

Homeric reception in augustan poetry: the case of Alcinous' Gardens¹

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The object of this paper is to discuss the reception of the famous Homeric gardens of Alcinous, the legendary king of Corcyra,² by the Roman poets of the Augustan age. For the sake of space I have picked the most representative cases, which I hope will enable us to form a clear image about the reception of this particular Homeric landscape in Augustan poetry.

The marvelous gardens of Alcinous make a startling debut in literature in Homer's *Odyssey* (7.112-32):

ἔκτοσθεν δ' αὐλῆς μέγας ὄρχατος ἄγχι θυράων
τετράγνος· περὶ δ' ἔρκος ἐλήλαται ἀμφοτέρωθεν.
ἐνθα δὲ δένδρεα μακρὰ πεφύκασι τηλεθάοντα
ὄγχυαι καὶ ῥοιαί καὶ μηλέαι ἀγλαόκαρποι
συκέαι τε γλυκεραί καὶ ἐλαῖαι τηλεθόσσαι.
τάων οὐ ποτε καρπὸς ἀπόλλυται οὐδ' ἀπολείπει
χείματος οὐδὲ θέρευς, ἐπετήσιος· ἀλλὰ μάλ' αἰεὶ
ζεφυρίη πνεῖουσα τὰ μὲν φύει, ἄλλα δὲ πέσσει.
ὄγχην ἐπ' ὄγχην γηράσκει, μῆλον δ' ἐπὶ μῆλῳ,
αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ σταφυλῇ σταφυλή, σῦκον δ' ἐπὶ σύκῳ
ἐνθα δὲ οἱ πολύκαρπος ἀλωὴ ἐρρίζωται,
τῆς ἕτερον μὲν θ' εἰλόπεδον λευρῷ ἐνὶ χώρῳ
τέρσεται ἠελίῳ, ἐτέρας δ' ἄρα τε τρυγώσιν,
ἄλλας δὲ τραπέουσι· πάροιθε δὲ τ' ὁμφακές εἰσιν
ἄνθος ἀφιῖσαι, ἕτεραι δ' ὑποπερκάζουσιν.
ἐνθα δὲ κοσμηταὶ πρασιαὶ παρὰ νείατον ὄρχον
παντοῖαι πεφύασιν, ἐπηετανὸν γανώσσαι.
ἐν δὲ δῶα κρῆναι ἢ μὲν τ' ἀνὰ κῆπον ἅπαντα
σκίδναται, ἢ δ' ἐτέρωθεν ὑπ' αὐλῆς οὐδὸν ἵησι
πρὸς δόμον ὑψηλόν, ὅθεν ὑδρεύοντο πολῖται.

¹ It is with great pleasure that I dedicate this paper to a great colleague and scholar, Prof. Andreas Manos, with whom I spent several hours of fascinating discussion on numerous scholarly and non-scholarly topics in Komotini.

² The island Corcyra was named after the nymph Corcyra. She was the daughter of the river Asopus, whom Poseidon fell in love with, ravished and carried to the island. The offspring of this union was Φαῖαξ, the first king of the island. He was succeeded by his brother Nausithoos, who was the father of Alcinous. See Diod. Sic. 4.72.1, 4.72.3. For the identification of Corcyra with the Homeric Φαιακία see Pfeiffer (1949-53) on Call. *Aet.* fr. 13 and 14, Thuc. 1.25, 3.70.4, Plin. *Nat.* 4.52, Schöffel (2002) 573f. For Alcinous' legendary gardens see *RE* 1.1544-1547 (Tümpel), Roscher 1.1.237-240 (Fleischer). On the Homeric motif of Alcinous and the Phaeacians see Tebben (1991).

τοῖ' ἄρ' ἐν Ἀλκινόοιο θεῶν ἔσαν ἀγλαὰ δῶρα.

Homer's impressive and detailed description of Alcinous' gardens left an indelible mark on later literature and exercised a lasting impression upon Roman poets. The first mention of Corcyra and Alcinous' gardens in Augustan poetry occurs in Vergil's *Georgics* (2.83-8):

*praeterea genus haud unum nec fortibus ulmis
nec salici lotoque neque Idaeis cyparissis,
nec pingues unam in faciem nascuntur olivae,
orchades et radii et amara pausia baca,
pomaeque et Alcinoi silvae.*

[Tr. Day Lewis: "Next, there's more than a single species of hardy elms, of the willow, the nettle tree, or the cypresses of Ida; more than one variety of fat olives you'll find – orchites, thew raggaria, and the bitter-berried posea: many sorts of apples there are in orchards; the same branch bears not the Crustumine pear, the bergamot and the pound-pear."]

