

*Nocet esse feracem: An Ecofeminist Analysis of the Pseudo-Ovidian *Nux**

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The *Nux* is a rich and compelling poem that has not received the critical attention it deserves. Once almost universally regarded as the work of Ovid, it is now considered spurious, but the question of authorship has dominated discussion.¹ There has been scant interest in understanding its meaning. Composed in elegiac couplets, the *Nux* consists of a monologue delivered by a nut tree, complaining that it is hit with stones by passers-by and a rod by its farmer, men who are intent on harvesting its produce. The tree laments that it has brought violence on itself through its fertility. Frequent comparisons are drawn between plant and human form and behaviour, reflecting a shared language of plants and people that is well established in Greek and Roman literature and manifests as trees as mothers, vines married to elms, men cut down like

1 — The most recent proponent of Ovidian authorship, Pulbrook (1985, 29–39) argues that Ovid wrote the *Nux* in exile during 12 CE. He undertakes a lengthy rebuttal against Lee 1958, whose argument against Ovidian authorship has been considered the most persuasive. Richmond (1981, 2763–7) provides a balanced overview of the question.

trees, morphological parallels between leaves and hair, arms and branches.² This article will contend that the *Nux* exploits this shared language to characterise the nut tree as female and much like a human woman in her exercise of her fertility. Because of this fundamental tree-as-woman analogy, it will employ a critical ecofeminist approach to unfurl the poem's preoccupations with themes of fertility, beauty, and violence in the relationships it depicts between human males (farmer and wayfarers) and plant-life. Readers are thereby led to consider how these themes map onto human society, how motherhood may bring harm to human women, how the farmer's protection and control may be like that exercised by a Roman husband. From this perspective, although the poem's date and authorship are uncertain, it will be seen to speak to two typically Augustan moral projects, agrarianism (with its associated repudiation of luxury) and the promotion of marriage and lawful procreation.

The *Nux* is totally in line with Ovidian language and interests; its moral outlook and basic plot is deeply rooted in fable. These facts have led critics to view the poem (whether authored by him or not) as either an allegory for Ovid's exile or a work that simply extends the fabulists' concerns with gratitude and justice.³ Its most immediate model may have been an Augustan-era epigrammatic reception of a much older Aesopic tale. The epigram by Antipater of Thessalonica (*AP* 9.3) concerns a nut tree planted at a roadside. Boys pelt stones at it and break its branches. The tree laments: 'Being fruitful does trees no good. Indeed, unlucky me, I bore fruit and got only violence' (δένδρεσιν εὐκάρποις οὐδὲν πλέον ἢ γὰρ ἔγωγε / δυσδαίμων ἐς ἐμὴν ὕβριν ἐκαρποφόρου, *AP* 9.3.5–6). The brief Aesopic fable 250 contains many of the same details. A nut tree laments that it 'produce[s] violence and pain' for itself (ὑβρεις καὶ λύπας παρέχω) with its yearly crop.⁴ The fable's epimythium comments that the story refers to those who suffer harm for their good deeds. Another version by Babrius takes a more critical approach to those inflicting violence upon the tree by directly blaming them for their ingratitude. The tree laments, 'People gladly enjoy my fruits, but they have a terrible way of showing their thanks' (οὓς τῷ καρπῷ μου εὐφραίνω, ὑπὸ τούτων δεινὰς ἀντιλαμβάνω χάριτας, Babrius 151 (Crusius)). Given the uncertainty surrounding the dates of both Babrius and the *Nux*, it is difficult to say if one influenced the

2— Nisbet (1987, 243) reflects on the ancient notion that 'trees are like people'; recent studies of this language and related themes include Sharrock 2020; Hunt 2016, 197–9; Gowers 2005 and 2011, and Buxton 2009, 210–30.

3— On gratitude and justice in the poem's early modern reception, see McGowan 2020. Villani (2014) emphasises justice within a broader metaphysical reading opposing Christian and pagan ideas. Ganzemuller (1910) and Beck (1965) find an allegory for Ovid's exile, but its themes are better explained without appeals to biography. Wartena (1928, 2–7) sees a simple expansion of Greek epigram and fable.

4— I follow Perry's 1952 text and numbering of Aesop's fables.

other.⁵

Additional elements beyond its plot echo other fables. A comparison between the nut tree and a beaver (*Nux* 165–6) recalls fable 118, where a beaver bites off his testicles to escape his human hunters and their dogs.⁶ The nut tree would like to emulate the beaver’s behaviour and rid itself of the very thing that attracts the violent attentions of humans, its nuts. Fable 175 on the travellers and the plane tree similarly highlights the role of fertility in the human–plant relationship. Exhausted from their journey and the summer heat, men lounge beneath the shade of a plane tree. Contemplating it, they comment that a tree that produces no fruit is useless to humans (ἀνωφελές τι τοῦτο καὶ ἄκαρπον ἀνθρώποις ἐστὶ τὸ δένδρον). The insulted tree interrupts, calling them ungrateful and observing, ‘While you enjoy my kindnesses, you call me useless and barren!’ (ἔτι τῆς ἐξ ἐμοῦ εὐεργεσίας ἀπολαύοντες ἀχρεῖαν με καὶ ἄκαρπον ἀποκαλεῖτε). I shall return to this fable below when I consider the inter-arboreal competition between the nut tree and the plane tree in the *Nux*. The sum effect of this multifaceted pattern of influence is that fable infuses the *Nux* with one of its archetypal concerns, how to survive in a harsh, hierarchical world in which the weak are frequently at the mercy of the powerful.⁷ The genre is notorious for its ability to be reinvented and redeployed for different rhetorical ends, but this Roman reinvention of the nut tree’s tale further resists any easy lessons by complicating the narrative.⁸ This particular nut tree has more to complain about than ingratitude.

The full meaning of its complaint cannot be appreciated until another aspect of the poem has been explored, the nut tree’s sex and gender. Among Graeco-Roman naturalists, plants were frequently classified according to their perceived sex in addition to other features such as whether they grew wild or were domesticated. Foxhall (1998) has shown how the categories of wild or domesticated and male or female tended to map onto to each other in Greek thought. Male trees were regarded as hardier, less fruitful, and more difficult to control, while female trees were thought more amenable to fruitful domestication; the same

5 — Text of Babrius from Chambry 1925–6, accessed through Aesopica.net (<http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/>); translation adapted from Gibbs 2002. Dates: Babrius, see Holzberg 2002, 59–60.

6 — See Villani 2014, 99–100.

7 — On fable’s brutal ethical worldview, see Morgan 2007, 63–8, Rothwell 1995, 235, and Blackham 1985, 8–9. Modern readers of the *Nux* may draw a new, ecological lesson: failing to appreciate the shade offered by trees may leave us unable to survive in a harsh, overheating world. I thank the anonymous reader for the reminder.

8 — Discussing Hor. *S.* 2.6.79–117, Holzberg (2002, 35) explains that fables typically refine a narrative to focus on their lesson, smoothing out extraneous detail. The *Nux* departs from its generic origins by complicating the story.

categories pervaded Roman thinking.⁹ Moreover, as Corbeil (2015) has explored, Latin speakers organised the world into sexual categories, and grammarians directly related gender, *genus*, to *generare*, generation or sexual reproduction. The grammatical gender of trees was thought to reflect something quintessentially *female* about them; namely that each tree is the 'mother' of its offspring.¹⁰ Exceptions proving this rule occurred when poets played on the connection by 'changing the grammatical gender of a plant to match the sex of an imagined personification',¹¹ but a poet does not have to change the gender of a noun to draw attention to its gendered associations. Trees were, therefore, sexed and gendered in Greek and Roman thought, but the fables and the epigram do not pursue this aspect of the nut tree's story. The *Nux*-author invests the tree with a strongly feminine colouring. The poem's insistence that trees are like women and women like trees brings new complexity to the tale. The analogy has been noticed by commentators, but they have generally seen it as an unsuccessful, even ridiculous, comparison.¹²

That a nut tree might be like a human female takes on a different hue when the poem is approached through an ecofeminist lens.¹³ Ecofeminism is a broad school of thought. All ecofeminists argue that the oppression of women is analogous to the domination of nature, but there is a divide between those who think that women are inherently identified or aligned with nature (and the body, the emotions etc.) and those who think that this description – this way of thinking – has simply been historically true, a position I favour. As posited by critics such as Plumwood (1993, 4) and Gaard (2017, xxiii) in response to well-founded criticisms of essentialism and eurocentrism in the movement, 'critical ecofeminism' addresses other kinds of oppression based on, for example, race, class, nation, or species by arguing that the oppression experienced by members of all these groups is legitimated through a logic of

9 — See Foxhall 1998, esp. 65 on Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 3.9.3, 5.4.1 and *Caus. pl.* 1.15.3–4, 1.16.6. Roman examples: Plin. *Nat.* 16.2.11: *in omnibus silvestria et mascula differentiam cuiusque generis augent; et infecunda firmiora fertilibus, nisi quo in genere mares ferunt, sicut cupressus et cornus*. 'In all, wild and male trees increase the difference of each species; and the infertile ones are stronger than the fertile ones, except in the species in which males bear, like the cypress and the cherry tree.' See too e.g., 15.99 (on the arbutus), 12.61–2 (frankincense).

