

Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Studies M.Phil.

Poetry and Knowledge: Georgic and Didactic Verse in the Long 18th Century

Dr Ruth Abbott (rha23@cam.ac.uk)

Many of the most popular poems of the long 18th century were primarily instructive. Inspired by the lessons in farming outlined by Virgil's *Georgics*, they explained to an avid readership how to do things like rear sheep, make cider, go hunting, know oneself, look at a landscape, grow a cucumber, or correct despondency. This course will explore the strong and exciting tradition of georgic and didactic verse in this period, from Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* (1697), through to Wordsworth's long poem *The Excursion* (1814). Among other things, we will be asking questions about the influence of Virgil's *Georgics* themselves, about the significance of form and genre in georgic writing, about the relations between poetry and other forms of knowledge in this period, and about what writers of this period thought poetry could do for and to knowledge itself – about why, fundamentally, they wrote their instructions in verse. For each seminar we will study one long poem in detail, alongside extracts from other poems of the period with similar preoccupations, and a range of other sources.

Downloadable copies of all works for study and discussion will be found on the course's Camtools website, but you are also encouraged to consult the recent scholarly editions detailed below (their footnotes will prove extremely useful for elucidating some of what is going on in these poems), and the recommended secondary criticism. The Camtools site also contains a lengthy (but not exhaustive) list of articles on various aspects of the georgic in this period that will suggest many other avenues for exploration.

Seminar One

This week's reading focuses on Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* and Addison's accompanying essay. We will be comparing Dryden and Addison's approach to that of other 18th century translators and critics of the *Georgics*, and looking at explicit imitations of the *Georgics* in agricultural verse from the first half of the period. We will be asking questions about how georgic and didactic poetry was conceptualised and attempted, focusing on the two aspects of Virgil's *Georgics* that 18th century writers found most worthy of discussion: technical accuracy and poetic style.

Works for study and discussion

*Joseph Addison, 'An Essay on the Georgics', and John Dryden, *The Georgics*, in *The Works of Virgil* (1697)

Book I of John Philips, *Cyder: A Poem in Two Books* (1708)

Joseph Trapp, 'Of Didactic or Preceptive Poetry', in *Lectures on Poetry* (published in Latin 1711/1715; English version 1742)

John Martyn, 'Preface' to *The Georgicks of Virgil, with an English Translation and Notes* (1741)

Joseph Warton, 'Reflections on Didactic Poetry', in *The Works of Virgil*, I (1753)

Book I of John Dyer, *The Fleece: A Poem in Four Books* (1757)

Preface and Book I of James Grainger, *The Sugar-Cane: A Poem in Four Books* (1764)

Recommended scholarly editions and secondary criticism

- The Georgics, with John Dryden's translation*, ed. Alistair Elliot (Ashington, 1981)
Cyder: A Poem in Two Books, ed. John Goodridge and Juan Christian Pellicer (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2001)
The Fleece: A Poem in Four Books, ed. John Goodridge and Juan Christian Pellicer (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2007)
John Gilmore, *The Poetics of Empire: A Study of James Grainger's The Sugar Cane* (London: Athlone, 2000)
John Chalker, *The English Georgic: A study in the development of a form* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969)
John Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Seminar Two

This week's reading focuses on didactic poems influenced by descriptive passages in the *Georgics*. Our main text is James Thomson's *The Seasons*, which we will read alongside extracts from other didactic poetry and prose instructing readers in the appreciation and interpretation of the natural world. We will be asking questions about how didactic and descriptive forms interacted in poems of this period, and about how the *Georgics*, which instructed its audience in how to cultivate the land, influenced 18th century georgics which instructed their audiences in how to cultivate the landscape: physically through forms of 'improvement', politically through acts of interpretation, and morally through the imagination.