Using parataxis and eleven conjunctions³ Vergil refers to the great variety of the trees of the earth and makes particular reference to king Alcinous' orchards. This reference heralds Vergil's account of the marvelous phenomena soon to follow in the next part of his book (109-35), in particular the *laudes Italiae*.⁴ It is worth mentioning that:

- 1) The Homeric gardens of Alcinous are the only mythological gardens mentioned by Vergil.
- 2) The Homeric gardens of Alcinous are used by Vergil as a point of reference, as the gardens *par excellence*, the model for all gardens.⁵
- 3) Despite their mythological status Alcinous' gardens are compared with real orchards.

The proverbial status of the archetypal garden that Alcinous' Homeric orchards acquired during the Augustan period⁶ is confirmed by Propertius in his third book of elegies (3.2.11-14):

*quod non Taenariis domus est mihi fulta columnis,
nec camera auratas inter eburna trabes,
nec mea Phaeacas aequant pomaria silvas,
non operosa rigat Marcius antra liquor.*

³ See Thomas (1988) on 2.83-8.

⁴ See Thomas (1988) on 2.87.

⁵ See Mynors (1990) on 2.87-8.

⁶ See Otto (1890) 12 § 53, Schöffel (2002) 573 n. 7.

[Tr. Goold: "If my house rises not on pillars of Taenarian marble, and my ceiling is not vaulted with ivory between gilded beams, if I have no fruit-trees matching Phaeacia's orchards or man-made grottoes watered by the Marcian conduit."]

Propertius contrasts his humble property and his poverty⁷ with immensely rich owners and luxurious belongings.⁸ Attention is focused on Propertius' juxtaposition of his own humble garden with the "orchards of Phaeacia". It is obvious that he has in mind not the orchards of the island in general, but rather Alcinous' Homeric gardens in particular, and that he can confidently count on his readers' ability to recognize and appreciate his mythological allusion. This passage illustrates the emblematic value that Alcinous' orchards have for the entire island. The term *silvae* used by Propertius of Alcinous' orchards renders both the size of the trees and their number and density, and shows how rich and fertile Alcinous' gardens are deemed by the poet.⁹

Another very symptomatic example for the proverbial status of Alcinous' gardens in Augustan poetry is the following passage from Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Pont.* 4.2.9f.):

*quis mel Aristaeo, quis Baccho vina Falerna,
Triptolemo fruges, poma det Alcino?*

[Tr. Wheeler: "Who would give honey to Aristaeus, Falernian wine to Bacchus, grain to Triptolemus, fruit to Alcino?"]

Alcinous' name features within a team of famous mythological figures: a) Aristaeus, the son of Apollo and Cyrene, who was thought to be the inventor of apiculture, b) Bacchus, the god of wine, and c) Triptolemus, the favourite of the goddess Demeter, who taught men the art of agriculture. Perhaps at first Alcinous' presence next to these figures seems unjustified, because he was not an expert in agriculture or in any kind of relevant art. It seems, however, that the beauty and the fertility of the gardens of Phaeacia, as described by Homer, had established Alcinoos in the literary memory of the Roman poets as the cultivator *par excellence*.¹⁰ Hence, by analogy to the well-known proverb «κομίζω γλαῦκα εἰς Ἀθήνας» Ovid created – or simply reproduced an already existing Latin proverb¹¹ – which in its Greek version would read something like: «κομίζω καρπὸν εἰς Ἀλκίνοον».

In the first century AD Martial follows the same line. In epigram 7.42 he sets up a joke regarding the Roman habit of exchanging gifts. It was customary for someone to offer gifts of similar quality and value in return to the ones he had received.¹² In this

⁷ This is a classic *topos* in Roman elegy. The poets traditionally depict themselves as poor. See Maltby (2002) on Tib. 1.1.5 with bibliography.

⁸ See Camps (1966) on 3.2.11-14.

⁹ See Richardson (1977) on 3.2.13.

¹⁰ See Akrigg (2006) ad loc.

¹¹ See Otto (1890) 12 § 53.

¹² See Galán Vioque (2001) p. 272.

way a certain kind of competitive spirit and rivalry developed among acquaintances and friends. In this particular epigram Martial apologizes to his patron Castricus for not being able to offer him gifts and poems of similar value to those he had sent him.

*muneribus cupiat si quis contendere tecum,
audeat hic etiam, Castrice, carminibus.
nos tenues in utroque sumus vinctique parati:
inde sopor nobis et placet alta quies.
Tam mala cur igitur dederim tibi carmina, quaeris?
Alcinoo nullum poma dedisse putas?*

[Tr.: If any one wish to vie with you in gifts, let him venture, Castricus, in poetry too. I am poorly furnished in both, and prepared to be surpassed, hence repose and unbroken quiet are my delight. Why then, you ask, did I send you such bad poems? Think you no man has given apples to Alcinous?]

