

BOOK REVIEW

Allegories of Farming from Greece and Rome: Philosophical Satire in Xenophon, Varro, and Virgil. By Leah KRONENBERG. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xi + 223. Cloth, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-51726-3.

In this elegant and learned study, Kronenberg shatters assumptions and posits a disturbing possibility: the occupation of farming, so long regarded as noble, virtuous, free of vice, and steeped in the traditions that constitute the best society, is not only morally ambiguous but ethically flawed. She reaches this conclusion from the very same texts that purport to aggrandize farming. With keen sensitivity to irony and satire that nonetheless resists over-reading, Kronenberg convinces that Xenophon, Varro, and Virgil use farming allegorically in order to explore—and expose—the inherent materialism and ensuing political deficiencies in a state dependent on an agricultural economy.

In the introduction, Kronenberg lays the foundation of her study with admirable clarity. She defends the seemingly disparate collation of the *Oeconomicus*, the *De Re Rustica*, and the *Georgics*; in spite of differences in genre (philosophical dialogue, technical manual, and didactic poetry), purpose, and audience, the texts sit well together as explorations of the farming life. Their disunity actually strengthens Kronenberg's thesis, since she is able to prove it from such a variety of perspectives. For Kronenberg, the three texts exhibit, to various degrees, characteristics of Menippean satire (itself an ill-defined and protean genre). The designation "Menippean" allows for a reading that detects changes of register, exaggeration, incongruity, simplification, and repetition as indicators of irony (pp. 19–20). Recourse to Menippean satire, with its "destructive, rather than constructive, tendency" (p. 6), exposes the subversion of traditional values and conventions, the Cynicism, satire, and parody that suffuse the *Oeconomicus*, *De Re Rustica*, and *Georgics*. However, as Kronenberg herself admits (p. 5), Menippean satire is so nebulous a category even in antiquity that its usefulness is limited. Her best defense of the application of the term rests on the fact that Varro is known to be one of Menippean satire's more prolific practitioners.

The book is structured in three parts that are meant to stand alone, so that readers interested only in Xenophon, Varro, or Virgil can consult the relevant chapters; however, such a desultory reading detracts from the integrity of the

argument that gives this book its force. With the *Oeconomicus* in the background, its philosophical dialogue and its Socratic irony, the *Georgics* takes on new meaning that extends well beyond the established scholarship.

The analysis of the *Oeconomicus* spans two chapters, the first of which demonstrates how Socrates lays the groundwork for a reassessment of the value of farming. After defining property, wealth, and the function of “economy,” Socrates attempts to raise the conversation to a philosophical level; however, Critobulus is unable (or unwilling) to follow, and so Socrates turns to the example of Persian farming. Although Cyrus’ regime appears orderly and productive, the underlying motives are ambition and greed; the apparent virtues of farming contain the seeds of hidden vices. Although farming brings pleasure, prosperity, and health, it motivates men to defend their land: in a world of limited resources, agriculture necessitates warfare. When the farmer and the soldier are indistinguishable, then justice is reduced to material goods and physical needs.

In contrast to the simple Critobulus, Ischomachus is a more savvy interlocutor capable of using Socrates’ own devices against him: he is an “anti-Socrates” (p. 55). For Ischomachus, the art of farming is easy to learn and nature teaches man all he needs to know to succeed. Why then, asks Socrates, are some not good at farming? Aren’t there some aspects of farming (i.e., the weather) that are beyond man’s control? Even industrious and diligent farmers can lose their estates. For Socrates, “part of the reason the industrious farmer will never be successful is because his very conception of what constitutes success is faulty” (p. 64).

This is Kronenberg’s method: to upend established preconceptions, and with Varro she is at her best. The *De Re Rustica* is no longer the familiar treatise espousing Roman elite ideology. Rather, “it is a subversive work, which uses farming as a vehicle to expose the hypocrisy and pretensions of Roman morality, intellectual culture, and politics in the Late Republic. It does this primarily by debunking the cultural myth of the virtuous farmer” (p. 74). Proof across the next three chapters teases out the ways in which Varro parodies Cicero in form and content. Furthermore, while Cato the Elder is oblivious to the moral ambiguities and the ethical contradictions in his own life, these are the very hypocrisies that Varro exposes in his “ironic moralizing” (p. 100). Varro thus uses agricultural and pastoral metaphors “to model the deficiencies of political life” (p. 108). For instance, Varro compares aviaries, one constructed for the sake of pleasure, the other for profit. Varro’s “aviary might be interpreted as a *mise en abyme*, or image of his dialogue in miniature” (p. 123), complete with Callimachean metapoetic imagery and even a museum. Merula’s aviary, on the other hand, operates on

principles of deception and manipulation of birds for profit. Thus, with the same allegorical cage, Varro traps both poets and farmers, their contemplation and materialism, in their own lies.

Against this backdrop, then, Kronenberg turns to the *Georgics*, one of the most studied poems in the Latin language. The ground is well-worn, and any new path must by necessity be narrow. Kronenberg's Virgil is the familiar poet of Thomas, Farrell, Perkell, and Gale. The *Georgics* engages in a dialectic between poet and farmer, between the contemplative and active life. Several passages reinforce this interpretation: the bees, the Old Man of Tarentum, the epyllion. In Xenophon and Varro, Menippean satire is a genre that destroys preconceived notions; however, in Virgil, Kronenberg detects a sympathy with those who, despite intentions to lead contemplative lives, must nonetheless struggle with the morality of the real world. Virgil emerges as the consummate *gentleman farmer*.

From introduction to epilogue, the early eighteenth century Dutch satire by Bernard Mandeville entitled *The Fable of the Bees* frames the book; this is as far into modernity as Kronenberg pushes the satire and parody of the farming life. At no point does she broach modern conceptions of farming, agriculture, agribusiness, the environment, or sustainability. Yet, if we could be free to think about the morality of the economy and the environment (not to mention their impact on the care of self and therefore on health care), then studies such as this would be one fruitful avenue of inquiry. Whether she intended to or not, Kronenberg has forced this reader at least to reconsider the rhetoric that strips accountability from economic bailouts and stimulus packages, that denies validity to global warming and green-wise initiatives, that exposes us even as we attempt to (re)claim our politics and morality. In different eras, this book will be read perhaps for no more than what it is, but for scholars of the moment, it has an irony and allegory all its own.