Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Studies M.Phil.

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

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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 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

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)  
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


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)
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 English Garden: A Poem (New York: Garland, 1982)


**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**

- Preface and Book I of William Somervile, *The Chase: A Poem* (1735)
- Book III (pp.60-99) of John Armstrong, *The Art of Preserving Health: A Poem* (1744)


**Recommended scholarly editions and secondary criticism**

- Adam Budd, *John Armstrong’s The Art of Preserving Health: Eighteenth-Century Sensibility in Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 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)**


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

*William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814)*


**Recommended scholarly editions and secondary criticism**


