

“A Piece of Land, Not So Very Large”: Considerations of Sustainability in the Rustic Fantasy and Rural Realities of Ancient Rome

Katy Fulcher
Department of Ancient Mediterranean Studies
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, NC 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor: Lora Holland Goldthwaite

Abstract:

The romanticization of rustic life by Roman urban elites is rooted in a nostalgia for a mythical human age, and not in any tangible reality. The literary representation of an idyllic country life is at odds with the reality of rural life for the peasant and slave populations as well as with the environmental impacts of the agriculture that supported both urban and rural lifestyles in ancient Rome. This paper assesses the moralization and polarization of country and city life in Augustan and later Latin literature. Recent archaeological research on the rural poor of the Italian countryside supplements the literary analysis and explains how the rustic fantasy is a response to an awareness of unsustainable agricultural practices. The idyllic simplicity exemplified by the rustic fantasy is driven by a perceived corruption and dissatisfaction with contemporary urban life but fails to account for the environmental degradation that enabled the perpetuation of both urban and rural elite lifestyles.

1. Introduction

The dream of a quaint cottage on a large, secluded tract of land free from the restlessness of city life and sustained by the work of one's own hand is a fantasy shared by many. This yearning calls for a return to simpler life, times, and nature. The aristocrats and upper classes of ancient Rome shared this dream, idealizing the countryside and the leisure of life within it. Literature describing the joys of country

living, written almost exclusively by the Roman elite, provides a rich resource for understanding how they idealized life in the countryside. The nostalgia of the rustic fantasy is more of an answer to the frustrations of city living than any tangible reality of life in the ancient Roman countryside. These frustrations were driven by a disdain for the corruption and danger that accompanies a large city, and promoted heavily only by those who could afford to separate from it. To some degree, country life is moralized by these writers, reflecting an awareness of the issues of sustainability in urban life. The rustic fantasy in Augustan and later Latin literature distorted the realities, and thus the perceptions, of rural life while contributing to the underlying awareness of harmful environmental practices in both urban and rural areas, acting as the ancient form of the concept of sustainability.

There has been scholarly exploration on the separate topics of the rustic fantasy, rural ancient Italian poor, and the environmental sustainability of Rome. In "The Foliate Lyre: The Use of the Countryside in Horace's *Odes*," Goldstein examines the role of the idyllic countryside in Horace's *Odes*, connecting its usage to Horace's agrarian childhood and the socio-political ideology surrounding agricultural settings from the Republic to the reign of Augustus (2). Similarly, Thibodeau examines the moralization of rustic life and its popularity within the cultural climate of the Late Republic as a reflection of leisure, simplicity, and glory in the chapter "Nobility in Rustication" of *Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rustic Life in Vergil's Georgics (75-76)*. On the other side of the topic, Bowes has done extensive archaeological research regarding the realities of ancient life in the Italian countryside in "Rural Poverty in the Roman Empire." She highlights the role that agriculture played within the lifestyles of rural peasants as well as the lack of information regarding this sector of the ancient population (Bowes 1). Concerning the agricultural practices and environmental sustainability in Rome, as well as the relationship between humans and nature, Hughes has organized a great deal of scholarship. In "Sustainability and the Empire" and "Ecology and Development as Narrative Themes of World History," he reviews the connection between humanity's tendency to place itself outside of the ecological web, the use of natural resources, and socio-political development, especially within the Roman Empire. The concepts of idealized rustic life and its inaccurate representations in ancient Rome have been explored independently of the awareness of environmental degradation. The realities of rural life were distorted and moralized in the elite literature of writers such as Horace, Vergil, Seneca, Ovid, and others. There is a clear connection between this distortion and moralization in its relation to an ancient awareness of environmental and agricultural unsustainability. The idealization of the countryside and pastoral life serves as a response to this awareness of unsustainability.

