

VIRGIL'S CUCUMBER AGAIN: COLUMELLA 10.378–92

Rebecca Armstrong has convincingly shown that the words *tortusque per herbam | cresceret in uentrem cucumis* (Virg. *G.* 4.121–2) lead the reader of *Georgics* 4 to expect a snake, only to be surprised by the bathetic climax which reveals it to be a cucumber.¹ This interpretation gains substantial support from an earlier reader, who signalled his apprehension of Virgil's suggestion by means of imitation. Columella, in his 'fifth *Georgic*' on horticulture, supplies the gap left for later authors by the invitation in the time-pressed Virgil's *praeteritio*.² This is his description of the gourd and the cucumber (10.378–80, 389–92):

tum modo dependens trichilis, modo more chelydri
sole sub aestiuo gelidas per graminis umbras
intortus cucumis praegasque cucurbita serpit ...
... liuidus at cucumis, grauida qui nascitur aluo
hirtus et ut coluber nodoso gramine tectus
uentre cubat flexo semper collectus in orbem,
noxius exacuit morbos aestatis iniquae.

As Armstrong has suggested with respect to the Virgilian passage, so commentators have seen here in Columella an allusion to the serpentine name of the *cucumis anguineus*.³ Yet, regardless or even because of this shared allusion, it is clear that Columella is referring to the Virgilian passage and, by explicitly comparing the cucumber to two different snakes, is signalling his apprehension of the latter's strategy of suggesting but suppressing mention of a snake.⁴ He marks the allusion to Virgil's cucumber by recalling almost every word in the *Georgics* passage, either by verbal echo (*tortus* ~ *intortus*, *uentrem* ~ *uentre*) or by the use of synonyms and periphrases (*tortus* ~ *flexo*,⁵ *per herbam* ~ *per graminis umbras*), while the notion of *cresceret* is less

¹ R. Armstrong, 'Virgil's cucumber: *Georgics* 4.121–2', *CQ* 58 (2008), 366–8.

² Virg. *G.* 4.147–8, explicitly invoked at Col. 10.pr.3, 1–5. Columella 'appointed himself Virgil's heir and stepped into a breach that did not really exist'. (E. Gowers, 'Vegetable love: Virgil, Columella, and garden poetry', *Ramus* 29 [2000], 127–48, at 127). The most sympathetic and stimulating discussions of Col. 10 are Gowers, J. Henderson, 'Columella's living hedge: the Roman gardening book', *JRS* 92 (2002), 110–33, V.E. Pagán, *Rome and the Literature of Gardens* (London, 2006), 19–36, and S. Diederich, *Römische Agrarhandbücher zwischen Fachwissenschaft, Literatur und Ideologie* (Berlin, 2007), 227–58.

³ Armstrong (n. 1), 367. F. Bolderer (ed.), *L. Iuni Moderati Columellae Rei Rusticae Liber decimus (Carmen De Cultu Hortorum)* (Pisa, 1996), 328, ad 10.378, who adds that the amphibious *chelydrus* is an effective parallel for the water-loving cucumber. The pun may also lie behind Martial's intriguing connection of reptile and vegetable in describing a farm so tiny that a cucumber cannot lie straight nor a whole snake fit in it (11.18.10–11).

⁴ Henderson's ludic translation of this passage suggests, with its suspenseful dots, exactly the sort of bathetic surprise which Armstrong finds in Virgil: 'Here, hanging in an outhouse, or there, like some watersnake, | out in the summer sun, all through the cool shade of the grass, | there creeps ... cucumber', J. Henderson, *The Roman Book of Gardening* (London, 2004), 63. Of course Columella, unlike Virgil, has already made explicit that whatever he is describing is *like*, and hence is itself *not* a snake, but Henderson brings out the misdirection which Columella replicates from – and annotates in – *Georgics* 4.