10 — Priscian comments that *arbor* is rightly counted feminine because each individual tree is also said to be the "mother" of its own offspring (*iure inter feminina connumeratur, quod "mater" quoque dicitur proprii fetus unaquaeque arbor, gramm.* 2.154.11–13). See Corbeil 2015, 31–2.

11 — Corbeil (2015, 92) alludes to Ennius' *cupressus* (e.g., *ann.* 511 Skutsch), Virgil's *crocus* (*G.* 4.182), and, more contentiously, Catullus' *ulmus* (62.54) – all made masculine nouns to evoke masculine characters.

12 — See Wartena 1928, 11, 34. For Beck 1965, 149, it is 'far-fetched' and 'abortion for beauty's sake is totally irrelevant to the plight of the nut-tree'.

13 — Since Quartarone 2002, ecofeminist readings of classical texts have included O'Hearn 2021a, Cowan 2021 and Cowan (forthcoming), and Archontogeorgi and Michalopoulos 2023. Ecocritical readings have included Schliephake 2017 and Armstrong 2019. duBois (1988), Keith (2000, 36–64), and Sharrock (2020) treat similar themes from different theoretical perspectives.

domination whereby women, the poor, racial or national Others, and nonhuman species are deemed worthy of oppression because they are aligned with nature.¹⁴ Oppression of all these groups stems from a foundational culture/nature or human/nature dualism which is hierarchical – that is to say, culture or the human trumps nature. Plumwood (1993, 47–55) identifies how this dualism enables domination by pointing to five key features of its logic. These can be efficiently explained by taking the nut tree as an example:

Backgrounding (denial): ‘this nut tree is not essential; I don’t need it’
 Radical exclusion (hyperseparation): ‘I am nothing at all like this nut-tree’
 Incorporation (relational definition): ‘this nut-tree lacks human reason’
 Instrumentalism (objectification): ‘this nut-tree has value because it produces a lot of nuts for me’
 Homogenisation (stereotyping): ‘all nut-trees are the same; this one is just like the rest of them’

The subject making these logical claims is the master, a figure aligned with masculinity, the elite, the West, whiteness, culture, and the human in ecofeminist thought. Not all these concepts map neatly onto Roman society, but there was a clear tendency in its elite literary discourse to valorise masculinity, culture, Romanness, and the human at the expense of their opposites. In my view, that suffices to render critical ecofeminism a powerful tool for examining works like the *Nux*.

The walnut tree and other plants in antiquity

Drawing upon Plumwood’s work in an investigation of the history of Western thought about plants, Hall (2011, 21) argues that Plato begins and Aristotle intensifies a ‘process of exclusion, which depicts the ecologically dominant plant kingdom as passive and limited in awareness’. Greek religious or mythological accounts of the world had recognised connections, even kinship, between humans and plants.¹⁵ Building on earlier presocratic debate, Plato’s *Timaeus* (77b3–c) granted plants a form of soul but argued that the plant ‘shares not at all in opinion and reasoning and mind but in sensation, pleasant and painful, together with desires’ (δόξης μὲν λογισμοῦ τε καὶ νοῦ μέτεστιν τὸ μηδὲν, αἰσθήσεως δὲ ἡδείας καὶ ἀλγεινῆς μετὰ ἐπιθυμιῶν. *Ti.* 77b5–6).¹⁶ Aristotle went further, denying sensation to plants too (*de An.* 413a25–c). These accounts justify human

14 — For criticism of essentialism and eurocentrism in ecofeminism, see Cuomo 1992.

15 — E.g., mortals are born from ash trees at Hes. *Op.* 145. See Hall 2011, 17–19 and 122–3, duBois 1988, 42–3, and Buxton 2009, 213–14.

16 — The text is Burnet 1902; translation from Bury 1929. Plants in the *Timaeus* are made from the same materials as humans and are termed ‘living creatures’ (77a): see Zatta 2016, 112–13.

use and exploitation of the plant world through radical exclusion and incorporation; that is, Plato and Aristotle emphasise the differences between humans and plants and define plants negatively in relation to humans. And yet, they do grant that plants possess a soul that allows them to grow, decay, take in nutrition, and reproduce – capacities which, we will see, the *nux* possesses.¹⁷ In the Roman period, there continue to be competing views, even within a single text. Pliny the Elder maintained a largely instrumental view of the natural world whereby plants and animals exist ‘for the sake of the health or pleasure of people’ (*salutis aut voluptatis hominum gratia*, *Nat.* 18.1). Like Plato and Aristotle, Pliny often defined plants by human and animal measures.¹⁸ He sometimes describes plants as though they possessed some measure of subjectivity by commenting on their desires, pleasures, and pains. For instance, he notes that ‘it is pleasing to some [trees] to catch sight of the sea from a distance’ (*quibusdam satis e longinquo aspicere maria incundum*, *Nat.* 17.24). This jumbled conception of what plants can and cannot do in comparison to humans and what plants are *for* feeds into the *Nux*.

Another important step in appreciating the tree’s characterisation is to understand that the *nux* is specifically a walnut tree, *inglans* or *nux inglans*, though the term is not used.¹⁹ Believed to have come from Persia (Plin. *Nat.* 15.24.87; Theophr. *Eng. Pl.* 3.14.4), the walnut tree was a stalwart of Roman agriculture and deeply embedded in cultural traditions and everyday life as a source of timber, as well as a dye, medicine, and foodstuff.²⁰ It was the nut scattered at Roman weddings, possibly to accompany the bawdy Fescennine verses (Catul. 61.121, 124 etc.; Plin. *Nat.* 15.24.86) or perhaps, as Servius reports from Varro, to mask any noises the bride made as she lost her virginity – these would be covered by the excited squeals of the children as they snatched up the nuts (Serv. *Ecl.* 8.30). Pliny postulates that the nut was so associated with weddings because ‘its offspring is protected in so many ways’ (*tot modis fetu munito*, *Nat.* 15.24.86) by an inner covering and harder outer shell. Its connection with sexuality and fertility ran to its very name – *inglans* was

17 — As Hunt (2016, 173–6) emphasises, drawing upon a concept of tree agency drawn from Jones and Cloke 2002, which predates material ecocriticism but is similarly concerned with how nonhuman agents act upon the world. Iovino and Oppermann (2014, 7) define material ecocriticism as ‘the study of the way material forms – bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities – intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories’.

18 — E.g., the *amicitia* between elm and vine at *Nat.* 16.72. Text of Pliny the Elder from the Loeb.

19 — The tree’s dark juice can stain skin (*Nux* 155–8), supporting its identification as the walnut: Wartena 1928, 24.

20 — Walnut for building (Plin. *Nat.* 16.223) and furniture (Juv. 11.114–19); dye for wool and hair (Plin. *Nat.* 15.88); in medicine (Plin. *Nat.* 23. 147–9). The spread of the *inglans regia* in Europe was regarded as a marker of Romanisation. Recent studies are questioning this view due to evidence of pre-Roman spread: e.g., Krebs et al. 2022.

said to be derived from *Iovis glans*, the ‘acorn of Jupiter’ or, less politely, ‘the *glans* penis of Jupiter’.²¹ As suggested by the image of children seizing upon nuts scattered at weddings, walnuts were popular toys for children. The poem reflects this use with an interlude on the games played with the harvested *nuces* by a *puer* (73–86).

Nevertheless, certain aspects of walnut-tree behaviour caused headaches for farmers. Its shade was believed to retard the growth of surrounding plants and affect human health. Pliny reports that the shade of different trees has different properties and explains that ‘[the shade] of the walnut is heavy and harmful both to the human head and all plants nearby’ (*juglandum gravis et noxia etiam capiti humano omnibusque iuxta satis*, *Nat.* 17.89).²² Varro draws attention to the importance of considering what trees are planted on the boundaries of your neighbour’s land. If he has an oak grove, you cannot plant your olives nearby. The oak is so ‘hostile’ (*contrarium*, *R.* 1.16.6) to the olive that it will cause it to bear fewer fruits and to twist unhealthily back towards the ground to escape its enemy. ‘Like the oak’, he comments, ‘so many large walnut trees neighbouring the edge of the farm make it sterile (*ut quercus, si <c> iugulandes magnae et crebrae finitimae fundi oram faciunt sterilem*, 1.16.6). Accordingly, the Virgilian *praeceptor* likely knows more than he is letting on when he instructs his pupils to observe the nut tree’s behaviour to divine the success of the wheat harvest:

si superant fetus, pariter frumenta sequentur,
 magnaue cum magno veniet tritura calore;
 at si luxuria foliorum exuberat umbra,
 nequiquam pinguis palea teret area culmos. (Verg. *G.* 1.189–92; text
 Williams 1979)

If its fruits are abundant, grain crops will follow equally, a great
 threshing will come with the great heat; but if shade abounds in the
 overgrowth of its foliage, in vain your floor will thresh stalks rich in
 chaff.

Like any leafy tree, a walnut tree would indeed hinder the growth of any sun-loving plant beneath simply by blocking its light. In Virgil’s scenario,

21 — *Iovis glans* is popularly translated as ‘Jupiter’s nuts’, catching the double-entendre but missing the literal meaning. *glans* refers to the head of the penis. There are no examples of *glandes* as testicles (see Adams 1982, 72–3; cf. 66–71). Possible double-entendres may lurk in *Catul.* 61.125–6, *Mart.* 14.1.12 and 5.30.7–8 but probably play upon similarities in shape between the walnut shell and the *glans* penis.

22 — Cf. ‘certainly, for [the shade] of the walnut, pine, pitch-pine, or silver fir to touch any plant whatsoever is without doubt poison’ (*juglandum quidem pinorumque et picearum et abietis quaecumque attingere non dubie venenum*, 17.91); and see *Nat.* 24.1 on the antipathy between walnut and oak trees, causing the oak to die if planted near the nut tree. On allelopathic trees generally, *Nat.* 17.239–40.

the wheat crop's yield decreases with reduced access to sunlight.²³ Modern studies suggest that, like other members of its family, the *inglans regia* does indeed have allelopathic effects on the germination and growth of some other plant species through the production of a toxic chemical called *inglone*, which retards growth and in extreme cases causes plants to wilt.²⁴ The walnut tree represented in the *Nux* mirrors these concerns about the tree's cultivation. One of its primary complaints is that it was placed at the edge of the farm near the road, lest it harm other crops (esp. 59–62).

Walnut tree as human woman

The human–plant relationship in the *Nux* takes shape, therefore, within a conflicting conversation in Graeco-Roman culture, where plants could be considered passive, unthinking, unfeeling instruments for human flourishing or living creatures with thoughts and sensations, whose forms were made of the same building blocks as humans. It develops from an understanding that the walnut tree was a source of useful products (nuts, wood, dye) but potentially toxic shade. The poem begins with the walnut tree introducing itself as the blameless victim of violence. It was planted at the roadside and is attacked by passers-by with stones, but *it* very quickly becomes *she* in a manner that goes beyond grammatical gender:

Nux ego iuncta viae cum sim sine crimine vitae, a populo saxis praetereunte petor. obruere ista solet manifestos poena nocentes, publica cum lentam non capit ira moram. nil ego peccavi nisi si peccare docetur	5
annua cultori poma referre suo. at prius arboribus tum, cum meliora fuerunt tempora, certamen fertilitatis erat. tum domini memores sertis ornare solebant agricolas fructu proveniente deos...	10
pomaque laeissent matrem , nisi subdita ramo longa laboranti furca tulisset opem. Quin etiam exemplo pariebat femina nostro, nullaque non illo tempore mater erat.	15

23 — Williams 1979, *ap.* Verg. *G.*1.189 implies that the fruitful *nux* is merely acting as portent of a good wheat harvest. Stehle (1974, 355) notices that the overgrowth and *umbra* of line 191 continues the theme of the dangers of wild, unchecked growth (cf. 1.156–7) but does not connect 189–92 with the walnut tree's reputation.

24 — At least one modern study, Qiao et al. 2020, has argued that intercropping the *inglans regia* with wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) reduced the grain yield, though it had positive effects on the grain's nutritional composition that would not have been visible to ancient farmers. See, too, Wang et al. 2014 and Zubay et al. 2021.

At postquam platanis sterilem praebentibus umbram
 uberior quavis arbore venit honor,
 nos quoque frugiferae, si nux modo ponor in illis,
 coepimus in patulas luxuriare comas. 20
 Nunc neque continuos nascuntur poma per annos,
 uvaque laesa domum laesaque baca venit;
 nunc **uterum** vitiat quae vult formo<n>sa videri,
 raraque in hoc aevo est quae velit esse **parens**.
 Certe ego, si nunquam **peperissem**, tutior essem: 25
 ista Clytaemestra digna querela fuit. (*Nux* 1–10; 13–26)

A walnut tree beside the road, I am attacked by the passing crowd with stones, though I have led a blameless life. That punishment usually overwhelms blatant wrongdoers, when public anger does not suffer slow delay. I have done nothing wrong, unless it is taught that it is wrong to give yearly fruits to one's own farmer. Back then, before, when times were better, there was a fertility contest among trees. Then, thankful masters used to adorn with garlands the farming gods when the produce was coming forth...

and the fruits would have hurt their mother, had not a long prop, set under the struggling branch, brought help. But even women used to give birth by our example, and none was not a mother at that time. But after more abundant honour came to the planes, who provide barren shade, than to any other tree, we fruit-bearers – if I, a nut tree, am placed among them – began to revel in spreading foliage too. Now fruits are not born in successive years, and the grape comes home stunted and the berry, stunted; now she harms her womb who wants to look beautiful, and rare in this age is she who wants to be a parent. Certainly, I would be safer if I had not given birth: that complaint was worthy of Clytemnestra.²⁵

Terms for fruiting coincide with the language of human childbirth and motherhood (see words in bold above; cf. *fetus*, 93; *lacte*, 95; *peperisse*, 107). Such language is not unusual in ancient discussions of plant reproduction, but it feminises and humanises the walnut tree. The likeness becomes more pronounced in lines 15–16 and 26, where human women are imperfect mothers who require encouragement from the example of trees, or they provide a negative exemplar for their arboreal doubles. Human women and trees frame their behaviour by looking to each other.

These opening lines introduce a moral failure among trees and human women that is centred on a distinction between beauty and fertility. The walnut tree envies the beauty of the plane tree, which had a longstanding reputation in some quarters as pretty but useless.²⁶ Criticising the plane

25 — Text from Lenz 1956. All translations my own unless otherwise indicated.

26 — For the plane-tree's positive associations, see Hardie 1997, 27–30.

for her 'barren shade' (*sterilem umbram*, 17), the walnut tree gives new voice to the mindset of those ungrateful travellers who rested from the hot sun beneath the plane tree in fable 175.²⁷ By incorporating fable 152 about the nut tree and 175 about the plane tree into the one poem, the author replicates the agonal narrative that is common to fable where one character is pitted against another.²⁸ The stakes of the contest are now wider. The nut tree's envy reflects a strain of Roman consternation over appropriate uses of land and wealth. Criticisms first arose in the Republican era when Rome came into closer contact with the eastern Mediterranean and began to import exotic plant species such as the plane and the cherry tree as well as foreign landscaping practices. Richer than ever, Roman men began to sculpt gardens dedicated solely to leisure and pleasure, and moralists decried the loss of productive kitchen gardens and agricultural land.²⁹ In place of fruiting trees and others such as the elm, which could usefully support the grape vine, the plane tree offered only pleasant shade:

Iam pauca aratro iugera regiae
 moles relinquent, undique latius
 extenta visentur Lucrino
 stagna lacu **platanusque caelebs**
 evincet ulmos... 5

...Non ita Romuli 10
 praescriptum et intonsi Catonis
 auspiciis veterumque norma. (Hor. *Carm.* 2.15.1–5, 10–12; text
 Harrison 2017)

Soon these regal piles will leave few acres for the plough and everywhere you'll see ponds spread wider than the Lucrine lake, and the **unmarried plane** will supplant the elms... Not thus was the regulation of Romulus and unshaven Cato and the standard by the guidance of men of old.

Horace's comments represent concerns that luxurious landscaped gardens of ponds, colonnades, sweet-scented flowers, and trees like the

27 — The walnut tree later complains that she helps others by providing protection from sun and rain (117–20) but her only recompense is violence (121–2). The walnut tree complains about ingratitude like the fable's plane tree, but she adopts the criticisms of the plane voiced by the ungrateful — another example of her moral ambiguity.

28 — E.g., the olive and the fig tree (413); the mulberry, the apple tree, and the bramble (213). Fable 213 no doubt influenced Callim. *Ia.* 4, as discussed by Acosta-Hughes 2002, 196–9. Although no linguistic parallels are distinct, *Ia.* 4 may have influenced the *Nux*. The olive is characterised as lowly, ugly, fertile, and associated with suffering (like the walnut), while the laurel is elevated, beautiful, non-productive, and pure, i.e., free from any association with death and suffering (like the plane).