2. Origins of the Rustic Fantasy

The idea of rustic beauty and righteousness reaches beyond the ancient aristocratic fantasy, reborn, for example, in the form of the 'cottagecore' aesthetic trend in today's social media feeds. Both are rooted in deep nostalgia and driven by the perceived corruption of their contemporary advancements, but fail to account for the underbelly that consists of hard labor, exploitation, and environmental degradation. The

fantasy is rooted in images of a mythic countryside, exemplified by natural beauty, solitude, self-sustained living made possible through hard and rewarding labor, simplicity, and thus satisfaction and contentment. The rise of rustic fantasy did not occur randomly, but rather gained attention around the fall of Republican Rome maintained through the Age of Augustus (Rosenstein 1). During this time, after many wars during the Republic and expansion under Augustus, Rome saw a period of continuous change. For some, the novelty of this life allowed them to flourish, but others, the majority of the aristocracy, craved nostalgia and tradition. Prior to this period of change, the Roman countryside was viewed much less favorably by the aristocracy, as the home of dirty, illiterate peasants and slaves who were entirely removed and obscured from the advancements and luxuries of Roman culture (Thibodeau 79). It is no surprise that, for the most part, in the idealization of the countryside, the majority of the population - the peasantry - was excluded from the fantasy.

2.1. Horace and Vergil

Two of the pioneers for rustication in literature were Vergil, in his *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, and Horace in his *Odes* and *Satires*. Both authors, as well as some later authors, harken back to the most primitive form of civilization and the mythical human condition of living off the land. Vergil identifies nature and agricultural practice with divinities in the *Georgics*. In 1.7-23, he mentions Ceres, Fauns, Dryads, Neptune, Pan, Minerva, and of course the god of the woods and wild nature, Silvanus, in association with the revelries of nature and the countryside (Vergil, Fairclough trans.). Later, in 1.118-19, he mentions the constant toil that accompanies the pastoral lifestyle, but then the Triumph of Toil over all obstacles and Want in 1.167-68. This triumph associates the idyllic rustic life with fulfillment and the harmony of humanity and the natural world. The *patrios argos*, or 'father's fields' mentioned by Horace in his *Odes* (1.1.11-12, Rudd trans.) evoke a connection with ancestry and human history, strengthened by Horace's own familial ties, as well as between the farmer and all the Ages of Man, offering a remedy to the corruption of his own time (Goldstein 29). Horace's nostalgia transcends his own personal fondness for the countryside, conjuring a collective ideal accessible to anyone. For the vast majority of human history, humans subsisted mostly through hunting and gathering, slowly transitioning to a total reliance on agriculture (Pringle 1450). This sustains the connection between the providence of the divine earth and the pastoral Golden Age, supporting a collective human nostalgia for rustic life.

The earliest historical narratives link humans and nature in an intimate connection, viewing life as an aspect derived from nature and placing emphasis on the non-human (Hughes, "Ecology and Development " 1-2). The poetry of Horace and Vergil glorify a preserved and unbroken vision of the countryside embedded in the many myths of human origin, contrasting with the issues plaguing not only urban life, but the reality of humanity's earthly existence. The moralization of rustic life is mostly related to the contrast with urban life, expressing an issue and thus the need for a solution. Horace and Vergil depict the farmer as the epitome of contentment, evident by his mastery of rustic life and direct contact with nature (Goldstein 27-8). This oversimplification and dichotomy between urban life and rural life effectively corrupts the

image of the human relationship with nature and glosses over both environmental and moral issues that occur in all human spheres. Humanity shares a broad pastoral heritage, owing its successes and advancements to the foundations of agriculture and rural life. The identification of the *vita rustica* with mythic and divine origins further removes it from anything remotely realistic. This life and rustic setting are too good to be true because they are, in fact, a fantasy.

2.2. Mythical Narratives

The popularity of pastoral literature can be largely attributed to its nostalgic roots, coupled with rising anxieties about urban and contemporary life. As a result of its popularity, a new rustic setting emerged for the upper class Romans, the *villa rustica*. The 'country house' was the epitome of urbanized rusticity, allowing for the concept of *otium*, or leisure, that became a large part of rustication to manifest in a space removed from the city (Frazer 49-50; Thibodeau 78). The *villa rustica* created a space that allowed the rustic fantasy to play out for the elite. However, the only part of the estate faithful to the fantasy was the country setting. Thibodeau identifies the representations of country life and *otium*, specifically in Vergil's *Georgics*, as a direct response to the dissatisfaction with urban life and concerns about honor: "In his handling of this topic, Vergil pays special attention to the perspectives of the Roman elite, and one of the most remarkable and innovative features of the poem is the way it makes rustication out to be an honorable thing - suggesting that even a landowner dwelling in the country and cut off from normal political life could tap into authentic sources of pride and prestige" (76). The association with honor and prestige created the perfect storm for acceleration in the acceptance and romanticization of the countryside, while simultaneously creating an environment for it to be further exploited and distorted. For example, the *otium* enjoyed by the aristocratic inhabitants of the villas was a direct result of behind-the-scenes labor and laborers who conveniently helped to evoke the fantasy by becoming part of the rustic landscape (Frazer 51). The fictionality of this fantasy cannot be overstated, as it is rooted in nostalgia for a mythic age that did not account for the realities of an agrarian existence.

