

Gardens in the Ancient Greek Literary Imagination

Will Larson, Class of 2021

This project began as an investigation into the world of ancient Greek gardens, inspired by some of the earliest literary garden descriptions in the Western canon contained within Homer's *Odyssey*. The gardens of King Alcinoos and their rich intertextual relationship with other classical garden representations provide fertile grounds for research on this topic. However, it is challenging to understand those mythical Homeric gardens through the lens of real design, in part due to a lack of modern archaeological insight into many ancient Greek gardens. Instead, the wealth of literary garden descriptions in Classical antiquity provides a vital opportunity for understanding and reimagining ancient garden spaces. The rich intertextual thread that runs between the garden descriptions of ancient writers unveils a deep and untold history of imagined gardens.

This focus on literary representation turns the attention from the design reality of Greek gardens to the important realm of imagined garden spaces. I began to develop a framework for comparative analysis to synthesize garden representations drawn from various authors in the Classical canon into a coherent garden theory of imagination. I then tracked those imagined gardens' parallel representation and reduplication in the works of later writers. Informed by the works of garden theorist John Dixon Hunt, the use of literary reception theory bolsters our understandings of ancient Greek gardens by recentering the focus from design history to the realm of imagination, reception, and experience of gardens. To better understand Greek gardens, we can work with the existing textual history of garden representations within the works of Hesiod, Homer, Theocritus, Apollonius Rhodius, Virgil and others. Using a reception theory framework, I traced literary gardens of imagination and myth from King Alcinoos' idyllic orchard to its reduplication in Theocritus' *Idylls* and later in Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. Rather than precise descriptions of garden designs, these writers provide rich descriptions of gardens filled with meaning and affect. What we lack in information from garden archaeology may instead provide fertile grounds for a creative reimagining of Greek garden spaces laden with ritual significance, cultural and philosophical questions, and commentary on the experience of gardens at large.

To this last point, we find numerous examples of gardens used as the poetic image of microcosmos, in which gardens are used as metaphor for the universe; a testament to the most basic relationship between human and environment. Gardens are transcribed, redefined, and retold through the imagination of writers throughout history, providing a record of each representation's transmission hidden within each subsequent literary work. Tracing this intertextual thread offers a more complete history of Western garden culture and deeper insight into the human imagination.

Faculty Mentor: Rob Sobak

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship