where one type of space ends. They all seem to flow into one another. And I think that makes it really hard to delineate them ideologically, what each space is supposed to mean, if they're all flowing into one another.

**Mark:**  And I guess we- I mean, just in terms of the terminology of that, we kind of have a reflection of that in the English terms that come from Latin. Like, horticulture and agriculture are very different, but there's [00:33:00] no clear--

**Aven:** --but yeah. Where are you actually--

**Mark:** --where are you draw the line between those things is not clear. You can see it that at the extremes that these are different things--

**Aven:** --but the semantic fields have different centers. That's not a problem, their edges are very very overlapping.

**Vicky:** This is something that is grappled with, that very boundary between horticulture and archi--agriculture, sorry, but also architecture. But horticulture and agriculture, as you said, where those two spheres meet and how they're related to one another is something that is explored in Latin authors. Virgil's Georgics for example, and also Columella's big agricultural treaties. These are two texts that I work with a lot. They both discuss gardens in their agricultural treaties, but they do it in this way and they are constantly grappling with the idea of, 'well, does the garden belong in my agricultural text in some way'?

And they're both kind of saying [00:34:00] the same thing. It's like, 'well, it belongs, but it doesn't really belong'. Virgil kind of deals with this by saying, 'well, if I have time to speak about gardens, then I'd tell this really nice story about an old man in his garden'. And then 40 lines later, 'he goes, but I don't have time for that, so I'm just going to skip onto the next thing. And I'll leave it to someone else to decide'. And then Columella and his text very much picks up that challenge and says, 'well, Virgil said, someone else should talk about gardens, so I'm going to do that'. But even when he talks about it, he still grapples in his introduction with this idea of, 'well, some people say that this kind of topic doesn't really belong here, but I'm going to include it anyway'.

And then he talks about it almost as being like a bonus or he uses financial language to signify that in some way, this is like an interest payment as part of his agricultural texts. So it's this idea of, 'yeah, it's a nice to have maybe, but it doesn't quite neatly fit into agriculture'. So, yeah. [00:35:00] As you said, that divide between horticulture and agriculture, we see that now. And it's something that the ancient Latin writers also grappled with all the way back then as well.

**Aven:** So when I think about garden versus-- so there's the 'hortus', the kitchen garden complicates this. So, let me ignore it for a moment because that's how I deal with those sorts of problems. But when I think of a garden, and this really is true of both the 'horti' and the 'porticus' that you were talking about, and then also the villa garden, the ideological sort of underpinnings of all of those are leisureright? It's 'otium'. They are a place of 'otium'; the 'porticus' for instance, something like Livia's 'porticus' stands in specific contrast to a forum. You have, there are two places you can go to gather and meet and have social contact, but one is the forum, which is for business, whether legal or commercial, and one is a 'porticus', which is where you go to have social--

--and of course those divisions don't actually work, but that's one of the reasons that women go to the [00:36:00] Liviae--, you know, and Livia has a 'porticus' and not a forum. You have the Forum Augusti and you have the Porticus Liviae. I know you know all of--

**Vicky:** Yep.

**Aven:** Just--

**Vicky:** Yep!

**Aven:** Laying it out--

**Vicky:** It's a really interesting masculine/feminine divide there as well.

**Aven:** We know that like, if women were going to go and walk and meet their friends, a place they would do that would be a 'porticus' because they don't belong in a forum. Respectable women don't belong in the forum, by and large. I know the minute I say a sentence like that, there's like, a whole bunch of exceptions, but you know what I mean--

**Vicky:** I know what you--

**Aven:** As a general ideological idea.

Anyway, so the one context in which I have dealt at all with gardens in this is in that idea of this philosophic-- like what Pliny is so concerned about-- that idea of philosophical 'otium', of the leisure that Horace too is so concerned with. He doesn't bring-- when he does talk about gardens, it's in a different context, but one could imagine, I think one ought to imagine him in a garden, much of the time when he's doing his drinking and [00:37:00] enjoying, he just doesn't necessarily talk about it explicitly.

But he's in a, you know, he's often in a natural setting and we know he's not on a-- like, in the woods or sitting next to a field of oats. So one assumes he is indeed in a garden. Same with Tibullus when he imagines himself on his farm. Yes, it's a farm, but it's going to be mostly a villa and it's going to be-- so this idea of 'otium' is that like-- leaving aside the kitchen garden, as I said, but when Romans--is that an important part then, of what distinguishes a garden? So if you're talking about horticulture versus agriculture, is that part of what, because you said your initial definition was that it's a space set aside, cultivated and set aside for a purpose, but of course, that could describe a farm. And so is it important that that purpose be in some way connected to leisure?

