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REVIEW

Review of Melissa Schoenberger,
*Cultivating Peace: The Virgilian Georgic
in English, 1650–1750*

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Melissa Schoenberger, *Cultivating Peace: The Virgilian Georgic in English, 1650–1750*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 168. Paperback, \$34.95

Cultivating Peace is a compelling account of Restoration and eighteenth-century engagements with Virgil's *Georgics* and with that poem's cautious attitude toward the promise of an Augustan golden age. Each chapter treats some aspect of the ancient Roman poem as taken up by several of its inheritors and exemplified by a key author: mutability (Andrew Marvell), translation (John Dryden), contingency (Anne Finch), and imitation (John Philips). Each author offers a poetic model for cultivating what Schoenberger, taking a cue from Queen Anne, calls 'the arts of peace' in the decades following the English civil war.

Schoenberger's reading of Virgil and the later poets who capture his georgic spirit hinges on all four of these themes, but contingency and mutability are most central to her conceptualization of peace. While georgic poetry has often been understood as a panegyric to empire, undergirded by the triumphant certainty of a perpetual *Pax Romana*, Schoenberger persuasively shows that Virgil's central theme of agricultural labor represents not a permanent domination of the land to be recognized and celebrated, but rather the uncertain work of cultivation, where even the most carefully plotted plans and plants can be uprooted by accidents of weather or the interruption of war. Thus Virgil is not, as has been claimed, a cheerleader of empire's inevitable rise, but rather a wary observer of it.

Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' is Schoenberger's case study in georgic mutability because, just as Virgil imagines scythes repurposed into swords when war invades the rural landscape, Marvell depicts the Fairfax estate as an only temporarily peaceful world that can easily morph into a battlefield, so that Nun Appleton is no more secure a refuge than the easily impregnated nunnery that once stood on its grounds. Chapter 2, which studies Dryden's translation choices in his *Works of Virgil*, argues that Dryden amplifies the Virgilian concern with peace's precariousness, while other translators sought to downplay it. The reading of Finch's *Petition for an Absolute Retreat* in Chapter 3 centers on her Virgilian image of a vine left bereft of its prop, exposing the contingency by which it was propped in the first place: even if the retreat here is more 'absolute' than that offered by Marvell, it still requires maintenance. In the final chapter, Schoenberger maintains that Philips' *Cyder*, though imitating Virgil's uncertainty in the face of peace, also marks the beginning of an uncritical wave of georgic imperial poetry.

As Schoenberger points out, the pessimistic strain of the *Georgics* has long been noted by classicists; in context, Virgil's famous proclamation 'labor omnia vicit' is not an endorsement of how humans have used labor to conquer the environment but rather a lament at how labor, with its unrelenting demands, has effectively conquered us. But non-classicists have been slower to recognize this pessimism, causing some to conflate Virgilian georgic poems that emphasize the necessarily constant cultivation of stability, on the one hand, with a more specifically eighteenth-century georgic that declares an imperial golden age already firmly in place, on the other. *Cultivating Peace* is at its best when carefully winnowing out the triumphalist imperial georgic strain, as evidenced for example in James Thomson's *Seasons*, from the hesitant, possibly critical georgic of its main authors, stressing that those authors understood Britain's post-civil war political stability to be not a static product but a process requiring cultivation.

The book is less persuasive in its definition of its other titular term, 'peace'. Only relatively local conflicts, between Royalists and Parliamentarians or England and France, seem to qualify as war; the global violence necessary to expand and

maintain the British empire falls, in the book's terms, under the rubric of peace. As Schoenberger mentions in passing, the British Empire, like many others, directly depended on the literal cultivation of crops—and on the violence that ensured that enslaved agricultural laborers would continue to enrich the imperial center without disturbing its peace. Given Schoenberger's keen interest in, and smart analysis of, how easily scythes can become swords in Virgilian georgic, the lack of consideration of the slippage between—or, indeed, simultaneity of—imperial peace and imperial violence uncritically accepts the premise of the original *Pax Romana*: that peace is in no way undermined by military repression and imperial expansion. In other words, not only is stability fragile, but what the beneficiaries of empire experience as stability is often, for others, stable only insofar as its oppressive effects are constant. In the conclusion, a quotation from a 2014 *New York Times* column on the uneasy peace in Northern Ireland presents the underlying conflict as arbitrary animosity between two nameless, dehistoricized groups, rather than as a postcolonial struggle. The lack of agency in this quotation—'there were bullets in the back of the head. There were car bombs'—echoes the book's general understanding of war as not only figuratively, as in Virgil, but almost literally a natural disaster, divorced from human power dynamics.

The cultural landscape Schoenberger presents in her four chapters, mostly populated with poetry but with a smattering of prose and visual art, offers a variety that pleasingly mimics the diversity in content and form of the four books of the *Georgics*. The narrative voice will often alight delicately on its objects only for them to morph into new ones almost as soon as they are observed. This, too, is a lovely imitative echo of Virgil's light didactic touch. But sometimes this delight in diversity means that promising observations are too quickly folded into the book's overarching argument, and texts that might interestingly complicate the book's thesis are left aside. The near-total absence of Milton, for example, is surprising, given the scholarly emphasis on *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* as post-civil war georgics and how Adam and Eve's constant gardening in Eden troubles the distinction between golden age plenitude and the necessity of cultivation.

Schoenberger's conception of peace as represented in georgic poetry, though limited in its engagement with historical and contemporary workings of empire, is rich and evocative. I would have liked to see its contours further nuanced in both conceptual and political terms. In a georgic world, who cultivates peace, and who gets plowed into the field?

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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