29 — On the imported trend for non-productive gardens, see Macaulay-Lewis 2018. For the multivalency of the Roman garden, an expression of self-sufficiency or a deplorable example of luxury, see Myers 2018. On Rome's 'botanical imperialism', see Macaulay-Lewis 2008, Totelin 2012 and Pollard 2009.

platanus caelebs were leaving little room for the olive and the plough.³⁰ Pliny the Elder likewise weaves tropes of excess such as tyrants, banquets, and eunuchs into his account of the plane tree's importation into Rome from foreign climes (*Nat.* 12.6–13). He makes incredulous remarks about the increasing prevalence of, and honours given to, a tree whose only virtue is the sprawling shade it offers. 'But who would not be amazed – and rightly so – that a tree has been sought from another part of the globe solely for the sake of its shade?' (*Sed quis non iure miretur arborem umbrae gratia tantum ex alieno petitam orbe?* Plin. *Nat.* 12.6), he asks. The walnut tree's attitude to the plane replicates this broader pattern of moralising about an attractive but unproductive tree.

Faced with such competition, the *nux* explains that fruiting trees are responding by controlling their fertility to become more beautiful. To supply attractive foliage, they are reducing the frequency of their crops (line 20) and 'the grape is coming home stunted and the berry, stunted' (*unvaeque laesa domum laesaque baca venit*, 21). Some commentators have argued that inclement weather is to blame for this damaged fruit, but the disfigurement implied by *laesus* is the next logical step after producing fewer harvests.³¹ Those that are produced are stunted because the tree is directing its nourishment away from its fruit to its leaves. In this way, *laesa* mirrors the earlier appearance of the verb in line 13 – *pomaque laesissent matrem* – to convey a combative relationship that can tip into mutual harm as mother tree and foetus fruit compete for nourishment and strength.³² Withdrawing nourishment could, in a human context, be likened to abortion: that is certainly how the philosopher Favorinus brands women's refusals to breastfeed (*Gel.* 12.1.8). The idea becomes clearer in line 23 where 'she harms her womb' (*uterum vitiat*) evokes the term *vitium* ('vice' or 'defect'), which occurs in several ancient references to abortion.³³ Other authors refer to the loss of produce in plants with similar reference to human practices, sometimes using the more direct term *abortus* ('abortion' or 'miscarriage'). Among Pliny's complaints about

30 — Cf. Verg. *G.* 2.70: *steriles platani*, 'barren plane-trees'; Mart. 3.58.2–3 *viduaeque platano*. Horace seems to imagine the plane tree as a 'bachelor'.

31 — Thus, Vollmer 1923, ad loc, 'a furibus', and Pulbrook 1985 ad loc, who amends *domum* to *gelu*. Pulbrook adduces several Ovidian examples where produce is harmed (*laesus*) by the weather, e.g., *Ars am.* 3.703–4. Wartena 1928, ad loc follows Lindeman 1844 in supposing that the fruit is simply not as attractive as before. However, the passage focuses on fruiting trees' efforts to control their fertility.

32 — See Hong 2012, 71–96 on conflict in the maternal–foetal relationship during gestation in the Hippocratic *On Generation and Diseases of Women 1*. Hong emphasises that the conflict was gendered: medical writers assumed that a healthy foetus was male unless some weakness rendered it female. Nouns of all three grammatical genders are used refer to the nut tree's offspring: *fructus*, *fetus* (masc.); *nux*, *opes* (fem.); *poma*, *tributa*, *dona*, *munera* (neut.). Cf. mother–foetus conflict at Ov. *Am.* 2.14.1–8.

33 — For *vitium/vitiare* and abortion, see Ov. *Am.* 2.14.10, Ov. *Ep.* 11.37, and Juv. 2.34. The language conveys moral judgement about abortion but can also indicate a defect that causes miscarriage.

the Roman obsession with the beautiful plane tree is that breeding for a small attractive tree has cultivated the dwarf plane: 'since we have contrived abortions even for trees...' (*quoniam arborum etiam abortus invenimus*, Plin. *Nat.* 12.13), he comments acidly, implying that the natural world has been warped by immoral human practices.³⁴

Abortions by human women were controversial, especially so in light of Augustus' attempts to increase the birth rate under the provisions of the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE). Critics of the practice sometimes griped that women had abortions to preserve their beauty.³⁵ In *Amores* 2.14, Ovid questions whether Corinna was driven to seek an abortion so that her 'belly would lack the reproach of wrinkles' (*careat rugarum crimine venter*, 7), and he reminds her that 'if the same custom had pleased mothers in the olden days, the race of humans would have perished through this vice...' (*si mos antiquis placuisset matribus idem, / gens hominum vitio deperitura fuit*, 9–10). His criticisms of Corinna's abortion are grafted onto the norms of plant reproduction. 'Why do you cheat the swelling vine of its growing grapes, and why do you pluck the unripe fruit with cruel hand?' (*quid plenam fraudas vitem crescentibus uvis, / pomaque crudeli vellis acerba manu?* 2.14.23–4), he asks.³⁶ By deploying plant functioning as an *exemplum* for Corinna, Ovid marks her behaviour as unnatural. Conversely, and much like Pliny the Elder, the *nux* implies that the misguided priorities of people render the natural world unnatural. It is because farmers have had their heads turned by beautiful plane trees that trees like the *nux* are deviating from their proper behaviour. The overall picture painted by the *nux* is that trees – and, by extension, human women – can be beautiful or fecund but they cannot be both. She proposes a dichotomy that is subtly hierarchical: beautiful trees/women are aligned with concepts like artificiality, foreignness, luxury, and empty pleasure that are weighted negatively in Roman culture, while fertile trees/women deserve praise for their naturalness, Romanness, simplicity, and utility.

The dangers of fertility

The walnut tree does not envy the plane tree for her beauty in and of itself. She wants the freedom from physical suffering that the plane

34 — Pliny uses *abortus* again while describing a disease in barley that causes the grain to hollow out before it becomes mature, 'by a kind of miscarriage' (*quodam abortu*, *Nat.* 18.150). Cf. Amm. Marc. 24.3.12–13.

35 — See Theoc. 27.31; Sen. *Helv.* 16.3; Favorinus reported at Gel. 12.1.8; Soranus I 60 objects to abortions 'in pursuit of beauty'. The Ovidian *praeceptor* asserts that 'childbirth makes the period of youth briefer: a field grows old with constant harvesting' (*partus faciunt breviora iuventae / tempora: continua messe senescit ager*, *Ars* 3.81–2). On Augustus' laws and abortion, see Kapparis 2002, 149–51.

36 — Favouing Ovidian authorship, Beck (1965, 149–50) suggests that *Nux* 23–4 alludes to *Am.* 2.14.7–12 and 23–4 to curry favour with Augustus by representing Ovid, as nut-tree, as a 'champion of old-time fertility'. On *Ov. Am.* 2.14, see Booth 1999, 161–7.

enjoys thanks to her beauty and failure to produce fruit, traits which, as I have noted, she frames as mutually exclusive.³⁷ Fertility brings, firstly, pain during pregnancy and childbirth. From lines 7–14, she recalls the time when trees would bear such an abundance of fruit that the excess weight on their branches caused pain (*pomaque laesissent matrem*, 13).³⁸ A human woman, of course, must tolerate similar aches as the growing foetus adds weight upon her joints. When the nut tree describes the moment of childbirth, ‘when the new nut drives ripe clefts in the split bark’ (*at cum maturas fixso nova cortice rimas / nux agit*, *Nux* 67–8), she recalls Ovid’s depiction of Myrrha, who gives birth to Adonis after a painful labour that bends her double in her metamorphosed form as a myrrh tree: ‘the tree opens in clefts and when its bark was split, it gave up its living load’ (*arbor agit rimas et fissa cortice vivum / reddit onus...*, *Met.* 10.512–13). But where Myrrha ‘lost her former understanding along with her body’ (*amisit veteres cum corpore sensus*, 500) and could not put words to the pain she felt in her tree form, the nut tree is well able to comprehend and describe the causes of her suffering.³⁹ Her stark comparison between plant reproduction and human parturition is totally centred on the experience of pain: ‘fruit injures, it hurts to give birth, it hurts to be fertile’ (*fructus obest, peperisse nocet, nocet esse feracem*, 107).

Ancient accounts of childbirth in humans and nonhuman animals recognised that parturition could be brutal, a fight to the death between mother and offspring; a common Greek trope likened childbirth to war.⁴⁰ Its violence was part of the literary, and sepulchral, tradition. In another episode from the *Metamorphoses*, Alcmena was forced by a jealous Juno to endure a long pregnancy and protracted labour. She claimed that the mere recollection of this trauma brought renewed pain and a cold shudder (9.285–315, esp. 289–92). Alcmena’s labours are constructed as an act of heroism to rival those of her famous son, and she recounts

37 — The plane does produce fruit (Theophr. *Enq. Pl.* 9.11.6), small spiky balls of seeds. These are not edible, but Pliny suggests that, like the leaf and bark, they may have medicinal uses (Plin. *Nat.* 24.29; 16.11).

38 — Ovid deploys the image of branches bending under the weight of fruit — *Ars* 2.263; *Rem.* 175–6; *Met.* 15.76–7 — but not from a tree’s perspective as a source of pain; cf. the suggestions of pregnancy in *nec minus interea fetu nemus omne gravescit*, Verg. *G.* 2.249.

