

BOOK REVIEW

Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rural Life in Vergil's Georgics. By PHILIP THIBODEAU. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. viii + 326. Hardcover, \$60.00. ISBN 978-0-520-26832-6.

Its author describes this book as a “large-scale exercise in compare-and-contrast” between the *Georgics* and the tradition of Greek and Roman agricultural writing (5). Most modern scholars have treated Vergil’s agricultural poem as a vehicle for some other message—whether political, moral, or literary—but Thibodeau hopes to renew interest in the poem’s treatment of agriculture for its own sake. Based on a thorough knowledge of Greco-Roman agronomy and a broad survey of relevant sources, he shows that Vergil’s presentation of agriculture differs significantly from that of his contemporaries, and he makes an attractive argument that these differences reveal part of Vergil’s purpose in the *Georgics*.

In Chapters 1–4, Thibodeau argues that Vergil’s intended original audience was wealthy landowners, whom the poet aims not so much to instruct as to entice to rustication and the further study of agronomy. The civil wars forced many of this class into an unhappy retirement from political life in the city, so the *Georgics* can be seen as a work of consolation carried out through a protreptic to agriculture. As Thibodeau shows, the Roman tradition before Vergil is generally hostile to the *vita rustica*, largely because its isolation precludes social and political advancement. Vergil, however, systematically distorts country life in ways that characterize it as a worthy alternative to the city and even, paradoxically, as a place where one could achieve glory. This argument is not only convincing, but also simple and elegant enough to teach with; one may hope it will finally supplant the dated view of the *Georgics* as an agricultural handbook advocating a return to the simpler days of peasant farming.

Thibodeau’s steady focus on agronomy—with its corresponding de-emphasis on the poem’s literary background—makes these chapters valuable as historical and economic context for any study of the *Georgics*, but also creates some blind spots. Thibodeau shows, e.g., that Vergil’s positive depiction of manual labor is foreign to the Roman agronomical tradition, but he fails to connect

this perspective to Vergil's literary model Hesiod, who enjoins work on his brother Perses throughout the *Works and Days*. Still, the book's new perspective on Vergil's audience gives it new traction with some previously difficult passages, like the *Laudes ruris* at the end of *Georgics 2*: where Ross and Thomas have seen the poem as provoking skepticism and pessimism through its "lying" presentation of rustic life as easy (e.g., *fundit humo facilem victum iustissima tellus*, 2.460), Thibodeau shows that much in this passage makes good sense from the perspective of a wealthy landowner, whose staff would handle the day-to-day difficulties of farm life.

In Chapter 5 Thibodeau departs from his early focus on agronomy to consider the *Georgics* in light of ancient literary criticism. Although it is not quite clear how this chapter fits with the rest of the book, it is nevertheless full of valuable insight into Vergil's poetic method and its development. Proceeding from the ancient critical disagreement over the purpose of literature—instruction or entertainment (*psychagogia*)—Thibodeau explores the poem's "psychagogy," i.e. its ability to excite and then relieve strong emotions in its readers, analogous to the excitement and catharsis of pity and fear that Aristotle saw in tragedy. Although didactic poetry was sometimes condemned for its failure to draw readers in emotionally, Thibodeau plausibly suggests that Vergil adapts technical advances by Nicander—who excited fear and pity by describing the effects of snake bites—and Lucretius—who excited and then undercut strong emotion to demonstrate its vanity—to involve his readers emotionally in his project of agricultural protreptic. To demonstrate, Thibodeau looks at how Vergil excites *pathos* in the *Georgics*, and how he "scripts" the emotional responses of his readers, finding (inter alia) that he creates emotional tension by exciting an emotion but ordering his addressee not to feel it (e.g., he should not forgive the horse's pathetic old age, 3.95–100), and that he excites strong emotion only to purge it (catharsis) by channeling it into wonder (e.g., Aristaeus's grief over the loss of his bees, 4.321–32 is dispelled by his wonder at his mother's underwater home, 4.363–73). Thibodeau's argument here is indirect, but his points are of great interest, and Vergilians will see implications for the *Aeneid* as well, since these techniques prefigure that poem's well-known polyphony and its use of wonder/ignorance as a closural device (e.g. after Aeneas views his shield, 8.729–31).

Different parts of this book will be useful to different readers. Students will profit from its convenient Introduction, which lucidly surveys trends in the poem's interpretation; teachers of literature and history will find Thibodeau's narrative helpful for their accounts of the Augustan period; and scholars will find much

of value in his endnotes, his survey of the poem's early reception (Ch. 6), and his two highly informative appendices, which include a catalogue of the poem's known early readers. The book's greatest virtue is this assemblage of data, which allows Thibodeau to make good observations and novel suggestions. Not every detail of Thibodeau's argument is equally satisfying, but its general contours emerge as both right and useful. And although some scholars may see insensitivities that result from his emphasis on economics, Thibodeau is remarkably sensitive to how Vergil creates an effect, even when one disagrees about why.

JOHN HENKEL

Georgetown College, John_Henkel@georgetowncollege.edu