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Fire and Human Error in Vergil's Second *Georgic*

At *Georgics* 2.303-14 a devastating fire rages through an olive grove with tragic consequences: the fruitful trees, products of human effort and ingenuity in grafting, are reduced to sterile *oleastri*, wild olive. I present a new interpretation of the passage by relating the fire and its effects to a series of human errors which bring about disaster and defeat man's efforts.

The fire has attracted attention as a parallel to the infamous storm (1.311-37) and plague (3.474-566). In this paper I look at the fire in its immediate context, a set of often ignored but thematically crucial technical precepts on the planting of vines and trees. In doing so, I will show [following Putnam and Ross] that there are significant correspondences between the olive tree which goes up in flames and the mighty oak which "outlives many generations of men" in the preceding passage (2.291-97). Thus two contrasting passages draw our attention to a theme central to the *Georgics* as a whole: the effective and ineffective uses of *labor*.

The fire has been seen as the destruction of human, and artificial, work in favor of the vigor of natural growth [Ross], but my reading of the passage emphasizes not so much the failure of *labor* as a concept but of the planter's failure to carry it out correctly. Thus any implied criticism in these passages is of individual farmers who do not carry out their work correctly, not of Jupiter's imposed obligation of *labor*. The destruction wrought by the fire is only superficially dark or pessimistic, then, and in fact points up a contrast not between stable and volatile sides of nature [Putnam], spontaneous and artificial [Ross], or the golden and iron ages [Thomas], but instead between didactic precepts studiously carried out and those ignored. The olive tree, therefore, functions as a symbol for the failure to apply *labor* correctly--the fire is designed to let us see the consequences of these mistakes; it does not signify that *labor* itself is a failing enterprise.