**Vicky:** I think--

**Aven:** If you set aside the kitchen garden--

**Vicky:** Yeah. Yeah, [00:38:00] definitely. I think that it's, as you-- you've really hit the nail on the head, that there are other spaces that-- like a farm-- that fit that idea of it's set aside for a particular purpose, obviously. But it's, there's something then, as you said, ideological about that transition from being outside of a garden, into inside of a garden.

But there's-- what complicates it is there's this range of associations as to what is it, what is that purpose? What do we do there? I think particularly in the city of Rome and these types of spaces that you're talking about, that idea of 'otium' is really intrinsic and it can be both a positive and a negative.

So there's, particularly in the late Republic and this idea of, you know, the fall of the Republic and the decline, ancient and modern scholars have often viewed that shift from that very productive, traditional sense to, 'oh, we're now going for pleasure', as you said, [00:39:00] 'or leisure'. It fits into that general, very moralizing Roman discourse that you get of this idea that, 'oh, well, we've descended into this 'luxuria' and this is, it could be terrible'.

So gardens had this really interesting place in that debate because I think they can be kind of pushed one way or the other. So we do see lots of examples of people using gardens as examples of like, invective against people that have gone too far in the kind of leisure and pleasure idea.

This idea of it's--it becomes an unnatural, almost a perversion of nature if you're pushing it too far, but then you have someone like Pliny who clearly wants to create this idea and linking it more to those philosophical, very learned, a literary type of leisure, and that's very positive for his own kind of self presentation.

So, I think [00:40:00] this idea of leisure or pleasure as well as 'otium', really, really intrinsic if we kind of ignore the vegetable garden idea. But that leisure can be both a positive and a negative, and we see varying examples and it's a very fine line, I think, between those two things, because at what point does it become too much? And there's a lot of that idea of fertility and abundance is good, but only up until a point. You've got to harness that in some way.

Because then if it becomes too much, then it becomes perverse and then it's going over the top and it's almost morally suspect, that you're then playing with nature too much. So yeah, you kind of get these examples in Tacitus with Messalina and Agrippina in the Annals, he very much sees gardens as these places of perverse power plays and this is where bad things [00:41:00] happen. And then in Statius' letters about villas as well. He has a lot of warnings about how, if you're doing too much to nature, then you make it unnatural, that you should only cultivate it enough, because if you're then creating these kinds of monstrous villa complexes, then you're actually ruining nature or spoiling it in some way.

So, I think with that leisure really, and 'otium', it really brings into question that idea of, 'well, how much leisure is morally acceptable? How much pleasure is morally acceptable? And where do these spaces factor into that discussion?'

**Aven:** Yeah. I mean, this is, this is such a-- that whole-- there's such a nexus there of so many things that are going on in the late Republic onward. I mean, probably before that too, but we really see it in the literature of the Late Republic. And then the retrospective discussion of the Late Republic that happens in the Early Imperial period with [00:42:00] 'otium'. Is 'otium' idleness, or is it philosophy?

And then 'otium' as an important marker of status, because only if you're wealthy do you have 'otium'. To not have 'otium' is definitely the mark of a person you don't want to be--

**Vicky:** yeah--

**Aven:** --but where do you draw that line? And then, you know, the argument between the Epicurean and the Stoic approaches to such things, et cetera.

And yeah, the gardens, I mean, I don't know how much you do talk about fish ponds in your gardens, but I know the fish ponds are one of the pieces of invective that you get all the time. Like, 'it's those fish ponds! That's where they really broke with the boundary of nature, they started growing those huge fish and caring for their fish more than for humans!'

**Vicky:** Yeah! '

**Aven:** 'Pretending they had oceans in their own backyards, that's when we knew we were all going downhill'--

**Vicky:** Yeah, exactly. And it's kind of this idea that--

**Aven:** -- fish ponds--

**Vicky:** When you're taking it too far and you know, one of the things that I look at in my research is [00:43:00] how Augustus and the kind of Augustan use of green space in the city really grapples with that idea. And arguably, he's very successful in harnessing it in a positive way because you see--and I use this idea of the golden age and there being this abundant growth and everything's blooming and it's all great in the Augustan period.

And he very much kind of-- but then there's this emphasis on, okay, it's contained profusion in some way. Like, everything is fully blooming, but at the same time, there is some level of control over it and that control, it's subtle, but it's just enough there to kind of harness the potential.