Works for study and discussion

- Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), from 'The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody', in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. II (1711)
Joseph Addison, 'On the Pleasures of the Imagination', 411-421 of *The Spectator* (1712)
Alexander Pope, *Windsor-Forest* (1713)
*James Thomson, *The Seasons* (1730)
Book I of Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination: A Poem in Three Books* (1744)
Book I of William Mason, *The English Garden: A Poem* (1772)

Recommended scholarly editions and secondary criticism

- Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)
The Spectator, ed. Donald Bond, vol. III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965)
The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams, Vol. I (London: Methuen, 1961)
The Seasons, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981)
The Poetical Works of Mark Akenside, ed. Robin Dix (London: Associated University Presses, 1996)
The English Garden: A Poem (New York: Garland, 1982)

- John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972)
- Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority: Poetry, Criticism, and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Dustin Griffin, *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Seminar Three

This week's reading focuses on poems influenced by Virgil's celebration of a life of rural retirement in the *Georgics*, particularly William Cowper's *The Task*. We will read *The Task* alongside extracts from other poems instructing readers in the pleasures of country life, particularly games and sports, and later 18th century critical accounts of didactic poetry. We will be asking questions about the relations between descriptions of labour in the *Georgics* and 18th century celebrations of leisure and idleness, about the forms of labour and play involved in poetic composition itself, and about the impact of such discourses upon accounts of writing, versification, and style.

Works for study and discussion

- Canto I of John Gay, *Rural Sports: A Georgic*, in *Poems on Several Occasions* (1720)
- Preface and Book I of William Somervile, *The Chace: A Poem* (1735)
- Book III (pp.60-99) of John Armstrong, *The Art of Preserving Health: A Poem* (1744)
- Samuel Johnson, 'Somervile' and 'Akenside', in *The Lives of the English Poets* (1779)
- Hugh Blair, 'Nature of Poetry – Its Origin and Progress – Versification' and 'Didactic Poetry – Descriptive Poetry', in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783)
- *William Cowper, *The Task: A Poem in Six Books* (1785)

Recommended scholarly editions and secondary criticism

- John Gay: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Vinton Dearing and Charles Beckwith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)
- Adam Budd, *John Armstrong's The Art of Preserving Health: Eighteenth-Century Sensibility in Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011)
- The Lives of the Poets*, ed. John Middendorf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)
- Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Linda Ferreira-Buckley and Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005)
- The Task, and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (London: Longman, 1994)
- Richard Feingold, *Nature and Society: Later Eighteenth-Century Uses of Pastoral and Georgic* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978)
- Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998)
- Richard Adelman, *Idleness, Contemplation, and the Aesthetic, 1750-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Seminar Four

This week's reading focuses on poems influenced by passages in the *Georgics* that articulate a theory of happiness, particularly William Wordsworth's *The Excursion*. We will

read *The Excursion* alongside earlier writing with comparable interests in elucidating the nature and sources of happiness, and shorter poems of the early 19th century that absorb georgic accounts of the happy man into didactic, dialogue, and narrative forms. We will be asking questions about the changing functions of form and genre, about the influence of the *Georgics* and its descriptions of labour and landscape upon 18th century accounts of happiness, and about how poetic instruction was understood and employed in the later part of the period.

Alexander Pope, Epistle I of *An Essay on Man* (1733)

Edward Young, 'Night the First', in *The Complaint: or, Night-thoughts on Life, Death & Immortality* (1742)

David Hume, 'The Epicurean', 'The Stoic', 'The Platonist', and 'The Sceptic', in *Essays, Moral and Political*, II (1742)

Charlotte Smith, 'Beachy Head', in *Beachy Head: with Other Poems* (1807)

*William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814)

Mary Shelley, 'Preface', and Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Julian and Maddalo', in *Posthumous Poems* (1824)

Recommended scholarly editions and secondary criticism

The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. Maynard Mack, Vol. III (London: Methuen, 1950)

Night Thoughts, ed. Stephen Cornford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary (1741-83), ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987)

The Works of Charlotte Smith, vol. 14, ed. Jacqueline M. Labbe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007)

The Excursion, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007)

Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000)

Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Rowan Boyson, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)