

## Digging More Deeply: Questions in Vergil's *Georgics*

In didactic poetry, the teacher who controls the poem's teaching may refer to student questions. In Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, for example, the poet-teacher uses expressions such as "in case you might ask" (*ne forte requiras*, e.g., 5.1091) or "if you perhaps think" (*si forte putas*, e.g., 3.533), suggesting that he is anticipating questions from the student (Schiesaro 2007, 72 n. 28).

In the *Georgics*, Vergil opens with a series of indirect questions. Throughout the text, he asks rhetorical questions of the student (or reader); in Book 2, he longs for the Muses to reveal aspects of nature to him (2.475-82). And of course Vergil lectures the student, urges certain actions, occasionally gives direct orders, and reflects on student behavior. But references to student questions are rare.

We do see such references in a section of Book 2, when Vergil is discussing the planting of grape vines (and trees) (2.227-297). He refers directly to a student's (potential) question at 2.288: "perhaps you might also ask what are the depths for planting-holes" (*forsitan et scrobibus quae sint fastigia quaeras*). The word *scrobis* is used only in this section and at 2.50, where Vergil shows that a critical part of the student's ability to create a civilized landscape is the transplantation of uncultivated trees into "dug-out holes" (*scrobibus ... subactis*) so that the trees will follow the student "without delay into whatever pursuits you call them" (*in quascumque voces artis haud tarda sequentur*, 2.52). Yet Vergil's answer to this important question is absurdly short. He makes only the obvious point that trees need to be planted more deeply than vines (2.288-89), giving far more attention instead to his famous image of a long-lived oak tree (2.290-97) (Thibodeau 2011, 122). This section also includes Vergil's advising the student on

how to investigate the soil he is dealing with (*rara sit an supra morem sit densa requires*, 2.227), as well as Vergil's ordering the student to "ask first whether it is better to place your vine on hills or on the plain" (*collibus an plano melius sit ponere vitem | quare prius*, 2.273-74).

The relative lack of student questions in the *Georgics* is perhaps not surprising, as the focus is on precepts from the poet-teacher (Schiesaro 2007, 73). But Vergil's failure to give a meaningful answer to his student's rare question also emphasizes that he does not attempt to cover every situation. Book 2 is often considered the most optimistic book of the *Georgics*, with its emphasis on the cultivator's ability to create a harmonious relationship between nature and humanity (Nelson 1998, 122-23). It is thus an appropriate place for Vergil to emphasize that a student can and must build on the teacher's lessons with his own questions—and answers—about what will work in particular situations.

This interpretation is reinforced by what I see as an allusion to a text not usually considered a significant influence on the *Georgics*: Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, a Socratic dialogue that includes a conversation between Socrates, as a student of farming, and Ischomachus, a gentleman farmer. Ischomachus insists that farming does not require complicated handbooks; it is easy to learn, with the natural behavior of plants like the vine teaching the farmer how to cultivate them (*Oec.* 19.17-19). He claims he can therefore prove that Socrates already knows how to farm, just by asking questions that lead Socrates to examine his own knowledge. Their conversation features a detailed question-and-answer on the proper hole depth for vines and trees (*Oec.* 19.2-5, 13), as well as on the kind of soil to plant them in and the right way to plant the vines in the hole.

When compared to Ischomachus' Nestor-like discussions of farming techniques (and shoe organization), Vergil's two-line dismissal of a question about hole depth seems very funny.

But together with the rest of Vergil's discussion of tree-planting, it is also a rejection of Ischomachus' claim that cultivation is simple and easily picked up by anyone who observes nature and then answers a few simple questions. Cultivation (and culture) is complicated and requires difficult choices. Vines (and people) must be tended with great labor by knowledgeable cultivators if they are to grow properly. And students should not count on any authority to have all of the answers—or all of the important questions.

#### Works Cited

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