⁵ Columella's *flexo* also echoes *flexi* ... *uimen acanthi* in Virgil's next line at *G.* 4.123. It is notable that Columella swaps the epithets by referring to *tortos* ... *acanthos* earlier at 10.241, the allusion marked by an Alexandrian footnote since the artichoke *imitatur* the acanthus. Gowers

directly evoked by the conventional image of the pregnant gourd and the boldly paradoxical one of the cucumber being born from its own laden womb.⁶ The extreme brevity of the similes (*more chelydri, ut coluber*) underlines the close parallelism between snake and cucumber, since precisely the same language can be used of both with no need for differentiation between tenor and vehicle. In fact, one might go further and argue that the language is rather more appropriate to the snakes than to the cucumber. This would constitute an inversion of what Oliver Lyne has termed 'trespass', so that here words like *serpit*, *uentre* and *cubat* stray from the (implied) simile into the narrative.⁷ This further reinforces Columella's implicit assertion that Virgil's cucumber is similarly described in terms appropriate to a snake, but with the simile marker *ut coluber* suppressed.

Columella demonstrates his awareness of the snakiness of Virgil's cucumber, not only by allusion to the passage itself, but by combining that with allusion to the actual snakes described in *Georgics* 3 and elsewhere. In this way, as Hardie in particular has demonstrated with authors such as Ovid and Valerius Flaccus, 'combinatorial imitation' of two separate sections of Virgil's text can illuminate the connection between them.⁸ Thus the two snakes to which Columella compares the cucumber (and in the first case also the gourd) are the *chelydrus* and the *coluber*, the same two snakes named at *G.* 3.415 and 418. Schroeter even suggests ingeniously that the cadence *more chelydri* might be shaped in imitation of the latter line's *nidore chelydros*.⁹ Even more suggestively, 10.391 echoes, as Brakman notes, Virgil's description of the monstrous serpents which, in the *laudes Italiae*, are absent from Italy: *nec rapit immensos orbis per humum neque tanto | squameus in spiram tractu se colligit anguis* (*Virg. G.* 2.153–4).¹⁰ This reference to the (problematic) *absence* of snakes is particularly suggestive in a context where Columella is drawing attention to the unexpected absence of a snake in Virgil's cucumber patch.¹¹

(n. 2), notes how the use of *imitatur* (the sand imitates the rope) at 10.8 'prefigures the imitative mode of the whole poem'. On 'divided allusion', see J. Wills, 'Divided allusion: Virgil and the *Coma Berenices*', *HSCPh* 98 (1998), 277–305.

⁶ The allusion of the whole passage to *G.* 4.121–2 is noted by Boldrer (n. 3), 329, ad 10.379b. The parallel of *intortus cucumis* to *tortus ... cucumis* is also noted by G. Schroeter, *De Columella Vergilii Imitatore* (Jena, 1882), 37, E. de Saint-Denis, 'Réhabilitons Columelle poète', *GIF* 21 (1969), 121–36, at 124, and A. Biotti (ed.), *Virgilio, Georgiche Libro IV* (Bologna, 1994), 116, ad *Virg. G.* 4.121–2. In giving the cucumber as well as the gourd a pregnant and hence distended belly, Columella sides with Virgil against (or perhaps tries to reconcile him with) his 'correctors' at Prop. 4.2.43 (noted by Armstrong [n. 1], 368) and *Mor.* 75 (noted by *CQ*'s anonymous reader).

⁷ On trespass, see R.O.A.M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet* (Oxford, 1989), 73–4, and see index s.v. 'trespass'. Boldrer (n. 3), 329, ad Col. 10.380 refers to *serpit* as a 'verbo espressivo ... che anima l'ortaggio e prosegue la similitudine con un serpente'.

⁸ P.R. Hardie, 'Flavian epicists on Virgil's epic technique', *Ramus* 18 (1990), 3–20; id., *The Epic Successors of Virgil* (Cambridge, 1993), 14, 43, 47, 78–9. Particularly relevant is his observation that Ovid's allusion, in describing the serpent killed by Cadmus in *Met.* 3, to both the serpents which kill Laocoön in *Virg. A.* 2 and to Cacus in *A.* 8, 'reveals an alertness to significant structural correspondences in [the *Aeneid*]', (id. 'Ovid's Theban history: the first "anti-*Aeneid*"?', *CQ* 40 [1990], 224–35, at 227). On the *contaminatio* in Col. 10 of allusions to different parts of the *Georgics*, as well as the other Virgilian poems, see Boldrer (n. 3), 21.

⁹ Schroeter (n. 6), 37.