3. Rural Life

The realities of rustic life were so obscured in large part due to the lack of knowledge and firsthand information about true agrarians as well as the divide between the elite and rural poor. Horace is the only author that came even close to this life, but his experience was frozen in the fondness of childhood memory and not reflective of reality (Goldstein 2). Nothing much was ever written about, or by, the large number of peasants and slaves that were actually working the land. This portion of the population, around 90%, made up the laborers who supported the mammoth agricultural economic sector, which directly affected all other sectors (Erdkamp 556). The sheer size of the agricultural labor force implied a heavy reliance on both the sector and the population. The dependence of Roman society on agriculture is not an anomaly, as this connection

was widely recognized in ancient Greece as well, noted by Xenophon in his *Oeconomicus*: “It has been said that farming is the mother and nurse of all other arts. For when farming flourishes, all other arts prosper, but whenever the land is compelled to lie barren, the other arts of landsmen and seamen alike virtually perish” (5.17, Marchant trans.). Although Xenophon spoke for Greece, this also applied to Rome’s reliance on farming. The importance of agriculture and its far reaches meant that the environment was heavily depleted. This was especially true during the time of the Empire, in which farming was commercialized on a large scale, creating systematic exploitation of the countryside and agricultural environments (Hughes, “Social Structure and Environmental Impact” 29). The rise of commercial farming helped to further obscure the rural realities, creating a greater separation between the elite and peasantry and in turn contributing to the development and popularity of the rustic fantasy.

3.1. Peasants and Rural Poor

The *Moretum*, a poem detailing the daily duties of a poor farmer in Ancient Rome, provides a unique contemporary perspective on the rural poor. It is usually attributed to Vergil, but his authorship of this poem is doubted, especially due to the intimate nature of the work and its realistic description of peasant life in comparison to the *Georgics* or *Eclogues*. For example, the *Moretum* describes a litany of meticulous actions done by the farmer, Simulus, in the preparation of his daily morning meal: he burns his hand searching for the hearth in the darkness (6-7), kindles and delicately protects his flame (11-12), spills his grain (16), toils as he mills his grain by hand (24-29), and sings to himself as he works (29-30). The detailed descriptions of the poor farmer’s morning duties paint a tangible reality of rustic peasant life that stands out among the idyllic images doled out by other writers. This familiarity is contrasted by Vergil’s lack of acknowledgement for the toils of poverty in the *Georgics*. In an instance, he admires the work and bounty, both physical and spiritual, of a poor old farmer, using epic language to describe the man’s satisfaction with his life’s work equaling that of a king’s, “*regum aequabat opes animis*” (4.132, Fairclough trans.). Vergil’s reverence lacks any genuine appreciation for the labor and hardships that the farmer would have faced. This shortfall is all too common in the extant descriptions and romanticization of rustic life in Rome.

As previously mentioned, although the peasantry and rural poor made up the vast majority of the Roman population, very little is actually known about them. Much of what is known comes from archaeology, stray bits of literature such as the *Moretum*, and vague, reductive descriptions by ancient (elite) writers. In her project, “Rural Poverty in the Roman Empire,” Kim Bowes notes the neglected field of research on the Roman peasant population, as the academic focus tends to lie in the process of ‘Romanization,’ or the decline of peasant villages and the impact of Roman imperialism on these areas (3). Bowes also notes that during the switch to Roman occupation, many rural dwellers were subsequently made into rural agricultural slaves, leading to a decline in the number of small freeholder peasant farms and driving their inhabitants into the city or military service (6). The transition from peasantry to slavery helps to explain and

support the fact that the majority of the Roman population consisted of this group, but further contributes to the obscurity and shallow definition of the rural poor.

