Ancient Botany in Text and Practice I

From the agricultural manual of Columella to the encyclopedia of Pliny, from Ovid's poems to Linear B tablets, ancient references to the world of plants abound. While some texts were specifically about botany and plant cultivation, others drew upon the plant world as a source of metaphors and analogies. Archaeological evidence increasingly augments our knowledge about botanical practices and plant uses in the Classical world, and iconographic studies add to this wealth of data. This panel will explore the discourse of botanical language in ancient texts, as well as the broader significance of certain key plants. Two panels of four speakers in each are proposed. The first panel engages with botanical symbolism in ancient literature, surveying anthropomorphic and metonymic incarnations of botany, which represent ancient conceptions of motherhood, gender, identity and imperialism. The second panel predominantly focuses on Pliny's discourses on arboriculture, agronomy and floriculture, as well as exploring the semiotic and somatic potency of particular plants.

Laurence Totelin (Cardiff): Mother and Nurse Plants in Roman Literature

Anthropomorphism is omnipresent in ancient botanical and agricultural texts. The Greeks and Romans attempted to make sense of plants by comparing them to animals, and in particular to humans – analogy is one of the most prominent forms of scientific thought in antiquity. However, beside technical anthropomorphic descriptions of plants and their life cycle, they often hide messages about human society and mores. This is particularly true in the writings of Pliny the Elder and Columella. Here, I will focus on descriptions of filial love (or absence thereof) in technical texts written in the first and second centuries of the Roman Empire (both in Latin and in Greek). I will analyse texts depicting the relationship between mother and child plants. We will encounter loving mothers and overbearing ones with tendencies to infanticide, as well as loving nurses who take care of infants who would otherwise die. Behind these plant descriptions, we will find discourses about infant care, and in particular infant feeding - the sempiternal debate over maternal breastfeeding. I will compare these botanical discourses to contemporary medical ones, which interestingly make use of botanical metaphors.

Miriam Bay (Birmingham): Botanical Bodies: Ovid's Gendered Floriculture

In *Fasti* book 5, Ovid recounts his interview with flirtatious goddess Flora, her body exuding fragrant roses as she describes her deification as *mater florum* by Zephyrus, and the origins of her *Floralia* festival. With playful insouciance Flora declares she

engendered Juno's immaculate conception of Mars by a flower unique to her gardens, and claims the victims of tragic deaths, Hyacinthus, Narcissus, Crocus, Attis and Adonis, owe her their memorialising floral metamorphoses. Engaging with Ovid's gendered approach to botany within this passage of *Fasti* and its related episodes in *Metamorphoses*, this paper will contrast Flora's divine embodiment with the floral incarnations of the metamorphosed youths. It will investigate how the properties of the flowers borne from their blood - hyacinth, narcissus, saffron crocus, violet and anemone - analogise the youths' ephebic masculinity and ephemeral sexuality. The implications of these exclusively male floral metamorphoses, and Juno's botanical insemination, on Ovid's anthropomorphic portrayal of plants will also be explored. It will define how Flora's femininity, expressed through the floral manifestations of her generative body, reflects conceptions of female sensuality, sexuality and identity. This paper traces the Ovidian discourse between properties of floriculture and masculine and feminine identities, offering a gendered reading of botanical aetiologies.

Peter Kelly (Galway): Transforming into Trees: Ovid's Heliades between Metamorphosis and Hybridity

This paper will discuss Ovid's depiction of the transformation of the Heliades into poplar trees in the *Metamorphoses*. It will analyze how Ovid uses tree transformation to problematize conceptions of identity and in particular dualistic notions of a mind-body divide. By focusing on how the metamorphosis of the Heliades is represented at once as being a form of encasement and transformation, this paper will also consider how to define metamorphosis versus hybridity. It will also look at how the sisters' transformation into trees results from the failure to transition the rites of mourning, following the death of their brother Phaethon. It will discuss how the tree may be read as a symbol for this liminal state. By considering how the tree becomes a corporeal manifestation of the sisters' psychological

trauma, it will further discuss the confounding and inversion of mind-body divides. Finally it will analyze how the tears and cries which the sisters emit after their transformation further portray the fracturing and transition of borders, as well as indicating the survival and persistence of a psychological residue in the post-metamorphosis state.