39 — Although *sensus* can refer to emotions, sensations, or the capacity for sensation, the Myrrha-tree still suffers pain during childbirth (*dolores*, 10.506; *ramos ... dolentes*, 510; *gemitus*, 509) and weeps (*lacrimisque cadentibus umet*, 509). I take *sensus* in its broader definition as ‘understanding’, a capacity for sensation, perception, and judgement (*OLD* s.v. 6). Like one of Plato or Pliny’s trees (see above), the Myrrha-tree feels pleasure and pain but lacks rationality.

40 — The nonhuman world produces some gruesome examples: cubs scratch at a lioness’ womb before birth (Hdt. 3.108, Philostr. *VA* 1.22); vipers eat their mother through her womb (Hdt. 3.109). These are consistent with medical accounts, where the insufficiency of the nourishment provided by the mother prompts the baby to tear at the womb’s membranes and cause its own birth (Hp. *Nat. puer.* 30). Hong (2012, 81–2) demonstrates how this process fits into a wider notion of conflict between mother and foetus which ‘reflects the anxiety that the interests of mother and child might eventually be at odds with one another...’ (83). On childbirth as war, Loraux 1995, 23–43 and e.g., ὡς τρίς ἂν παρ’ ἀσπίδα / στήναι θέλωμι’ ἂν μάλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἀπαξ, E. *Med.* 250–1; cf. 1029–31.

them to the pregnant Iole in the hope that she will not suffer similarly.⁴¹ The walnut tree, by contrast, contemplates that she would be safer if she had never given birth, a transgressive sentiment she judges 'worthy of Clytemnestra' (*Nux* 25–6). Enraged by his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, Clytemnestra killed her husband and so incurred the wrath of her children, Electra and Orestes, who murdered her. She typifies both mother–child love and conflict, an ambiguity reflected in the physical language of maternity that often attended her story in tragedy: Orestes comments that she gave birth to her own murderers (φονέας ἔτικτες ἀρά σοι, *E. El.* 1229); Clytemnestra calls Iphigenia 'my dear birth-pang' (φιλιτάτην ἐμοὶ / ὠδίν', *A. Ag.* 1417–18) but complains that Electra was sucking the very life out of her in a comment that I would suggest recalls the growing foetus who feeds off its mother at her expense, 'for she was a greater harm, living with me, always draining my blood neat from my soul' (ἦδε γὰρ μείζων βλάβη / ὕνοικος ἦν μοι, τοῦμόν ἐκπίνουσ' αἶι / ψυχῆς ἀκρατον αἶμ (S. *El.* 784–6).⁴² When the nut tree acknowledges her similarity to this mother, she differentiates herself from the long-suffering, self-sacrificing mothers of Roman ideal. Motherhood, particularly as deployed in Augustan ideology, functioned as a moral proof of what was 'natural' and therefore right and just.⁴³ Veturia upbraids her son Coriolanus by suggesting that it would have been better not to give birth to him, but she does so to save Rome not to spare herself from physical suffering: 'could you plunder this land, which bore and nourished you? ... If I had not given birth, Rome would not be besieged. If I had no son, I would die a free woman in a free fatherland' (*potuisti populari hanc terram, quae te genuit atque aluit? ... ergo ego nisi peperissem, Roma non oppugnaretur; nisi filium haberem, libera in libera patria mortua essem*, Livy, 2.40).

Compounding the pain of childbirth for the *nux* is another threat – human males perpetrate violence against her. In contrast to the safety accorded to beautiful, non-fruiting trees, her nuts make her a target for passers-by, who harvest them with brutal force:

non equidem invideo, nunquam tamen ulla feritur,
 quae sterilis sola est conspicienda coma.
 cernite sinceros omnes ex ordine truncos,
 qui modo nil quare percutiantur habent.
 at mihi saeva nocent mutilatis volnera ramis,

41 — McAuley 2016, 123–9. Cf. Klein 2020 on Theocritus' erasure of Alcmena's pain at *Idyll* 24.1–10.

42 — The ruse that draws Clytemnestra to her death is centred on childbirth and mother–daughter conflict at *E. El.* 651–8, 1124–46. On the language of maternity in these plays, especially Sophocles', see McClure 2012, who, like many, takes *S. El.* 784–6 as a reference to Clytemnestra's dream that she gave birth to a snake which, when it suckled at her breast, drew milk mixed with blood (*A. Ch.* 527–33). For blood-sucking as a common metaphor for ill-treatment, see Finglass (2007) ad loc.

43 — See McAuley 2016, 28–53.

nudaque deiecto cortice ligna patent.
 non odium facit hoc, sed spes inducta⁴⁴ rapinae:
 sustineant aliae poma, quarentur idem. (*Nux* 33–40)

I certainly do not envy her, though none is ever struck, the barren one who must be admired for her foliage alone. Look at all those unblemished trunks in a row who have no reason to be struck. But savage wounds harm me, my branches are mutilated, and my wood lies exposed, naked, with its bark pulled down. Hatred does not do this, but hope persuaded of plunder: let others bear fruit, they will make the same complaint.

The passage humanises the tree by emphasising the inhumanity of the violent acts wrought against her. The verb *mutilare* tends to render its agent barbaric and, ultimately, animalistic through his attempts to dehumanise his victim. A pertinent example of its use may be found when the ‘savage tyrant’ (*ferus tyrannus*, *Ov. Met.* 6.549) Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue to stop her from revealing her rape, and the severed part is compared to the ‘tail of a mutilated female snake’ (*mutilatae cauda colubrae*, 559).⁴⁵ The fact that the nut tree describes herself as *nuda* further supports comparisons with a figure like Philomela. It could mean simply ‘leafless’ or ‘bare’ (cf. *Ov. Met.* 13.690–1), but the poem’s sustained analogy between trees and human women equally implies that stripping her bark has left the tree ‘naked’. In Ovid’s stories involving plant-women, metamorphosis into a plant is sometimes how a woman ‘escapes’ sexual violence, though it is in her tree form that Apollo finally caresses and kisses the unwilling Daphne (*Met.* 1.553–6) and although she now has the form of reeds, Syrinx is still made subject to Pan’s whims (*Met.* 1.705–12; cf. *Lotis* at *Met.* 9.346–8). The *Nux* takes these narratives further so that the walnut tree claims to have suffered sexual violence *as* a tree.⁴⁶

The nut tree’s violent treatment continues to be sexualised in her account of an assault by the farmer himself. I outlined above how lines 67–8 describe the nut tree giving birth with one eye on Myrrha’s painful labour in the *Metamorphoses*, but this passage is also part of a scene of sexualised violence. Prior to lines 66–70, the walnut tree has been describing at length how the farmer neglects her – an aspect of their

44 — I follow the most common reading in the MSS (*inducta*) rather than *illustra*, the preferred reading of Lenz 1956; see Wartena 1928, ad loc.

45 — Telesphorus is murdered and mutilated (*cum oris detruncati mutilatique deformitas humanam faciem perdidisset*) by king Lysimachus, after being locked up in a cage *velut novum aliquod animal et invisitatum* at Sen. *de Ira* 17.3. Seneca emphasises the inhumanity of such kings. See, too, *trunca geras saevo mutilatis partibus ense* (*Ov. Ibis* 547).

46 — For *nudus* and sexual violence: after being raped by Jupiter, Callisto is stripped by her comrades: ‘while she hesitated her garment was taken off, and once it was removed her crime was revealed along with her naked body’ (*dubitanti vestis adempta est, / qua posita nudo patuit cum corpore crimen*, *Ov. Met.* 2.4612). After forcefully stripping Corinna, the Ovidian poet-amator says ‘I pressed her naked form right up to my body’ (*et nudum pressi corpus ad usque meum*, *Am.* 1.5.24).

relationship to which I shall return – but here she claims that he physically abuses her:

irriguae dabitur non mihi sulcus aquae.
 at cum maturas fesso nova cortice rimas
 nux agit, ad partes pertica saeva venit.
 pertica dat plenis inmitia volnera ramis,
 ne possim lapidum verbera sola queri. (*Nux* 66–70)

no furrow of flowing water will be given to me. But when the new nut drives ripe clefts in the split bark, the savage rod comes for its part. The rod gives harsh wounds to full branches so that I cannot complain of blows from stones alone.

The terms *sulcus* ('furrow') and *rima* ('clefts') can refer to female genitalia, while *pertica* ('rod') may signify the phallus.⁴⁷ The language of wounding (*volnera*, 69, 169) also occurs in sexual contexts. One might add verbs of striking and beating (*percutiantur*, 36; *verberor*, 148) to the list, though the evidence for *percutio* and *verbero* as sexual metaphors is slighter.⁴⁸ Taken altogether, these ambiguous terms sexualise the violence against the nut tree and suggest similarities between her experience and that of human women; most troublingly, the pain of childbirth and rape come together in one scene.