3.2. Archaeological Evidence

The lack of evidence for the rural peasant population unfortunately extends into archaeology. Bowes and her team found that many of the sites were likely not habitations, meaning that little information regarding the domestic lives of rural peasants could be deduced (22). Archaeological research, however, can still help to elucidate some of the realities of rural agricultural labor on a scale smaller than commercial production. It has been long assumed that the rural agrarians used primitive farming practices and were not technologically advanced, however, Bowes suggests that even these small 'poor' farms had maximized productivity, "Intensive strategies were, according to the agronomists, tailored to make the use of the significant variability in soil and climate found even within micro-regions. The agronomists' interest in purpose-built drainage, even of pasture land, maintenance of certain kinds of pasture, and manuring practices are likewise adduced in support of intensive intents" (8). The maximized mode of productivity fits with a broad understanding of the small rural farms and the poor, since they likely were farming for sustenance. However, with the rise of commercial farming and rustic estates, poor were usually either pushed onto or given the leftover, least productive and overworked tracts of land (Erdkamp 560). Likely, this push furthered the movement of poorer individuals into urban and more populated settings. This influx added to the distaste and perceived unpleasantness of the city.

4. City Life

The urban center, or the city, served as the antithesis of rustic life in its moralization and ideals. This comparison is perhaps most evident in Horace's country and city mice in his *Satires*, where he contrasts the idleness, simplicity, and humbleness of rustic life with the danger, complexity, and luxury of city life in an allegory of two mice (2.6, Fairclough trans.). The dangers of the crowded city of Rome and urban moral decay are also cataloged in Juvenal's third satire, where he lists the collapsing buildings (194-6), panic and fire (196-8), the drive to constantly rebuild after disasters (215-6), constant traffic (236-7), the threat of wobbly logs transported on wagons (255-7), beatings and assault (297), and countless other dangers. Juvenal also describes the city as the source of sickness itself (236, Braund trans.). The influx of poorer populations likely contributed to some of the disdain for city life by elites. However, the comparison between rustic and city life was used and typically overstated accompanying idealization of country life.

Granted, the unpleasantness of city life may have deeper roots in contrast to the country. Smith examines the restlessness of city living, arguing that it may be attributed to the use and abundance of artificial light, especially during the night (236). The use of light allowed for non-laborious forms of activity, such as intellectual labor to continue well into the night, adding to the unnaturalness of cities (Smith 268). This continuation and

use of light further contributed to the divide between urban and rural spaces. The man-made urban structures literally blocked the natural landscape and created an air of mystery and fear of the night in its allowance for 'dark' activities (Smith 263, 268). While subtle, the detail of light may have contributed to an underlying discomfort of being in an urban setting on top of the existing dangers and grievances that occur in largely populated areas.

5. Agriculture & Economy

The commercialization of agriculture, as well as the necessity and size of its labor force, demonstrates its economic importance. Agriculture served as the basis and the source of subsistence for all ways of life. The lands of the Roman Empire, especially in close proximity to a major city center, were great for agriculture, with relative ease of water access as well as fertile volcanic soil (Stoddart 206). This meant that in order for a city to prosper and support itself, a strong reliance on agriculture was necessary. The countryside served as the backdrop and foundation for the city. Simon Stoddart examines the role and relationship between rural and urban centers in terms of centralization and nucleation, specifically in examples of Etruscan cities and political intents, which were built on by the Romans. Stoddart highlights the differentiation of nucleation on a case-by-case territorial basis, but explains the overarching connection of the city to the agricultural center, "The size of the center at the time of foundation was in proportion to the size of its territory, and the relationship to the countryside was achieved through a stepped gradation of settlement size, from the urban center through secondary centers to the farmsteads themselves" (205). This gradation of the landscape and the path formed from countryside to city center, although in Etruria, still demonstrates the basis on which cities function on agricultural connection and production. This relationship further reflects the dependence of concentrated population centers, urban areas, on farming and food production.

5.1. Colonization of the Countryside

In Rome specifically, the relationship between the 'town and country' is perhaps most evident in an examination of Roman land survey and colonization. As demonstrated in the process of centralization, the way that land is distributed indicates the economic hierarchy and dependence of an urban system. In an exploration of the *Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum*, a collection of texts on Roman land survey, Brian Campbell assesses how the text illuminates the neglected study of the countryside and its economic implications. Campbell's breakdown of the process of Roman colonization, mainly under Augustus, reveals that the system is similar to the process of Etrurian nucleation and centralization, with intentional choice of land based on agricultural workability (82). The most basic requirements for desirable land included a reasonable amount of farming land, defined as an adequate combination of woodland and pasture, as well as access to water, most favorably proximity to a river (Campbell 90-91). The

intentionality of land choice emphasizes the economic necessity of agriculture within a socio-political network, or empire.