Daniel Bertoni (Miami): Growing Ivy in Babylon: A Botanical Power Play

Harpalus, Alexander's rogue of a boyhood friend, is most famous for absconding from Babylon with the contents of the treasury. During his caretakership of the city, he worked to grow exotic plants, a tradition rooted in Mesopotamian kingship. One attempt, Theophrastus reports (*HP* 4.4.1), was a significant failure: ivy withered in the foreign environment. The plant serves metonymically for Dionysus and his travels, and its status as a Greek plant dying in foreign climes gives symbolic importance for Harpalus' future career. Indeed, the context of the anecdote is a corresponding success with ivy: Dionysus' ivy on Mt. Meros gives Alexander a crown. This story's literary reception displays ivy's entwining of science, mythology, and cultural behavior. Pliny (*NH* 16.144), citing Theophrastus, embellishes the connection between Alexander's conquest and the journeys of Dionysus. An extended version is found in Plutarch's *Table-talk* 3.2, where the imbibers question whether ivy (as used in garlands) is a hot or a cold plant. The arguments extrapolate from Theophrastus' terse account and justify botanically the plant's death in the fiery soil of Babylon. This biological understanding of the ideal relationship between a plant and its environment shows how scientific botany rationalizes cultural activities and imperial ambition.

Ancient Botany in Text and Practice II

Andrew Fox (Nottingham): *Cupressus advena*: Pliny and the Naturalisation of Foreign Trees

Pliny the Elder's moral perspective on the use of foreign goods is well chronicled, and foreign imports meet Pliny's approval only when they generate *utilitas* for the state, a consistent criterion throughout the *Natural History*. However, Pliny's aversion to imports is not a frequent component of his treatment of trees. In a list of timbers resistant to rot and age, adapting

Theophrastus' similar list, the timber of native and foreign trees are equally extolled. Among the latter variety is the timber of the cypress (*cupressus*), which is further praised for not cracking spontaneously and its durability. However, the tree is attacked by Pliny, whose diatribe opens with *cupressus advena*, and contradicts his endorsement of the timber's durability. Aspects of Pliny's character demonstrated in the composition of the *Natural History* coalesce in this passage: his dispassionate inventory; his desire for a culturally unified empire; and his reverence for the *anima* in all living things. By answering questions of how Pliny's character is seen in his treatment of the tree as a foreign import compared to his regard for its status as timber, and through Pliny's treatment of his sources, this paper will explore the expression of Rome's relationship with the foreign.

Aude Doody (Dublin) 'And Italy shines blessed with bright white wheat': Competition in Pliny the Elder's Botany

In Book 18 of the *Natural History*, Pliny tells us that Italian wheat is the best wheat. He then tells us the other good regions for wheat, setting them in hierarchical order. In the course of this careful ranking of wheat types, Pliny gives us the opinions of 'Greek writers from the time of Alexander the Great', remarking caustically on their surprising ignorance of the supremacy of Italy in wheat production; his evidence that these Greeks should have known better is a line he translates into Latin from Sophocles' *Triptolemus*. This odd critique of Greek sources for Roman agriculture will be the starting point for a discussion of what counts as 'the best' in Pliny's treatment of plants: what are his criteria and where does his evidence come from? Pliny's insistence that Italian wheat is the best wheat is not surprising, given his pro-Roman chauvinism, but the ways in which he tries to prove it expose patterns of scholarship and source criticism that underpin his highly influential treatment of botany in the *Natural History*.

Jane Draycott (Trinity Saint David): The Properties of Plants used for Chaplets, Garlands and Wreaths and their Supposed Significance

According to the twenty-first book of Pliny the Elder's Natural History, while roses from Campania were initially favoured in the creation of chaplets, garlands and wreaths, more exotic flora 'fetched from India and beyond' came to be preferred, and eventually even these were replaced by imitations made

from multi-coloured silks soaked in perfumes, leading Pliny to proclaim ‘Such is the latest form taken by the luxury of our women!’ (21.8.11). At first glance, Pliny's motivation for criticising the evolution of chaplets from flowers to fabric seems straightforward: he despises not only the luxuria, but also the artifice involved. However, in this particular instance his criticisms were entirely justified: as far as the Romans were concerned, chaplets were not simply decorative but were thought to serve a range of practical purposes that varied considerably according to the plants used in their creation. This paper will survey the Roman beliefs regarding the properties of certain plants, examine the extent to which the purpose of the chaplet was to deliberately harness them, and explore what were believed to be the consequences of using chaplets in this way.

Jo Day (University College Dublin): Irises in Antiquity

From death rituals to healing, perfumes played essential roles in many facets of life in the ancient Mediterranean. The majority of the scents were derived from botanicals, with a few key plants especially renowned for their fragrance. One such plant was the iris, still used in perfume production today as orris oil. This paper traces the use of iris from the Bronze Age into Classical and Roman times, using a combination of archaeological and textual evidence, including Theophrastus, Pliny, and Dioscorides. Where were the best irises thought to grow, and was iris perfume really an important element in the Corinthian economy? How was fragrance extracted from the plant? What other uses beyond perfume did it have? Using iris perfume as a starting point, the link between aroma and social status will also be considered in the light of methodologies derived from sensory anthropology.