Interpreting this violence in human terms may seem perverse. Beating some plants during harvest did happen. Pliny refers to wheat being 'thrashed with rods' (*perticis flagellatur*, *Nat.* 18.298) to dehusk it, while advising against beating an olive tree to collect its fruit as this will diminish future harvests (15.11–12). No doubt ancient farmers beat their walnut trees to facilitate the nut harvest too – though I can find no evidence in texts beyond the fables, epigram, and *Nux*. Gardening websites today recommend the practice and it is surely effective.⁴⁹ In the world of the *Nux*, however, these acts of violence by human males are symptomatic of how they have instrumentalised the tree, only valuing her only in so far as she produces nuts for them. These attackers operate out of an understanding of plants as passive entities that exist solely for

47 — For these points, see Movich 2021. See Adams 1982 on *sulcus* at pp. 24, 28, 84, *rima* at 95–6, and 'sharp and pointed objects' under metaphors for the penis at 14–19. Movich 2021 also highlights the term *ictus* ('blow') in line 73. It described the thrusting action of penetration: see Adams 1982, 148–9 (cf. *verbera*). *cortex* appears in Auson. *Cent. Nupt.* 116, p. 217 as 'foreskin' (see Adams 1982, 74, 168) – this masculine term does not fit my argument that the *nux* is feminised but it may simply contribute to the sexualised atmosphere.

48 — Adams 1982, 152 for 'wounding' and 145–9 for verbs of 'striking' and 'beating'. On agricultural metaphors for violent human sexual activity, cf. *Catul.* 56.5–7 and 58.5 and see O'Hearn 2021b, 126 n. 56 and Weiner 2018.

49 — One British website, *The Gluttonous Gardener*, advises that fallen nuts can be collected from the ground but that 'Shaking branches or beating the tree will encourage the most obstinate nuts to fall'. (<https://www.glut.co.uk/plant-care-guides/the-walnut-tree-care-guide>).

human use (instrumentalism, see above). Using and abusing the tree, they seek to get the most nuts possible (*spes rapinae*, 39; 41–5, 97–100) and have little understanding of or interest in the pain they are causing. The *nux* is a witness to the capacity of plants to feel pain.⁵⁰ Having sustained significant damage from these assaults, she warns onlookers not to attribute her ‘crown naked of foliage’ (*foliis ... nuda cacumina*, 101) to the wind, heat, or hail, because the real culprits are her human male attackers, motivated by the desire to exploit her fertility. From an ecofeminist perspective, the sexualised violence perpetrated upon the walnut tree is symptomatic of an overall attitude to the nonhuman natural world that is analogous to an attitude towards human women. These attitudes cause harm to the nonhuman natural environment and human women alike. The nut tree seems to believe that the violence she suffers at the hands of humans is one with the ‘natural’ violence of childbirth.

Seeking protection in one man

Unsurprisingly, the walnut tree repeatedly reflects on ways to avoid pain. These revolve around controlling her fertility, death, and aging,⁵¹ as well as dropping her fruit without human interference, as might happen during a storm (163). The thought that she might deliberately shake her offspring from her branches (164) is the source of her famous comparison with the Pontic beaver, who, by popular belief, bite off their own testicles when in danger (165–6). Other sources for this belief such as fable 118 (see above) and Pliny the Elder state that the source of danger is the human hunter and that the beaver, cognisant of what the man seeks, detaches his testicles to preserve his life.⁵² Among other uses, beaver testicles were believed to be effective in treating female reproductive disorders.⁵³ Even if we disregard this more tenuous connection between the nut tree’s fertility and human female reproduction, the comparison between nut tree and beaver supports a wider conceptual alignment in the poem between the experiences of plants, animals, marginalised human males, and human women: all are at

50 — Scientific studies are starting to find that while plants do not have a central nervous system, they do use chemical, visual, electrical, and sonic signals to communicate pain and danger. See, e.g., Wohlleben 2016, 6–13.

51 — I think the protection afforded by winter (*Nux* 127–32) relies on the conception of aging as a phenomenon like the seasons so that ‘winter’ signifies postmenopausal ‘old age’: see, e.g., D.L. 8.10 and *Ov. Met.* 15.199–213. When Graeco-Roman authors reflect on female aging, they comment more often on the loss of beauty than fertility (see *Ov. Met.* 15.232–3). See O’Hearn 2021b, 114 for other sources, but all centre on male aging.

52 — *Phaed. Ap. Per.* 30; *Apul. Met.* 1.9; *Plin. Nat.* 8.109; *Ael. NA* 6.34. See Villani 2014, 99–102.

53 — E.g., *Hp. De Mul. Ster.* 19 and *De Sup.* 14; *Plin. Nat.* 32.27–31. Devecka (2013) examines Rome’s luxury trade in beaver testicles and postulates from modern examples that it would have exposed beavers to over-hunting (p. 90). It is a passing comment on his part, but I disagree with his characterisation of the *nux* as male (p. 89).

risk of violence, frequently at the hands of a more powerful human male.⁵⁴

Beyond these strategies, a larger theme develops on the protection that the farmer could afford her. The tree begins her complaint by recalling that she gives this man – ‘her own cultivator’ (*cultori ... suo*, 6) – fruit every year. He is criticised throughout. He has done nothing to help her beyond giving her a patch of earth to stand in (*inveniat, dederit quid mihi praeter humum*, 58), and even this is a ‘despised field’ (*contempto...in agro*, 59) and ‘almost a public road’ (*publica paene via*, 60; cf. 123–6). He does none of the necessary tasks to cultivate her. He fails to prune her, to turn the soil to soften it and break it up, or to water her (63–6), and yet, as soon as her nuts are ready, she is beaten to release them, and the harvest is collected and stored by his wife, a ‘thrifty farmwife’ (*parca colona*, 72) whose rustic simplicity and fertility makes her something of an avatar for the walnut-tree.⁵⁵ Despite his mistreatment, the nut tree fantasises about the benefits of a closer relationship with him:

felix, secreto quae nata est arbor in arvo
 et soli domino ferre tributa potest.
 non hominum strepitus audit, non illa rotarum,
 non a vicina pulverulenta via est. 90
 illa suo, quaecunque tulit, dare dona colono
 et plenos fructus adnumerare potest.
 at mihi maturos nunquam liet edere fetus,
 ante diemque meae decutiuntur opes. (*Nux* 87–94)

Happy the tree who is born in a secluded field and can bring tribute to her master alone. She does not hear the noise of people nor that of wheels; she is not covered in dust from the neighbouring road. She can give gifts, whatever she bears, to her farmer (cf. *cultori ... suo*, 6) and count out the full number of her fruits. But I am not allowed to bring forth mature young, and my fruits are struck down before their time.⁵⁶

The *Nux*'s private, productive patch of earth redevelops the vegetal portrait of female sexuality in Catullus' wedding hymn, poem 62, a

54 — E.g., birds cannot nest in the tree because of the stones (149–50); the *nux* compares her inability to escape blows to a man in the arena and a sacrificial calf, both of whom must accept the violence they see coming (ll. 167–74). It is not clear if the man is a gladiator or someone (perhaps a slave) condemned to death: see Pulbrook 1985, ad loc., Courtney 1988, 277–8, and Wartena 1928, ad loc. Either way, both share a marginalised status: they are human males, but, like the feminine, animal, and plant, they are at the mercy of free men with status and power, the figures aligned with rationality, culture, etc., whom Plumwood 1993, 22–23 calls the ‘Master’.

55 — The farmer and *colona* appear to have at least one son, the boy (*puer*, 73) who plays with nuts (73–86); others are mentioned playing at 77 (*alter*) and 79 (*est etiam ... qui*). Cf. Ovid's ‘thrifty farmwife with her hard husband’ (*cum duro parca colona viro*, *Fast.* 4.692) who have a small farm in Carseoli. Their son creates the cruel custom of setting alight a fox to honour Ceres.

56 — For *opes* as *fructus*, Ganzhenmuller and Wartena compare *Ov. Med.* 6 and *Ars* 2.652.

singing contest between young men and women. The women sing that a *virgo* is

ut flos in saeptis secretus nascitur hortis,
ignotus pecori, nullo convulsus aratro,
quem mulcent aurae, firmat sol, educat imber... (Catul. 62.39–41)

like a hidden flower, born in a walled garden, unknown to the flock,
wrenched out by no plough, which the breezes caress, the sun
strengthens, the rain raises...