And I think one really obvious example of this visually is if you look at the Ara Pacis, the big Altar of Peace, the bottom half of that frieze that surrounds the altar is this huge kind of floral [00:44:00] display. And from a distance, it looks like it's all these swirling leaves and you know, very much fits into that 'everything's blooming at the same time', and this is a fertile and abundant great period of golden age following the civil wars. But then if you look closer, you notice that it may appear from a distance that everything is just spontaneous, but there is a pattern to it. There is order to these spirals and everything was enclosed in nice, geometrically, framed friezes.

So you've got this idea that is kind of an illusion of spontaneous growth, I think. But there's this very carefully constructed frame around it. And I think-- so Augustus really, I think, gets to the heart of that idea of 'is 'otium' and abundance, is that a negative or a positive?' And he's trying to harness it in the most positive way that fits in with his whole ideology of rule in [00:45:00] general.

**Aven:** Makes me think that what's important is-- Mark brought that up about the civic nature of it-- because the reason it's okay that they produce these places of leisure is because they're doing it for the people, for the people of Rome who do not have leisure and they are providing leisure for the people who have only a little leisure.

And of course, if you think about the way that the histories are written, which is not the same as what happened, but the way the histories are written, Nero is the opposite. He provides a garden, but it's a garden for himself, and it's not civic, it's personal--

**Vicky:** And in the center of Rome. So that is like, a very obvious example of 'he's using it for his own personal pleasure'. And you can contrast that with earlier, Julius Caesar, very famously, he kind of gave his gardens to the people in his--

**Aven:** in his will--

**Vicky:**  and then--

**Aven:** Or whether or not he did, Augustus did-

**Vicky:** Yeah, [00:46:00] exactly. And Augustus very much builds on that. He takes lots of green spaces that in the Late Republic had either been mostly private or maybe semipublic to some extent. And he really does open them up a lot to the public. And he also creates new green space as well, particularly the Campus Martius. We do very much get the sense that there was a kind of greenify-ing of that whole area.

And yeah, again, this idea of the civic and the public and the private and it's okay if you're doing it for the people or at least giving the perception that you're doing it for the people.

**Aven:** Get some of it, at least--

**Vicky:** --exactly. So this idea of that communal sense and that it's something that everyone can enjoy. I think one of the things that some authors like to moan about about the city is-- when we have the city countryside divide-- is that they say, 'oh, well, I don't have room for a garden anymore'.

Martial says 'all I've got room for is like a [00:47:00] tiny, basically a window box in my apartment for some flowers', like 'this is why I need to leave Rome' in his very dramatic kind of fashion. But the evidence suggests that there were plenty of green spaces that were accessible to the public and who provides them and when, and who takes them away, I think is really interesting.

Like you said, Nero, it kind of encapsulates everything about him, that he kind of takes over the entire city space. And then obviously very famously the Flavian Amphitheatre, the Colosseum, that's a very public space. It's then put where his villa once was. So it's like a reclaiming of that space in some way, back to the public.

**Aven:** And so you see that for Augustus, while occasionally accused of luxury in small ways is essentially not, it's so important to his perception that he and their household is productive and all of those things whereas Nero, one of the central things that makes him a [00:48:00] bad emperor is that he is personally self-indulgent.

And so that matches entirely with this idea that he would have great gardens, but they would--I know it's a villa, but I mean, it does have gardens. It does have a park space, but it's personal. Therefore it's indulgent as opposed to being appropriate.

**Vicky:** Yeah, And it's that idea of, yeah, appropriateness and where's that line? And I think different people can get away with different things, as is normal. But it's a really easy symbol, I think, to weaponize either end of the spectrum, either the positive or the negative.

And so with Augustus, you see a very-- he's weaponized it in a very positive way for his own self image, whereas for Nero, we get the complete opposite of that. And on a more personal level, again Pliny, he's utilizing these spaces in his descriptions as a means of self representation to put across a positive aspect of his personality.

So [00:49:00] for him, it becomes this very Greek, learned, philosophical space. So I always find it interesting in literary descriptions of gardens, what is the person doing in the description? What are they trying to put into that description? How are they trying to put themselves in that garden?

And what is it meant to represent for them?

**Aven:** Yeah, cause it's not even just about emperors, because if you think about Hadrian-- you know, he has some gardens and some villas and while he's not represented as the best emperor, he's also not a monster. He's not one of the bad emperors at all, but he somehow-- but he doesn't, those garden spaces that I know of-- and again, this is moving well outside my real expertise, so I don't really know, but I'm pretty sure that they're pretty much personal gardens. They're personal villas, they're personal gardens. So he's not getting away with it by being civic minded, but because he's strongly associated with intellectual and Greek and literary developments, it's okay because they aren't then seen as just [00:50:00] indulgent, which is also because the people liked him and he was a better emperor. Cause of course Nero was technically intellectual and Greek loving too, but he wasn't liked--

**Vicky:** Yeah. And Hadrian, a bit late for me as well in terms of time space. But yes, he's very much an example of, again, he buys into that very Greek idea of the garden space and it becomes part of that whole Panhellenic intellectualism that he wants to get across.