As is usually the case with Martial's epigrams, the joke and the *acumen* of the poem comes at its closure. Martial ends his poem by pointedly offering a variation of the proverb we first came across in Ovid:¹³ "Do you think that nobody has offered apples to Alcinous?" Alcinous is here used by Martial as the epitome of wealth and generosity,¹⁴ while his fruit-bearing trees constitute the model of abundance and fertility.

Especially interesting as regards the Augustan reception of Alcinous' Homeric gardens is Ovid's reference to the fertile orchards of Corcyra in the so-called "little *Aeneid*" of his *Metamorphoses*. As they are sailing towards Italy, Aeneas and the Trojans sail past Phaeacia and finally disembark at Buthrotum, where Paris' brother, Helenus, having taken Andromache, Hector's widow, as his wife, has built a new city, a miniature copy of Troy (Ov. *Met.* 13.720-2):

*proxima Phaeacum felicibus obsita pomis
rura petunt, Epiros ab his regnataque vati
Buthrotos Phrygio simulataque Troia tenetur.*

[Tr. Miller: Next they sought the land of the Phaeacians, set with fertile orchards, and landed at Buthrotos in Epirus with its mimic Troy, a city ruled by the Phrygian seer.]

¹³ See Galán Vioque (2001) on 7.6, who also cites Verg. *Georg.* 2.87, Prop. 1.14.24, Hor. *Epist.* 1.2.28, Ov. *Am.* 1.10.56, *Met.* 13.719, 14.565, *Pont.* 2.9.42, Plin. *NH* 19.49, Stat. *Silv.* 1.3.81, 2.3.82, Juv. 5.151, 15.15, Priap. 60, 68.25. Cf. also Priap. 16, where Alcinous' apples are cited along other legendary apples, such as the apples of Hippomenes, the apples of the Hesperides, and the apple of Acontius. The wealth and fertility of Alcinous' gardens is a common theme in Martial (4.64.29, 8.68.1, 10.94.2, 12.31.10, 13.37). See also Leary (2001) on 13.37.1.

¹⁴ For Alcinous' generosity see also Helzle (2003) on Ov. *Pont.* 2.9.42.

Interesting conclusions may be drawn from the comparative examination of this passage with its Vergilian model (*Aen.* 3.291-3):

*protinus aerias Phaeacum abscondimus arces
litoraue Epiri legimus portuque subimus
Chaonio et celsam Buthroti accedimus urbem.*

[Tr. West: We had soon put the cloud-capped citadels of Phaeacia down below the horizon and we coasted along Epirus until we entered the harbour of Chaonia and then walked up to the lofty city of Buthrotum].

In Vergil's account there is only a brief mention of Corcyra, as the Trojans quickly sail away from it and reach the opposite shore of Buthrotum. On the other hand Ovid in his brief reference to the Trojans sailing away from the shores of Corcyra modifies his model and mentions its fertile orchards as a characteristic feature of the island (*felicibus obsita pomis / rura petunt*). I would suggest that the main reason for this change is Ovid's intention to conjure up the Homeric background of Vergil's *Aeneid*, especially since Aeneas' approach to Corcyra constitutes the first similarity between his trip and Odysseus'.¹⁵ The emblematic status¹⁶ that the Homeric orchards of Alcinous have acquired is the catalyst for the association of the *Aeneid* with the *Odyssey* through the *Metamorphoses*.

To conclude: I hope that the discussion of the passages above has been illuminating as regards the reception of Alcinous' Homeric gardens in Augustan poetry. The image of Corcyra in Augustan poetry is clearly modeled on and influenced by its image in Greek literature and in particular its Homeric past as land of the Phaeacians. The legendary and wonderful orchards of Alcinous are the majority among the Latin poetic references to Corcyra. In essence, Alcinous' emblematic orchards stand for the whole island. In Augustan poetry Alcinous' Homeric gardens are the trademark of the island, and at the same time they are considered as a proverbial symbol of fertility and wealth, as the gardens *par excellence*.

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¹⁵ See Williams (1961) ad loc., who also notes that the episode of the Harpies too was partly modeled on Odysseus' adventures on Thrinacia.

¹⁶ Serv. *Georg.* 2.87: *pomaque subaudis a superioribus 'non unam nascuntur in faciem'. alcinoi silvae pomiferae arbores: nam Alcinous, rex Phaeacum, fuit diligens cultor hortorum, unde per eius silvas arbores pomiferas intellegimus: de quo Homerus ait, quod haberet μῆλον δ' ἐπὶ μῆλον. et aliter: Alcinous rex Phaeacum fuit, cuius - hortos Homerus nobilitavit.*

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