Flower and *virgo* are pleasing and valued because they are protected from the stresses of cultivation by a proprietary boundary (though the elements, rather than the hand of man, care for them). The young men counter their argument by redefining the idea of property and proposing an ethic of care unlike the brute force of the plough and hoof or tooth of the flock. They compare the *virgo* to a vine that cannot reach its full potential and cannot raise healthy fruit (*numquam mitem educat uvam*, 50) if left ‘without a mate’ (*vidua*, 49); ‘joined to its husband elm’, it receives support from its spouse and care from the farmer (*at si forte eadem est ulmo coniuncta marito, / multi illam agricolae, multi coluere iuveni*, 54–5).⁵⁷ Many ripe fruits surely follow. The nut tree’s desire for seclusion and protection from violence speaks to the fears of the young women, while her desire to produce for her farmer echoes the song of the young men. She wants safety from violence *and* she wants to be fertile. She is in this respect quite unlike the young women who wish to stay beautiful but unproductive *virgines*. Despite her attempts at birth control, the walnut tree distances herself from the beautiful to promote fertility as a moral good, thereby positioning herself on the side of traditional mores. She contends that her fertility is best supported, best brought to fruition, within the confines of a relationship with one man, her *dominus*, a word repeated at lines 100, 123, and obliquely at 9 (*domini memores sertis ornare solebant*). The term certainly underscores how the tree perceives herself as property; it was also a thoroughly appropriate one for a woman to use of her husband.⁵⁸

The concept of marriage as a wall around female sexuality (and

57 — I follow Thomson’s 1997 text but accept the reading of MS V *marito*: see Corbeil 2015, 90–2. Catullus also compares a bride to a hyacinth in the ‘little garden of a rich master’ (*divitis domini hortulo*, Catul. 61.88); Wasdin (2018, 90) nicely suggests that the imagery of protection is intended to soothe the bride’s anxieties as she prepares to leave her parents’ home for that of her husband. On the reluctance of the virgins to transition to adulthood, see Stehle 1977.

58 — See, e.g., Catul. 61.87–9, and n. 57 above; cf. Petr. 67.9 and Apul. *Met.* 6.1. For *domine/domina* in epitaphs and wills during the Principate, see CIL 6, 11252 where the deceased Auguria addresses her still living spouse as ‘master husband, Oppius’ (*domine Oppi marite*, line 15), and CIL 6, 11458; *Dig.* 32.41 pr. and 24.1.57; and see Treggiari 1991, 373, 414 for discussion. For more on *domine/domina*, see Dickey 2002, 77–99. For *dominus* in erotic contexts: Ov. *Ars* 1.314, *Met.* 9.466, and *Am.* 3.7.11.

agricultural fertility) emerges again when the nut tree responds to a hypothetical critic, who brushes aside her grievances with the thought that 'what borders on public places, it is ok to pluck: the road has this law' (*'quae publica tangunt, / carpere concessum est: hoc via iuris habet'*, 133–4). By placing the nut tree on the public road, her imagined interlocutor is making a statement about her sexual availability. The motif had a long history in discourse about sexuality. A classic example comes from Plautus' *Curculio* when the slave Palinurus counsels his master Phaedromos to beware falling in love with a married woman by telling him to keep to the public road (*publica ... via*, 35). By staying on *publica via*, a man can avoid cutting a path through an enclosed paddock (*ne per fundum saeptum facias semitam*, 36). Accessing another man's field and harvesting his crops were metaphors for adultery. Ovid employs this language in epistle 20, for example, where Acontius stakes his claim to Cydippe. He had tricked her into swearing by oath that she would marry him, but her father had previously betrothed her to another. Acontius asks of his rival,

quis tibi permisit nostras praecerpere messes?
 ad sepem alterius quis tibi fecit iter?
 iste sinus meus est... (Ov. *Ep.* 20.143–8)⁵⁹

Who gave you permission to gather my crops before me? Who made a passage for you through another man's fence? That lap is mine...

Ovid's deployment of legal language and concepts in *Heroides* 20 and 21 – and beyond – is now a critical commonplace.⁶⁰ Hollis (1994) has argued that Acontius is citing Roman property law to deny his rival the right to harvest crops on Acontius' land as well as any means of access to the site, thereby claiming sole ownership and enjoyment of Cydippe. As the example from Plautus shows, metaphors likening ownership of a woman to ownership of land and its crops had long been available, but they were especially pointed at a time when marriage laws were changing. Recent readings of Ovid's epistles 20 and 21 have highlighted how Acontius assumes that Cydippe has some say in choosing her husband, as though Augustan marriage law applied to their situation. Considered under Augustus' *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE), Cydippe's father would not be able to force his daughter to marry someone without her

59 — On the difficulties of line 144, see Hollis 1994 and Kenney 1996, ad loc (whose text I follow). I am sympathetic to Hollis' *saeptum* or Damsté's *segetem* in place of *sepem*, but any of these readings underscore that the *Nux* author was working within a tradition that conflated ownership of women with ownership of land and crops.

60 — See Kenney 1969 and 1970; Hollis 1994; and Ziogas 2021, 142–99, and scholarship cited therein. For examples of 'ploughing someone else's field', see Thgn. 581–82 and Pl. *As.* 874. Cf. Ov. *Ars* 3.562: *cingenda est altis sepibus ista seges*.

consent and he could not stop her marrying Acontius.⁶¹

The nut tree likewise situates her story within a specific historical moment by conflating her desire for protection through marriage with a much larger conception of a civilised order presided over by ‘Caesar’, who legitimises and protects boundaries marking ownership in lines 135–46. As she responds to her critic, she continues to deploy the language of ownership, theft, and trespass that had long doubled as a set of terms wielded in the control of female sexuality,

si licet hoc, oleas destringite, caedite messes,	135
improbe, vicinum carpe, viator, holus.	
intret et urbanas eadem petulantia portas,	
sitque tuis muris, Romule, iuris idem:	
quilibet argentum prima de fronte tabernae	
tollat et ad gemmas quilibet alter eat.	140
auferat hic aurum, peregrinos ille lapillos	
et, quascunque potest tangere, tollat opes.	
sed neque tolluntur nec, dum regit omnia Caesar,	
incolumis tanto praeside raptor erit.	
at non ille deus pacem intra moenia finit:	145
auxilium toto spargit in orbe suum.	

If this is allowed, strip the olives, cut the crops; pluck your neighbour’s vegetables, shameless wayfarer. Let this temerity enter the city’s gates, let this same law apply to your walls, Romulus: let anyone lift the silver from the shop-front and let any other go for the gemstones. Let this one carry off gold, that one foreign jewels and whatever wealth he can touch. But they are not pilfered nor, while Caesar rules all, will a thief be safe under so great a protector. And that god does not limit his peace to inside the walls: he spreads his aid over the entire globe.

As commentators such as Wartena and Pulbrook have emphasised, the passage refers to Augustus, who sought to tackle problems relating to public order, including robbery, according to Suetonius (*Aug.* 32), and who was seen to pursue a ‘global’ empire without limit (*Verg. A.* 1.279, 6.791–805; *Ov. Tr.* 2.231–2; *Res Gest.* pr. 1f. *rerum gestarum divi Augusti, quibus orbem terrarum imperio populi Rom(ani) subiecit*). Indeed, Ovid’s praise of Augustus in *Fasti* 2.126–44 traverses similar conceptual territory. Romulus is told to yield to Augustus because this man has managed to achieve far greater things: ‘this man makes your walls great by protecting them; you allowed Remus to leap across them’ (*facit hic tua magna tuendo / moenia, tu dederas transsilienda Remo*, 133–4), Ovid contends, highlighting – like the *Nux* author – Augustus’ guardianship of boundaries. Similarly, too, Ovid emphasises the broad swathes of earth that Augustus holds under his sway: ‘with him as leader, either side of the sun is Roman’ (*hoc duce Romanum est solis utrumque latus*, *Fast.* 2.136) and ‘whatever is under

61— For these points, particularly in relation to *Ov. Ep.* 20.79–90, see Ziogas 2021, 149.

high Jove, Caesar holds' (*quodcumque est alto sub Iove, Caesar habet*, 138). This power supports not only the maintenance of public order ('the laws flourish under Caesar': *florent sub Caesare leges*, 141) but also the control of female sexuality. Ovid compares the efforts of Romulus and Augustus in this last sphere with the uncompromising 'you rape; as leader, this man orders married women to be pure' (*tu rapis, hic castas duce se inbet esse maritas*, 139).⁶²

Like *Heroides* 20 and 21 and *Fasti* 2.139, the *Nux* speaks to Augustan attempts to reform marriage and reproduction. The *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE) and *Lex Papia Poppaea* (9 CE) aimed to promote being married and having the 'right' number of legitimate, living children. The laws contained provisions regarding the legitimacy of heirs and promoted reproduction by penalising the childless and establishing a system of privileges and rewards for men and women with children. For example, certain civil obligations, like tutelage, could be avoided if a man in Rome had three living children (a man in Italy had to have four living children; in the provinces, five); citizen women who fulfilled their reproductive obligations by having at least three children would be freed from tutelage, and freedwomen could access the same right after having four children.⁶³ The *nux* wishes she were like the tree who is 'able to count out the full number of [her] fruits' (*et plenos fructus adnumerare potest*, 92).⁶⁴ Her wish echoes the aims of these laws by suggesting that the number of mature offspring someone has is important and that this healthy brood is only legitimate when a mother enjoys the protection of one man, her *dominus*.

