

Vergil is perhaps best known for his famous epic, the *Aeneid*. This poem, which seems to overshadow the other extant works by Rome's greatest poet - the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* - receives much attention from teachers and students alike. Of great interest for a variety of reasons, however, is the collection of agricultural lore in the *Georgics*, which means "matters of the earth". The various purposes of the poet in writing this poem are heavily debated, and attest to the poem's depth and range of meanings. In what follows, we will consider briefly the main subjects broached in the *Georgics*, and some of the lore Vergil passes to us from Italy's countryside long ago.

The *Georgics* were first recited before Octavian (the later Augustus) in 29 BC, after Vergil had spent six years composing the poem. Occupying a middle place between his first and final publications - the slender *Eclogues* and the epic *Aeneid* - the *Georgics* are highly literary and yet down to earth. On the one hand indebted to a long series of didactic poems beginning with Hesiod's *Works and Days* and ending with Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, the poem is, on the other hand, the product of a poet who was born and raised on the farm. The four books that comprise the collection reflect a farmer's knowledge of the earth, as well as a poet's wide reading in agricultural treatises and imaginary literature. For this unusual combination of subject and manner of presentation alone, the *Georgics* are unique.

The first book deals with the operations of the farmer: treatment of the land, including ploughing, rotation, and clearing. The poet next describes the labour and toil involved in the farmer's work, and moves on to the topic of farm machinery. Thereupon Vergil treats the importance of vigilance over the quality of the produce and seeds, and the constant worry over pests and diseases. Besides the operations of the farmer, Book 1 deals with the agricultural calendar. This includes a discussion of the best time for sowing seed, the chores best left for stormy days and winter-time. The book concludes with a treatment of weather signs. Like the first, the second Book of the *Georgics* may be divided into two main sections, of which the first treats arboriculture. Here the poet deals with the varieties of trees and soil. Then, after a brief praise of the Italian

countryside, the poet turns to the topic of vine-dressing and the care of olive trees. The theme of nature's co-operation with the farmer permeates this book; on occasion this theme is developed in a more sinister way: nature must be subjugated through the farmer's *labor*.

Book Three deals with the care and training of livestock, and with the husbandry of smaller farm animals, including sheep and goats. Fumigation of the pens, cleaning of the animals, and the struggle against disease and pestilence are also treated in this book. Book Four, which concludes the collection, is mainly concerned with apiculture (bee-keeping) and the interesting practice of *bugonia*, or the means of generating bees from the carcass of an ox. Obviously a matter of fiction, this mythical account concludes the poem by raising it to a near-allegorical level.

In these four books Vergil develops a number of interesting themes. These themes, it should be noted, have been interpreted in different, even opposing ways. First there is the theme of the dignity that may be found in the labour and toil of the farmer. Then there is the hope for the future as reflected in agricultural life, despite the decline in social and political life. And a third major theme which lends unity to the poem is that the realism of the countryside provides a sense of continuity and predictability to human existence. While the experts have answered the question whether Vergil's outlook in these matters was positive or negative in widely differing ways, most will agree that these are the key themes to the *Georgics*.

To get a better impression of the topics treated in the *Georgics*, consider Vergil's advice on the following topics, all chosen from the first book:

*Cultivation:* Vergil follows the advice of earlier guides by suggesting that a field should lie fallow every other year, in order to regain its "strength" and to retain moisture. Upon the harvest, the soil should be left alone, while the burning of stubble may be permitted. The weeds and grasses that inevitably spring up should be made available to the cattle and sheep. In the year's spring, the fallow field should undergo three separate ploughings, beginning in April, before it is seeded. Typical soil should be ready for sowing in mid-summer.

*Irrigation.* The proper balance of wet and dry, and the ideal timing of

rainfall are, of course, crucial to the success of a crop. The farmer should do what he can: fertilize the field with manure, cultivate it properly, and add water when required. The sown field must be adequately covered with soil, and be sufficiently - but not overly - moist to provide growth.

Breaking apart large clods is recommended, but the most important contribution of the farmer is bringing in water. This he may do by means of artificial channels which conduct water to dry areas. An overly wet winter (the key period of growth) may produce cereals so quickly that they cannot support their own ears. In this case, letting the sheep graze and trample some of the crop may be beneficial, as the stalks send up side-shoots.

*Yield.* Various methods to increase the volume and quality of the yield are advocated. One is the "dressing" of the seeds by means of "olive lees", the non-oily fluid which results from pressing the olives. This bitter liquid was considered an antiseptic and insecticide, and thus - it was thought - ensured a larger number of successful seedlings. Another liquid solution contains compounds of sodium (potash, soda, or the like), and when applied to the seed was believed to ensure a healthy crop.

*Winter Chores.* For those dark days of winter, when "farmers enjoy their grains and hold jolly dinners amongst themselves," numerous tasks present themselves. These include laying traps, setting snares, the making of various oils, the collection of acorns and nuts. Myrtle-berries were picked for their medicinal and culinary uses. For the farmer's wife, the loom awaited her cheerful, song-filled attention. These chores, and indeed all the toils on the farm, may be summed up with the saying found in the *Georgics*: "labor omnia vincit" - "hard work overcomes all challenges".