¹⁰ C. Brakman, 'Ad Columellae librum decimum', *Mnemosyne* 60 (1933), 107–12, at 111. Boldrer (n. 3), 332, ad 10.391 does not mention this echo but suggestively (for both Virgil and Columella) notes the verbal parallels with descriptions of monsters at Cic. *Arat.* fr. 8.3 T and Prop. 4.6.35.

¹¹ *CQ*'s anonymous reader suggests a further instance of combinatorial imitation. The passage immediately preceding (10.357–68), describes the ritual expulsion of caterpillars (*dira ...*

Columella is not, however, merely displaying his *doctrina* by detecting the subtle allusion to the snake in the *Georgics* and creatively annotating it through explicit similes. His imitation also constitutes an interpretation.¹² Armstrong concludes her discussion with some suggestions as to how the substitution of the cucumber for the anticipated snake might 'form a small-scale comment on some of the larger themes of the poem'.¹³ In her reading the very suppression of the expected snake is not a suggestion that the apparently harmless cucumber has sinister qualities, but rather a demonstration that not all surprises lurking in the grass of the *Georgics* are nasty; some can be welcome: 'the plump cucumber thus adds to the sense that a garden has the potential to surprise with its bounty'.¹⁴ Similarly, Henderson, without noting Virgil's serpentine subtext, contrasts the two depictions: 'Columella's cucumber, long and round, serves up a sinister deformity for the fall, where Virgil's garden saw only a joy he could have grown into a greenhouse of delight, no worries'.¹⁵

As always with such creative allusion, two broad possibilities are available to the reader. One might argue that Columella polemically puts the snake back into the cucumber; in doing so, he dissents from Virgil's suppression of the serpent and his related implication that the cucumber is a harmless, even desirable vegetable, thus further reinforcing Columella's own negative, or at least ambivalent, depiction of this vegetable.¹⁶ Alternatively, Columella's allusion might support a reading whereby the implicit snakiness of Virgil's cucumber was in itself a subtle indication of its sinister potential within the world of the *Georgics*, an indication which the imitator and commentator draws attention to, emphasizes and validates. This latter possibility might be reinforced by the combinatorial imitation, noted above, of Virgil's snakes and Virgil's cucumber. Indeed, the reference to the cucumber's 'harmfully exacer-

animalia! 351 – 'nesso epicheggiante ed iperbolico', Boldrer [n. 3], 316) from the garden by a bare-footed (*nuda plantas*), menstruating woman, and compares her to Medea sending the Colchian serpent to sleep. As well as being another example of Columella's explicit paralleling of a relatively minor pest with a monstrous serpent, the reader suggests that this scene might recall the real serpent of *Georgics* 4, the *immanis hydrus* lying unseen in the long grass before Eurydice's (presumably, but not explicitly, bare) feet (4.457–9). This is attractive, though the emphatically ritual context of this 'pot pourri of mumbo jumbo' (Henderson [n. 2], 130), in which even the bare feet have magical associations (Boldrer [n. 3], 319), and the close verbal echo of Seneca's and Lucan's Medeas (*magicis ... cantibus*, Col. 10.367, *Med.* 684, Luc. 4.553) make the evocation of Eurydice a secondary one.

¹² On Columella as a tool for interpreting Virgil, see esp. E. de Saint-Denis, 'Columelle, miroir de Virgile', in H. Bardon (ed.), *Vergiliana: recherches sur Virgile* (Leiden, 1971), 328–43. Where Saint-Denis studies 'ce que l'œuvre de Columelle nous révèle sur celle de Virgile, telle qu'elle a été lue et comprise au premier siècle de notre ère' (329) and argues that 'parce que Columelle est plein de Virgile et qu'il a vécu en communion intime avec lui, nous pouvons l'interroger pour essayer de résoudre quelques énigmes irritantes et de mettre un point final à des controverses interminables' (337), one might prefer to see Columella offering tendentious interpretations of, rather than absolute solutions to, the 'enigmas' of Virgil's texts. Cf. Gowers (n. 2), 127: 'it tells us how Virgil was read in antiquity', and Diederich (n. 2), 231: 'Man hat festgestellt, daß Columellas Vergilimitation, komplex und subtil wie sie ist, viel Kreativität verrät'. On references to Virgil outside Book 10, see A. Cossarini, 'Aspetti di Virgilio in Columella', *Prometheus* 3 (1977), 225–40; A. Doody, 'Virgil the farmer? Critiques of the *Georgics* in Columella and Pliny', *CPh* 102 (2007), 180–97.