The colonization of the countryside was undertaken by the Roman elite, contributing to the displacement of the rural poor. The list of required components for land, wood, fields, and water, echo Horace's prayer in the second book of his Satires, "A piece of land, not so very large, where there would be a garden, and near the house a spring of ever-flowing water, and up above these a bit of woodland. More and better than this the gods have done for me. I am content" (2.6.1-4, Fairclough trans.). Horace's desires are fulfilled by the land parameters listed by the surveyors. The process of land survey and colonization under Augustus contributed to the popularity of the rustic fantasy by making it both attainable for and attractive to the Roman elite. It is important to note, however, that the framework of the colonies were based on and around an urban center, making them rural caricatures of a city. During the Middle to Late Republic, the most forms of rural settlement existed as isolated farmsteads and hamlets, occupied by poorer populations whose lives centered around working the land (Attema et al. 149). The dispersal of farmsteads and hamlets reflected the decentralization that existed prior to the colonization of the countryside. The self-sufficiency that was prized in country living made this decentralization possible, but was corrupted in the process of rural expansion. The expansion and rural occupation was inherently dependent on urban development and thus resulted in an increase in the demand for agricultural production (Attema et al. 153). This further bifurcated the idealized rural life that was chased as a result of colonization and the reality of rural life under this expansion.

6. Environmental Impacts

The environmental impacts of Roman colonization and the economic agricultural implication that came with the expansion of an urban system are underexplored in terms of the connection to the rustic fantasy. The corruption of the countryside occurred both in literal and idealistic terms, ironically, at the hands of those who complained about the corruption of the city. Of course, this 'corruption' was inevitable in the development of an expanding empire. Economic and social development implies a greater usage and need for resources. As J. Donald Hughes argues, "For a nation to succeed in development would be for its natural resources to be used, for its forests to be turned into lumber and its coal and iron ore deposits into steel. In the process, the air would become more polluted and the rivers would become more laden with the products of erosion and waste" ("Ecology and Development" 8). Environmental degradation is the impending doom of economic success and socio-political development, and not only causes, but forces this corruption on a larger scale. To some extent, the rustic fantasy was a response to this as a manifestation of environmental concerns and unsustainability. These concerns relate explicitly to the overuse and exploitation of natural resources in both rural and urban areas.

There were many different forms of environmental damage done at the hands of the Romans. Arguably all of them, whether directly or indirectly, were related to farming and agriculture, specifically when they occurred on a large scale. The three main

contenders were deforestation, overgrazing, and erosion, usually occurring in sync with one another; overgrazing led to further deforestation by animals, expedited the process of soil erosion and made the effects permanent (Hughes and Thirgood 64). Since these processes occurred alongside one another, the environmental effects were more pronounced, causing environmental and economic instability. Forestry and agriculture were such integral parts of the ancient Roman society, and quite literally served as the basis for it. The deforestation that occurred in the timber industry and land clearing affected the microclimate and thus the agricultural productivity of the area, supplemented by grazing animals and fire clearing, caused soil siltation, salinization, and exhaustion (Hughes and Thirgood 68). This created a domino effect of economic strain, decreased productivity, and natural disasters. The widespread use of these practices, under the pretense of supporting the growing demands, actually undermined the agricultural and environmental stability of the Roman Empire.

6.1. Stability

This lack of environmental stability likely contributed to insecurity in a broader sense, as Rome was mainly an agrarian, or at least agriculturally supported, system. To say that ecological issues were the dominant causes for the decline of the empire would be a generalization, but they definitely played a part. Guy Middleton examines the role of environmental degradation in the collapse of great societies, arguing that climate change is the principal factor in historical change and that complex societies tend to commit 'ecocides' by outgrowing, and thus over-exploiting their natural resources and environments (258). This perspective is often overlooked and misunderstood, but a lack of sustainability paired with climate change can have serious implications. This revelation of grave environmental consequences was not lost on the ancient population. Seneca, in his *Epistulae*, writes that the human race will be condemned to death by the earth, through all the damage mankind has wrought upon it, and that in the end everything will return to nature (71.15-16). While Seneca did not mention specific examples of environmental harm, the idea of an anthropogenic apocalypse and the separation between humans and nature is present. The catastrophic ideas about environmental stability and eco-anxiety are not necessarily on the forefront of thought, but appear in some subconscious awareness.