So yeah, and I think it's just another example of, you can kind of mold these spaces into, okay-- oh God, I'm going to use another pun--they're ripe for like, imparting whatever you want onto them. And I think because of that liminality, because of that ambiguity, you can play with them in these ways and utilize them for your own kind of specific goals and aims in mind.

**Aven:** So, as a last thought or last question-- to what [00:51:00] degree do you-- I was going to ask you about other stuff too, but we've talked so much about gardens and they're lovely. So we'll have you back on some other time for talking about them, gardens, they really are a really fascinating topic. How much have you looked at, or do you look at, or do you intend to look at some of the later focus and fascination with gardens? And here I'm thinking about it, the sort of 16th, 17th century, English and French, but I know the English tradition better-- flowering of horticultural works? You know, I happen to have a particular interest in John Evelyn, but that whole world of the formal gardens, the interest of the Royal Society in botanical things and that sort of stuff. Do you look at that or theorize? Because they obviously do look back to the classical world, but do you look at that for theorizing about gardens at all?

**Vicky:** Yeah. I mean, I think as-- my research, I think when you think about garden scholars, they kind of tend to come from one of two angles. You've got more [00:52:00] generalized like, landscape architectural historian type scholars. And then you've got people that come to gardens like me, from a very specific kind of temporal or geographic region, for example.

It's definitely something that I have tried to integrate into my own scholarship in this idea of how do I bring in those more general garden philosophical debates onto the ancient world. And I think it's always a challenge with that mixing of more modern theory with spaces because you know, how applicable are they?

But I do think with gardens that there is a lot of potential for this kind of trans-cultural type analysis, particularly because even within the Roman world, I'm dealing with many different types of space. So there's nothing wrong with bringing in modern theory, modern lenses to analyze that.

I mean, I particularly [00:53:00] use modern spatial theory to think about the ways in which we conceptualize these spaces. I know that other people have done a lot more work on things like, like you said, the 17th, 18th century Italian gardens, English gardens as well and how they intersect.

It's not something that I have included a lot in my current research, but I think as I move on, I really want to focus more on these kinds of trans-cultural ideas. And because I like to think a lot about how particular concepts maybe translate across different types of Roman garden spaces. So to kind of broaden that into 'well, and how does a Roman garden then compare to later gardens?', I think is something to consider. One thing I'm particularly interested in-- not as late as, as you said, the 17th, 18th century, but I'm really interested in this transition from-- you [00:54:00] know, in Rome, a lot of the time, this idea of a boundary with a garden, it then leads to notions of transgression.

And this idea of, 'well, if you've crossed into this space, then once you're in there, you can maybe do things that you wouldn't be able to do elsewhere'. So it becomes a space where certain transgressions are okay. Whereas we then have this kind of Christian conception with the Garden of Eden, Paradise is where-- different stuff is happening there.

And in Late Antiquity with this idea of, move into gardens and flowers and chastity, whereas in the Roman imagination, it can sometimes be very sexual and overt with garden space. So I'm interested in thinking more about, 'well, how did that transition occur'? The kind of pre-Christian, post-Christian idea of the garden and moving into Late Antiquity, I think could be an interesting angle to think about.

**Mark:** Yeah, I was thinking, I mean, that's the other way [00:55:00] to go? Is that in the Middle Ages, they obviously pick up on a lot of these notions about the garden and really run with it both in the religious terms, in the Christian terms, but also it becomes hugely important in more secular material like the courtly love tradition. Yeah. And what the garden there.

**Aven:** If you want to talk about a garden as a site of transgression and as literally a sight/site of, in both senses of the homonym, because it's where you see your lady walking stand by and the walled garden is safe space for the chaste lady to be, but it's also a place where she is open to be and to see and to interact.

And so the crossing of the wall, right? Like, I'm thinking of, there's a number of stories that I can think of where seeing a lady walking in the garden or looking down from a tower and seeing someone, you know, features really importantly, and it's important that it's a nominally safe space and a [00:56:00] nominally private space that is nonetheless open.

**Mark:** It's a schema used in both the literary and the visual arts in the Middle Ages, so--

**Vicky:** yeah. And that is exactly the same--like, operating in a different way, but those same overriding ideas as you see in the Roman imagination, that they've set up these boundaries, but specifically in order to then challenge various binaries and chaste/unchaste all of these kind of ideas.

And I think I do find it really interesting. And I guess it's a space where you can work out those ideas, because of its liminality and because of this sense of boundary crossing. And what does that boundary mean in different sets of circumstances? Is it simply physical? Does it become ideological? Where's the line between those two things and etymologically, you go back to terms--

The Old Persian 'pairi-daeza' comes, is [00:57:00] formed from the two words which mean 'around' and 'fence'. And from that we get the Hellenized 'paradeisos', and then that's where we get paradise from, which is very intrinsically linked to the garden of Eden, this idea of paradise as a garden.

So we have these-- yeah, the language itself kind of maintains that idea of the boundedness, the cultivation. Like, if we look at all of the kind of origins of the various European and Proto-European words for garden and they all kind of maintain that sense of a boundary in the root of the actual word.

**Aven:** Yeah. Garden and yard, right?

**Vicky:** Yeah, exactly!

**Mark:** Yeah.

**Aven:** Yeah, okay-- I won't, because we could go on forever now, yeah, I mean--- and cause we didn't even touch on say, Priapus and gardens--

**Vicky:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah--

**Aven:** --which is obviously where my mind goes because I'm a 12 year old, but you know, the god of gardens and his threatening of trespassers with his giant phallus.

**Vicky:** Yeah, exactly.

[00:58:00] **Aven:** Yeah.

**Vicky:** You know, just the very basic sense that the boundary, despite all that we've spoken about in terms of liminality and the ambiguous nature-- this is why these boundaries I think, are so interesting because they're encouraging liminality and ambiguity, but at the same time, the Romans see the boundary as so important that it has to be policed by a figure like Priapus, and not just like any old figure. Like, this is a very, very provocative symbol. It's both productive and prohibitive, you know? Yeah. With the fact that it's a phallic symbol, you've got those two aspects of fertility, but also I mean, he's literally wielding it as a weapon, right?

Like, in most of the statues and you know, the poems centered on him, they are not for the faint hearted. They are very cutting and visceral about what's going to happen to you if you transgress. So it's [00:59:00] very-- his character is very interesting because he's like teasing you, he's inviting you to come in, but then he's also saying, 'well, yeah, but I'm going to make you get in here, but at the same time, I'm going to punish you'.

**Aven:** Yeah. And then his punishment is a literal transgression of boundaries.

**Vicky:** Exactly. Exactly.

**Aven:** That is what he does to you to punish you, is he transgresses the boundaries that shouldn'tbe transgressed.

**Vicky:** Yeah. So he kind of embodies, in just his very physical form, that idea of-- yeah, the transgression aspects of that garden boundary. So yeah, I find it particularly interesting in the Roman imagination that there is this very visceral symbol of what will happen to you with transgression. Despite the fact that they then clearly always represent it as a very liminal and that ambiguous space. They also really, really want to defend that boundary at the same time.

**Aven:** Yeah. All right. We could have this conversation forever, but I'm [01:00:00] gonna--I think this is perhaps a good place to place the boundary!

**Vicky:** Yes. Yes, all the puns.

**Aven:** For the moment, but thank you so much. Totally fascinating.

**Vicky:** Well, thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Aven:**  And we'll look forward to, yeah, I know that-- so right now you have a book coming out, or not coming out. That's perhaps a little preemptive. You have a book under contract--

**Vicky:** --under contract, probably the end of next year, beginning of... what year are we now? So in the beginning--

**Aven:** don't know.

**Vicky:** ---2023, I think. Yes, I'll be working on it over the next year for it to come out after that. And shortly I have an article coming out on Columella, actually, and gardens in Syllecta Classica. That should come out this month, I think imminently.

So yeah, so that's exciting.

**Aven:** And if people want to hear your thoughts on, on gardens, but let's be honest especially on memes and running [01:01:00] donuts, could they find you?

**Vicky:** So yeah, so if you want to maybe sometimes get some garden knowledge, but also knowledge about various things. Yes, I'm very active on classics Twitter, and it's @Vicky\_Austen, spelled A-U-S-T-E-N to be very awkward. But yes, you can find me on there and yeah-- gardens and so much more, many memes, many gifs as well.

**Aven:** And lots about teaching and--

**Vicky:** --lots about teaching, yeah. So yeah. Yeah. yes, I have lots to say and hopefully you can find me there as well.

**Mark:** Wonderful!

**Aven:** Thanks so much!

**Vicky:** Thank you.

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Thanks for listening.

**Mark:** Bye.