¹³ Armstrong (n. 1), 367.

¹⁴ Ibid. 368.

¹⁵ Henderson (n. 2), 130, n. 52.

¹⁶ On the cucumber's (and the gourd's) ambivalence, see Henderson (n. 2), 130: 'this pair of fat-bellies, everything from fatal through life-saving, as versatile as Columella's verse, as necessary as his expertise'.

bating the diseases of the harsh summer' (10.392) might take the combinatorial imitation further in pointing the imagistic parallel between the snakes and the plague which are the two principal destructive forces of the second half of *Georgics* 3.¹⁷ Certainly the plague and the cucumber both slither (*serpant*, *G.* 3.475), and exercise their destructive power in summer (*aestiua*, 3.472).

Ultimately, however, Columella's world view, like his cucumber, is a complex mixture of (in crude terms) positive and negative.¹⁸ The summer brings horticultural bounty as well as the blasting Dog Star (10.400–8); the serpentine *cucumis liuidus* may aggravate disease, but the *cucurbita* can be used as a wine-container or a buoyancy aid for children learning to swim (387–8), while the *cucumis candidus* will not only soothe, but actively bring aid to the ill (394–9).¹⁹ Columella certainly identifies the snakiness of Virgil's cucumber and it is more than arguable that his annotative imitation also interprets it, but this is not to say that he asserts a simplistic or reductive interpretation which would diminish the glorious complexity and ambiguity of Virgil's *Georgics*, Columella's *De Cultu Hortorum* and both of their cucumbers.

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¹⁷ On parallels between Virgil's snakes and plague, see, *inter alios*, D.A. Ross, *Virgil's Elements* (Princeton, 1986), 177–83; R.F. Thomas, *Virgil's Georgics* vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1988), 119, ad 3.414–39.

¹⁸ 'Columella erkennt die Ambivalenz der Natur also durchaus an und huldigt keinem so einseitigen realitätsfernen Optimismus, wie ihm die Forschung vielfach vorgeworfen hat', Diederich (n. 2), 245. On the cucumber, see Henderson quoted in n. 16 above. With different emphasis, P. Toohey, *Epic Lessons* (London, 1996), 176–9, notes a tension in the poem between erotic (and fertile) sensuality and chaste purity. On the associations of cucurbits with the imagery of fertility in literature more broadly, see R. Norrman and J. Haarberg, *Nature and Language: a Semiotic Study of Cucurbits in Literature* (London, 1980), 13–79, esp. 21–3 on classical texts.

¹⁹ I use Columella's own terms to distinguish between the cucurbits, but they are notoriously difficult to identify. For a scientific attempt to do so, see J. Janick, H.S. Paris and D.C. Parrish, 'The cucurbits of Mediterranean antiquity: identification of taxa from ancient images and descriptions', *Annals of Botany* 100 (2007), 1441–57, at 1444–5. Rebecca Armstrong suggests *per litteras* that Columella's observation on the diversity of the cucurbits, *una neque est illis facies* (10.381), might further constitute a correction of Virgil's failure to catalogue the different kinds. I am grateful to her and to CQ's anonymous reader for their helpful suggestions.

THEMIS AT ELEUSIS: CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *PROTREPTICUS* 2.22.5

The present note argues against a tenacious emendation. The textual problem with which it is concerned is located in a particularly sensitive passage, the long attack against the Mysteries of the Hellenes in Clement of Alexandria's *Protrepticus* 2.12–2, one of our most precious sources of information on 'ancient mystery cults'. The manuscripts of the *Protrepticus* are unanimous in reading τῆς Θέμιδος at 2.22.5.¹

¹ All extant manuscripts of the *Protrepticus* derive from the Parisinus Graecus 451 (P), which dates from the tenth century. See O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus. Bd. 1: Protrepticus und Paedagogus* (Leipzig, 1905), xvi–xxiii.