But being a *dominus* in ancient Rome could extend to power of life or death over the person owned. Slaves could be abused and even killed with relative impunity, and at some points in Roman history citizen wives may have been more vulnerable to violence too.⁶⁵ It was believed that Romulus enacted strict marriage laws that allowed husbands to kill their wives for adultery or even wine-drinking (considered a prelude to promiscuity).⁶⁶ Augustus' *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE) and *Lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* (16 BCE) brought punishment for adultery into the public sphere; although it was still possible for a woman to be

62 — It has not gone undetected that the accusative-and-infinitive construction may read 'orders pure women to be married' in reference to Augustus' marriage to Livia when she was still pregnant with her first husband's baby. See Robinson 2011, ad loc. on Augustus and Romulus as 'wife-snatchers'. See Dolansky 2016 on a broader motif of rape throughout *Fasti* 2, which serves to critique Augustus' moral legislation.

63 — See Dixon 1988, 71–103, Gardner 1986, and e.g., Tac. *Ann.* 2.51; Gel. 2.15.

64 — The *OLD* lists *Nux*. 92 as an example of its first meaning for *adnumerare*, 'to tell out (a sum of money, etc.), pay out', but I see no reason not to put the emphasis on counting (s.v. 2).

65 — On social status as a critical factor determining women's experience of domestic violence, see Witzke 2016, 260–71; cf. Dossey 2008, whose focus is Late Antiquity, including Christian sources. For literary depictions of intimate partner violence from an ecofeminist perspective, see Cowan (forthcoming).

66 — See D. H. 2.25.6–7 and V. Max. 6.3.9; Plin. *Nat.* 14.89 mentions a man who killed his wife for drinking and was acquitted by Romulus.

killed for adultery, the strict circumstances under which this punishment could be carried out (by her father, not her husband) made it highly unlikely. The picture is less clear when it comes to domestic violence. Husbands had no legal right to beat their wives and physical abuse seems to have been frowned upon. Cato the Elder apparently disapproved of such behaviour (Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 20.2), though this report must be balanced against his support for Romulus' legal protections of husbands who killed their adulterous or wine-loving wives (Gel. 10.23). Ill treatment (*mala tractatio*) could lead to divorce (Quint. *Inst.* 7.4.11; 7.8.2; Sen. *de Ira.* 3.5.4).⁶⁷ A female citizen with money and connections had legal avenues to escape a violent marriage and could look to protection from her birth family. Nevertheless, when domestic violence happened, as it most certainly did, it was behind closed doors. The *nux* dreams of a closer, quasi-marital relationship with a man who has shown no care for her. Planted on the public margins of the farm, the violence against her is manifest – she can easily draw attention to the damage done by stone, rod, or neglect. Brought within the confines of the farm – like a woman in her marital home – her mistreatment and any complaints about it might go unnoticed. It raises the disquieting thought that the protection of one man might in fact be no protection at all.

Conclusion

A woman, a spaniel and a walnut tree,
The more they're beaten the better still they be.

This ugly proverb emerged in the early modern period in response to the Aesopic tradition but, by bringing together human females, nonhuman animals, and plants as beings who should all be subjected to violence because of their 'inferiority', it speaks directly to the concerns of the *Nux*.⁶⁸ This article has made those concerns difficult to ignore. It has demonstrated that the walnut tree is characterised as female and analogous to a Roman woman. Critical Ecofeminism allows us to perceive and to take seriously their shared experiences of pain, and it permits us to lay bare the ideology underlying the violence that caused a great portion of this pain. Human males, the *domini* (whether they owned the farm or were mere passers-by), justified violence against these female beings because of their 'natural' fertility. These masters employed an unspoken logic of domination representative of a wider cultural attitude to plants and women as beings who lacked rationality, who were aligned with nature, and therefore needed to be managed.

⁶⁷ — However, as Treggiari (1991, 430–1) notices, the examples of ill treatment given by the rhetoricians rarely seem to involve physical abuse.

⁶⁸ — On the proverb, see McGowan 2020, 266 n. 17 and 271–3.

And yet, the poet has knowingly depicted this human–plant relationship in the shadow of the ambiguous cultural status of the walnut tree, whereby it was celebrated as the producer of a valued domestic product but recognised as a potential threat on the farm. Although the *nux* admits to bringing harm to other trees, it is only indirectly. Stones thrown at her have a way of hitting her neighbours (47–59). She mentions the idea that she might harm crops as though it were a mere nasty rumour: ‘Lest I harm crops – since I am said to harm crops – / the bottom of the estate holds me at the furthest edge’ (*me sata ne laedam, quoniam et sata laedere dicor, / imus in extremo margine fundus habet*, 61–2). If she were brought in from the margins, the truth is that her mere presence might cause other plants to wither. A Roman reader, learning that the walnut tree was directing all her energy into her foliage, would likely fear the noxious effects of her ‘sprawling shade’. Her desired spouse is already married. The walnut tree’s litany of complaints adds up to an unreliable narrator.

There is no indication either that the poem seeks to change the world it depicts. The walnut-tree’s complaints of injustice, when viewed from the perspective of fable, are useless – fable often depicts a world in which the power of the strong to exercise dominance over the weak is natural and just. Her claim that she would be safe from harm if she were beautiful is patently untrue and fails to recognise the manifold ways that women and trees can suffer when they are regarded as inferior objects of utility, whether that usefulness resides in beauty or fertility. One need only consider the fate of Daphne in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Her wish for *perpetua virginitas* (*Met.* 1.486–7) is granted, but it does not save her from losing her autonomy. As the narrator comments, ‘that elegance of yours stopped you from being what you wanted, and your beauty fought against your vow’ (*te decor iste quod optas / esse vetat, votoque tuo tua forma repugnat*, 488–89). When Apollo pursues her, her fear only adds to her allure (527–30; esp. *aucta fuga forma est*, 530). Daphne desperately prays to her father for help, begging him to ‘destroy through transformation this beauty by which I have pleased too much’ (*qua nimium placui, mutando perde figuram*, 447). Apollo might not rape Daphne in the end, but he still touches her without her consent. He still makes use of her beauty to adorn his power when she is transformed into a laurel tree and ‘only her splendour’ and her gender ‘remains in her’ (*remanet nitor unus in illa*, 551).⁶⁹

The fact that the walnut-tree denies the suffering of her fellow tree–women and seeks to establish herself as more worthy than them through her fertility reveals something more insidious about her characterisation. She approves of the hierarchical status quo despite her dissatisfaction with her lot. This is a tree who wants to be made subject to the farmer’s

69 — On Daphne’s gender and *illa / banc* (552–3), see Sharrock 2020, para. 8.

attentions to increase her yield. As an analogue for the Roman woman, the *nux* yearns for the walls of the married *domus* and the opportunity to meet the quota of children dictated for her by Augustan law. Although she gives expression to female experiences of pain and violence relating to pregnancy, childbirth, and marriage, she speaks with the voice of the master. She jealously criticises the honours given to the beautiful, who do not play the reproductive roles proscribed to them, and gatekeeps what it is to be good tree–woman. Her fundamental complaint is that she has not been allowed to participate as fully as she would like in the system. Her internalised misogyny is emblematic of the conservatism of the poem.

We may nonetheless find some comfort in the undeniable agency of a tree who defiantly complains about the ill-treatment doled out to her, and who claims rationality for herself, if not for her neighbouring trees. The walnut tree explains that trees near her sometimes have broken twigs and branches but that they did not incur this damage through their own deeds. Their proximity to her puts them in danger as the stones that hit her rebound to hit them too. These trees would curse her shade ‘if they were wise and words followed understanding’ (*si sapiant et mentem verba sequantur*, 53). Unlike these trees suffering in silence, the *nux* resists that feature of the master’s logic which would exclude her from rational thought and a voice with which to express it. She is a rational actor, who is able to understand the causes of her pain and complain about her attackers. She demands our attention, not because she was once a young human woman and is worthy of consideration for that reason, but because she is a tree from whom humans have derived benefits: she claims a relationship of mutual obligations. Rather than mere jealousy, her restriction of her own fertility in preference for the more voluminous shade that would offer protection may be seen as a rational response to violence and neglect and thus a mark of resilience and strength. This is a penetrating psychological portrait of a complex agent, and it speaks to our present need to better understand the world beyond our carefully cultivated human boundaries.⁷⁰

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70 — I thank Jacqueline Fabre-Serris and Judith Hallett for their invitation to submit to *Eugesta*. I am indebted to Bob Cowan and Phillip Dupesovski for several fruitful conversations about ecofeminism and the *Nux* during our panel, Ecofeminism and Classics, at the Australasian Society for Classical Studies conference in February 2022 and subsequently when I gave a version of this paper for the CAH/CCANESA Research Seminar Series at the University of Sydney in September 2022. Many thanks, too, to the anonymous readers for *Eugesta* whose feedback helped me to improve the final version.

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