Coda

Secrets of the willow

Richard Lehman is a general practitioner, gardener and polymath who lives near Banbury in Oxfordshire. Those of us who are lucky enough to be in his address book receive each week, by e-mail, his own personal digest of all the main weekly American and British medical journals. Richard’s summaries of all the latest research articles are embellished with literary, historical, and scriptural allusions, as well as his own very strong opinions concerning the merits or otherwise of the research papers themselves. Every one of these ends with a description of ‘plant of the week’, giving him a chance on occasion to make some links between topical scientific issues and seasonal gardening ones.

One of his recent summaries covered a big clinical review of oral antiplatelet therapy which showed that good old-fashioned aspirin, originating from the bark of the willow tree, was still the front runner. Presumably in celebration of this, he declared the weeping willow to be his plant of the week, and offered his readers two illustrative quotations:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof
For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song...

Psalm 137

The poore Soule sat singing by a Sycamour tree,
Sing all a greene Willough:
Her hand on her bosome, her head on her knee,
Sing Willough, Willough, Willough,
The fresh Streames ran by her, and murmurd her moanes,
Sing Willough &c.,
Her fast teares fell from her, and softened the stones,

Now, I have enormous admiration for Richard’s scholarship, but on reading this I wondered whether he had made two rather uncharacteristic mistakes. Firstly, I thought it most unlikely that the willow in the psalm was of the weeping variety. Secondly, I was pretty sure that the poor soul in Desdemona’s song sat ‘sighing’ by a sycamore tree rather than ‘singing’. These two small niggles sent me on a journey of literary and botanical discovery that has revealed (among other things) that willows are not always willows, that sycamores are unlikely to be sycamores, and that poor souls may indeed sigh and sing at the same time. My suspicions about the tree in the psalm arose because I was sceptical that you could hang any kind of harp on a weeping willow, even if—as was presumably the case here—your instrument was more like a Welsh harp than a concert one. Of course, the passage is meant to be figurative rather than literal, and it has its counterpart in Psalm 126 when the exiles return to Zion with songs of joy. All the same, I doubted if the psalmist would want to run the risk of evoking the rather pathetic picture of harpists struggling to hang up their instruments on the fragile, vertical branches of a weeping willow.

As it happens, willows (aravim in Hebrew) appear six or seven times in the bible, generally as ‘willows of the brook’. However, modern commentators seem to agree that the aravim mentioned in the Psalm 137 are not in fact willows at all but Populus euphratica. This is a kind of poplar native to Iraq, apparently similar in some ways to our own black poplar. It has two different kinds of leaves—long pedunculated ones as well as deltoid ones—and this may explain why it was regarded as a willow. Poplars and willows are closely related anyway, and people in biblical times may not have distinguished one from the other. And who knows, maybe the psalm was written by a Jerusalemite who had never...
actually been to Babylon or looked at the trees there very closely.

Populus euphratica appears in only one other place in the bible, in the prophecies of Ezekiel. There it has a different name—tsaitsaith, which is thought to be onomatopoeic, echoing the characteristic rustling of the leaves. For Ezekiel, the tree symbolized the deep-rooted imperial power of Babylon. This certainly adds some poignancy to the image of hanging up your harp in despair.

As for the Shakespearean willow song, I am pleased to say that both Richard Lehman and I were proved right. The poor soul ‘sighs’ in earlier quarto editions of Othello, but ‘sings’ in the first folio edition of the plays. This is almost certainly because the typesetter got impatient and anticiapted the word in the next line—a common error known as dittography. However, if you look more closely at Desdemona’s song, it leads to some more arboreal surprises and pleasures.

For a start, the tree in the song, like the biblical one, cannot have been a weeping willow either. They were unknown in Europe until they were imported from China at the beginning of the eighteenth century: the Chinese connection is commemorated in the willow pattern plate, designed in 1779. Popular myth attributes the first weeping willow grown in Britain to Alexander Pope, who is said to have planted a budding wand from a basket containing figs that a Turkish lady admirer had given him. A later inhabitant of Pope’s villa in Twickenham then cut it down, to deter tourists who came especially to gawp at it.

It was Linnaeus who gave the tree its Latin designation Salix babylonica, also on the mistaken assumption that it was the psalmist’s tree. The English term ‘weeping willow’ was first used around the same time, presumably because of the psalm as well, although the description might be justified by the tree’s drooping appearance alone. Ironically, most weeping willows nowadays are not the real thing, but a hardier hybrid with the native white willow Salix alba. Which brings us, finally, to the sycamore, and the intriguing question of why the poor soul in Desdemona’s song should sit by a sycamore but sing about willows. Part of the answer, apparently, is that the sycamore is not a sycamore either, or at least not the familiar Acer pseudoplatanus, or English maple, that we now mistakenly call a sycamore. Instead, the song refers to the mulberry fig, Ficus sycomorus, which appears many times in the bible as a symbol of rejuvenation, but seems, by Shakespeare’s time, to have acquired an association with infidelity—not that anyone is suggesting for one moment that there is a link between the two.

In the original Elizabethan song from which Shakespeare took his version, it is a man who is lamenting his wife’s unfaithfulness, shortly before killing himself. The ironic contrast with Desdemona’s position, as a faithful wife about to be murdered by a pathologically jealous husband, would probably not have been lost on the audience. They might also have understood why an encounter with a sycamore (which also sounds remarkably like ‘a sick Moor’, not to mention ‘a sick amour’) might lead a woman to bemoan her fate under a willow. Certainly, the association between willows, sadness, loss and weeping appears to have been fixed by then in the European mind, regardless of the botanical facts. But I won’t harp on about that.

John Launer