

Philip Thibodeau, *Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rural Life in Vergil's Georgics*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. 336. ISBN 978-0-52-026832-6. \$60.00 (hb)

Despite the number of books written on the *Georgics* in recent decades, Thibodeau offers new evidence and a novel vantage point for reassessing this challenging and fascinating poem. He brings to the work extensive knowledge of the realities of Roman agriculture and agricultural writing, and detailed study of the reception of the *Georgics* in antiquity. His new perspectives produce readings that are often valuable for both historians and literary scholars, though not all are fully persuasive. Historians should note, for example, Thibodeau's clear demonstration that the oft-repeated claim that there are no slaves in the *Georgics* is wrong, or overstated, for Vergil "often identifies and describes laborers who in the experience of his readers were typically slaves, and depicts farmers giving commands to members of a slave staff" (45). Thibodeau makes many novel and fascinating observations, though not all readers will accept every conclusion he draws from them; the book should be a spur to further work on the poem.

The book aims to "situate the *Georgics* within the discourse of agrarianism in ancient Rome" (4) and to "show how the poem innovates and departs from the conventions of agrarian discourse and practice" (5). The poem addresses the concerns of the *agricola*, but in literary Latin, Thibodeau shows, the term *agricola* refers to a landowner who farms, in earlier ages with his own hands but in Vergil's day through the labor of others. Vergil's wealthy and educated Roman readers could thus be called *agricolae*; what the poem does, Thibodeau argues, is to allow readers to engage in a fantasy of "playing the farmer" (15 and Chapter Two) that includes some hand-on work. Reading with great attention, he shows that old questions about what type of farm the poem envisions, and "whether the farmer whom Vergil addresses is a land baron, a poor peasant, or a figure in the middle range" (19), cannot be precisely answered, because different passages point in different directions. At times the addressee is urged to do manual labor himself as if on a small farm, while at others he is to give orders to workers (mostly slaves) as though on a large farm; in the latter case Vergil enables the fantasy by eliminating the figure of the *villicus* who would in reality run a wealthy Roman's farm. "A major part of the *Georgics*' charm consists of its ability to beckon the reader into a world in which he or she becomes a gentleman or a yeoman farmer or a shepherd or a stable boy or anyone from a cast of authentic characters" (37). Though Thibodeau does not say this, his observation brings the poem closer to other fantasies of the period, like the Happy Isles of *Epode* 16 (on *Epode* 2 see below), the shepherds of the *Eclogues*, the Golden Age of *Eclogue* 4, and Livy's retreat into early Roman history as announced in his *Preface*, and even the imagined enslavement to a harsh mistress in all of love elegy.

For the goals of the *Georgics*' fantasies, Thibodeau shies away from political or existential interpretations, except to say that the need for so many Romans to retreat to their farms in times of turmoil encouraged Vergil to offer consolation to them, by ennobling rustic life (Chapter Three). This to me seems a meager goal for the poet of the

Eclogues and *Aeneid*, and also implausible: it is hard to imagine an actual human being thinking, “Well, I used to be upset that politics forced me to retire to the country, but that elegant hexameter poem about the noble associations and mythological origins of farm equipment and agricultural practices sure makes me feel better.” For Romans who had lived through what Vergil’s readers had, both the fantasy of “playing the farmer,” and the vicissitudes of the farmer and his uncertain prospects for success, lend themselves easily to a variety of deeper considerations relevant to their own lives—as to our own. Thibodeau also never sees the poem as playing with or aware of its own status as fantasy, despite his good attention to the inconsistencies of the status of the speaker and addressee: one response to these discrepancies would be for the fantasy to fall apart, as Tibullus’ fantasy of life on the farm with Delia does at 1.5.35 *haec mihi fingebam*, and as so many speakers’ fantasies fall apart in Catullus and in the *Eclogues*. Thibodeau sees Horace’s *Epode* 2, which spends 66 lines on the delights of life on the farm, then announces in the last four lines that these are the fantasies of an urban moneylender, as satirizing the picture presented in the *Georgics*, despite the chronological problems (217–218): why not instead see both poems as similar treatments of the fantasy of playing the farmer, with the idyll undercut less overtly in the *Georgics*?

In Chapter Four Thibodeau’s good knowledge of agrarian writers makes him able to point out the Vergil’s “selectivity,” which is to say “the *Georgics*’ extreme compression and omission of topics others writers treat as indispensable” (116), which makes the poem on its own unusable as a handbook. His claim is that the omissions entice a reader to want to learn more about technical matters, but others could say that they mean that technical matters are just a feigned topic; here discussion of recent debates on the nature of didactic more broadly might have been welcome.¹

Chapter Five explores the second part of Seneca’s claim (*Epistles* 86) that Vergil wrote the poem not to teach farmers but to “enchant readers” (*legentes delectare*). Thibodeau explores the poem’s *psychagogia*, how it uses rhetoric to move the emotions of readers, and shows that many passages are written to maximize their emotional impact. Often the “excitement” (169) of the emotional response seems to be an end to itself,² but the chapter leads up to but does not to my mind fully argue for a theory like that of Aristotle’s approach to tragedy, in which passions are aroused but then “soothed” (195, on Aristaeus). The discussion is particularly unsatisfying on the treatment of Orpheus, where “the pathos has been tuned to a fever pitch” (198), but then, Thibodeau claims,

¹ Cf. B. Effe, *Dichtung und Lehre : Unters. zur Typologie d. antiken Lehrgedichts* (München, 1977); M. Heath, “Hesiod’s Didactic Poetry,” *CQ* 35 (1985) 245–263. Incomplete instruction is discussed by A. Harder, “To Teach or not to Teach...? Some Aspects of the Genre of Didactic Poetry in Antiquity,” pp. 23–48, in Harder, A.A. MacDonald, and G.J. Reinink, eds., *Calliope’s Classroom: Studies in Didactic Poetry from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Leuven, 2007), and R.L. Hunter, “Written in the Stars. Poetry and Philosophy in the *Phaenomena* of Aratus,” pp. 153–88 in Hunter, *On Coming After: Studies in Post-Classical Greek Literature and its Reception* (Berlin, 2008).

² Here we are close to the approach to the *Aeneid* of S. Farron, *Vergil’s Aeneid: a poem of grief and love* (Leiden, 1993), which has not won wide acceptance, and to the approach to literature in general of M. Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford, 1989), which briefly discusses *Georgics* 4 (62–63).

the narrative's calm return to Aristeus and his carrying out of Cyrene's advice means that the passions previously aroused have been "assuaged out of existence" (200). I cannot see how this works, or can be thought to have worked for all readers.

Chapter Six discusses "The Reception of the *Georgics* in Early Imperial Rome." Thibodeau's research has been exhaustive (an appendix lists seventy-seven early readers, some nameless) but the chapter's treatment must be selective: "I say very little about the interaction between georgic and pastoral, [and] touch only lightly on Horace's and Ovid's use of the *Georgics*" (203–204). Tibullus 1.1 is discussed, but not 1.5 (which I have mentioned above) or (except for one sentence) 2.1, on the quite Vergilian purification of the boundaries of the poet's farm.³ Every reader will learn something from chapter six and the appendix, and from the book as a whole, but the picture of the poem's reception could have been more thorough, and the whole book's interesting ideas need further thought.

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³ Cf. Denis Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome. Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge, 1998) 121–123, drawing on David O. Ross, Jr. "Tibullus and the country," pp. 251–265 in *Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi su Albio Tibullo* (Roma-Palestrina, 10–13 maggio 1984) (Roma, 1986).