6.2. Eco-anxiety

Other ancient authors also demonstrated environmental awareness, especially in terms of over-exploitation, resource depletion, and human intervention in nature. In his *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny the Elder writes "Assuredly mankind wants nothing to be as nature likes to have it" (19.19.56, Rackham trans.), later detailing how the penetration and rummaging of the inner parts of the earth despite the bountiful provisions on the surface only causes more issues for humanity (33.1.2-3). The intrusion and interruption of natural systems can only lead to distress, in the realms of both humans and nature. This awareness of the exploitation of natural resources provides an insight into the

ancient understanding of the surrounding environment. In the same manner, Columella argues in *De Re Rustica* that underproduction in agriculture is not the fault of an aging earth, but rather the fault of its merciless and demanding stewards, since the earth has “always brought forth all things and is destined to bring them forth continuously” (Preface 1.1-3, Ash trans.). As he explains, the earth has and will always produce, but not by regulated and taxing human standards. Columella echoes this recurring theme of human interference and its implications for natural resources and agricultural production. In his *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius also reiterates the same theme, remarking that uncultivated land is more prolific than cultivated land, and that while humans may bring the earth’s bounty to great fruition, the process would be much better without intervention (1.208-214). Again, Lucretius repeats that the earth and the natural environment would be better off without mankind’s involvement. The idea that humans ‘help’ the earth through heightened agricultural production discounts the effects that this overproduction has on the environment.

7. Rusticity as Sustainability

The complaints about the disturbance of nature revealed that ancient Roman elite writers were well aware of the environmental harm, but they did not know how to fully avoid it. ‘Sustainability’ as it is now understood was not an explored or utilized concept. In many cases, growth and development were perpetuated by the replacement of unsustainable practices with other equally unsustainable practices, and the sheer size of the Roman Empire allowed for this through vast access to natural resources (“Sustainability and the Empire,” Hughes 28-29). This trade-off only addressed the surface level issues of resource depletion instead of making environmentally sound changes and was supported by the privileges of empirical land use. The expansiveness of the empire encouraged the use of natural resources and drove its development. J. Donald Hughes also identifies humanity’s reluctance to place itself within the ecological web, deceptively releasing itself from the restraints of nature through technology and resource use (“On Resigning from Community Life” 130-132). These factors, most importantly the distancing and lack of sustainable understanding, contributed greatly to the over-exploitation of the environment. This divide and fictitious interchange of unsustainable and nonviable practices in ancient thought is also evident in the ideas surrounding the polarization of urban and rural life.

7.1. Humans and Nature

The human-nature divide becomes relevant to the rustic fantasy, in which the two are once again reunited. The division may be perceived as remedied by a return to nature, regardless of the dynamic of the relationship. Hughes observes, “the Romans treated nature, living and nonliving, as a conquered province available for use by humanity, the imperial species,” and viewed their relationship to nature as a stewardship (“Sustainability and the Empire,” Hughes 31). The idea of a stewardship implies not only dominion, but a role of caretaking. Within an urban setting, removed from the purest and

untainted forms of nature, this concept is harder to apply, but being in the countryside, one may experience a closer connection with the earth. This distorted understanding of the human-nature relationship and the substitution of unsustainable practices reinforced the ideologies surrounding the rustic fantasy. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, each age denotes a change in the human-nature relationship. Ovid describes the Golden Age as the greatest and most primitive age, with eternal spring and the earth freely supplying all human needs (1.89-90, 101-108). The beauty of this age can be identified with the minimal human interference within nature, contrasting later ages in which humanity's dependence on the earth intensifies. In the Iron Age, the distorted idea of stewardship comes into play, as Ovid describes the greed of humans who not only demanded sustenance, but "delved into the bowels of the earth" (1.137-138, Miller trans.). These demands satisfied the growth and development of humanity, but corrupted the engagement of humans and nature. By equating the countryside with the Golden Age, this corruption may be overlooked and the mythical earth may become tangible once again, but discounts the true status of the human-nature relationship.

7.2. Romanticizing Poverty

This fictionalization of rustic life was harmful in its negation of rural realities. There are virtually no surviving accurate depictions of rural life from ancient Roman writers. The *Moretum* is the closest example, but its singularity makes it difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the entirety of ancient rural life. Other examples of ancient literature describing rustic peasant life are unrealistic, including the old farmer of Corycus, mentioned previously, in the fourth book of Vergil's *Georgics* and the story of Baucis and Philemon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. All three examples of rural poverty, however, are romanticized to some degree. In the story of Baucis and Philemon, there is little detail about the daily toils and mundanity that the old couple experienced. However, Ovid glorifies the humbleness of the couple, speaking directly to their lack of wealth and belongings and the two were prepared to give what little they had to their divine guests: "The two old people saw this strange sight with amaze and fear, and with upturned hands they both uttered a prayer, Baucis and the trembling old Philemon, and they craved indulgence for their fare and meagre entertainment. They had one goose, the guardian of their tiny estate; and him the hosts were preparing to kill for their divine guests" (8.681-684, Miller trans.). Here, the emphasis was placed on their need and lack of material wealth, referring to their piety and desire to give rather than their actual impoverished state. This failure to acknowledge their condition, also occurring in Vergil's description of the farmer in the *Georgics*, only addresses the moral concern of generosity rather than the realities of rural poverty.

8. Conclusions

The corruption of the city served as the antithesis to rustic life. This corruption, however, discounted the realities of the rural poor and contributed to the disdain for the city. The city, as the center of development, growth, and demand, reflected the same

negative sides of humanity portrayed in the subsequent eras of the Golden Age because it was inherently human and removed from nature. The growth of a city and the development of humanity necessitated higher demand and use of natural resources. The rustic fantasy served as this juxtaposition, imagining a better way of living that minimized the overuse and exploitation of the environment. To compound the elements of this fantasy, the use of classical pastoral elements and ideas makes the countryside into the exemplification of tradition, while distancing this idealized version of rustic life from truth and reality.

However, the rustic fantasy also serves as a response to concerns about environmental exploitation. The modern rendition of the fantasy, or 'cottagecore,' explicitly relates to sustainability and environmental conscientiousness. Within "A Beginner's Guide to Cottagecore," Higgins writes, "Cottagecore inherently inspires sustainable living and connection with the land. The movement asks us to confront climate change and consider how we can better care for the earth." This connection is more evident in the modern manifestation of rustic fantasy because knowledge and awareness about the concept of sustainability itself already exists. Many ancient authors identified the negative environmental impacts caused by human demands and greed, but without the knowledge of sustainability, there was no way to remedy these issues, only to identify them as vain and corruptive. The rustic fantasy acted as the remedy, although it entailed no tangible environmentally conscious action. The pastoral setting embraced a connection to the land, and thus agriculture and self-sufficiency.

This idea of self-sufficiency is at play in the few examples of ancient rural poverty, in the *Moretum*, *Georgics*, and *Metamorphoses*. The idea of limited natural resource use is evident in *Historia Naturalis*, *De Re Rustica*, and *De Rerum Natura*. Both themes relate directly to agriculture, but the awareness of unsustainability within it is transformed into an abstracted vision of rural life. This recognition of unsustainable practices, but lack of knowledge on the concept of sustainability and its applications caused this abstraction and romanticization of the countryside. The moralization of rustic life and the exemplification of the rural poor, such as Baucis and Philemon, worked in tandem with the rustic fantasy. It is clear, however, that the individuals like the old couple were a rarity, contrasted by their inhospitable neighbors who were also rural poor. This moralization further elucidates the fact that the main proponents of the rustic fantasy were elite Roman writers who were unfamiliar with the realities of rural life. The rustic fantasy acted as a response to unsustainability and the deterioration of the relationship between humans and nature, but failed to provide palpable solutions for these issues and account for rural realities, instead functioning as the solution itself.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the completion of this paper, from critique, assistance, and emotional support. Thank you to my faculty advisor, Dr. Lora Holland Goldthwaite, and my peers, for patience and suggestions and thank you to my

friends and my mom for not only putting up with me over the course of this semester, but offering great comfort and advice.

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