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**Virgil's Bumpkins: An examination of rural idealization and denigration in Virgil's  
*Georgics* and 21st-century American culture**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Greek and Roman Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts  
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## INTRODUCTION

If you ask any American to close their eyes and think of a farmer, they will more than likely conjure up an image of a “mom and pop” family-owned farm in an ambiguously Midwestern or Southern place — somewhere quaint, rustic, or even “simple.” While this ideal often proves to be less and less common as corporate farming reigns in America, the idea of small, independently owned farms is ingrained in our culture. The episodic plot of NBC’s *30 Rock* demonstrates this rural imagination, as two New York City executives travel to “Stone Mountain, Georgia” to look for a new cast member. Jack Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin) wants to travel to middle America for their search, claiming “small towns are where you see the kindness and goodness and courage of everyday Americans....people who are still living by core American values,” and describing its residents as “wonderful, folksy, [and] simple.” However, his travel companion, Liz Lemon (played by Tina Fey), clearly shows distaste for the area, complaining that “everything is just a little different down here.” Of course, in the end this all backfires comically, and they find that the town’s residents resent their assumptions, one character retorting, “You think ‘cause [sic] we talk like this, we’re all simple and quaint. Well, I’m an amateur astronomer, and Rick’s black wife speaks French.” Therein lies the problem — amongst non-rural Americans, particularly those labeled as the “east-coast elite,” there is often a fine line between romanticization and distaste that manifests itself as a backhanded, patronizing respect. Even as far back as ancient Rome, we can see this dichotomy. Vergil’s *Georgics* has been known throughout history as a didactic, “how to” guide on farming. However, as scholarship has progressed, the *Georgics* is now seen less as a guide on farming and more as a “self-insert” farming fantasy for the elite (similar to the Gen-Z “Cottagecore” craze). Vergil was writing for an elite audience, many of whom did in fact own land. However, most were not out

working the land themselves. Instead they used slave labor and tenant farmers to perform the day-to-day tasks. It is clear from writings of the Roman elite at the time that there was a wistfulness for the countryside, yet it was paired with a clear distaste for the working class. This is exemplified in the term *agrestis*, a derogatory term for a countryman, similar to the word “bumpkin” or “rube” today. The antithesis of this, in line with the fantasy of the “elite farmer,” is the idea of an *agricola*, a benevolent, knowledgeable, land-owning farmer. My thesis sets out to analyze this dichotomy through a close reading of Virgil’s *Georgics* and to apply what we learn from this analysis to rural life in 21st century America, paying particular attention to the rise of populist politics in recent years.

## CHAPTER I: THE *AGRICOLA*

I frequently find myself browsing the web looking at seaside villas and woodland cabins for sale. While they're out of my price range, it's fun to imagine myself someplace else, someplace novel, with an entirely different life. I'm not alone in my daydreaming — one of the latest Gen-Z crazes is the “Cottagecore” escapist fantasy. Popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea centers around an escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life to the countryside. It conjures images of cozy cottages, wooly sheep, gardens overflowing with fresh fruits and vegetables, and picturesque picnics. However, this isn't *quite* the reality of life in the country. Rather, homesteaders wake up at the crack of dawn to attend to their crops and animals, and go to bed exhausted at the end of the day. They experience the hardship, loss, and risk that comes with trying to subsist off the land. While it wasn't baking bread and wearing ruffled dresses, the Romans also had their own romanticization of life in the countryside. The entirety of the pastoral literary tradition is filled with tales of shepherd boys tending to their sheep in rolling green fields — so it's no wonder Romans would *flock* to the country for some relaxation time. There are many accounts of Roman elites, such as Cicero and Horace (contemporaries of Virgil), who wrote about their time in the country.

The picture of an ideal life in the countryside is complicated. While some Romans craved relaxation and respite from busy city life, the male elite readership also yearned for excitement, adventure, and victory — primarily in the advancement of their own status and wealth. Thus, along with the romanticized picture of the countryside comes the portrait of an ideal farmer. Most modern readers will be familiar with Quinctius Cincinnatus, the namesake of Cincinnati, Ohio. He was celebrated in Rome for his devotion to land and country, particularly how he willingly gave up military power to go back to a simple life of farming. In his work *On*



Agriculture (*De re rustica*), Columella writes on the Cincinnatus and fellow “farmer-soldiers” Fabricius and Dentatus:

“It was a matter of pride with our forefathers to give their attention to farming, from which pursuit came Quinctius Cincinnatus, summoned from the plough to the dictatorship to be the deliverer of a beleaguered consul and his army, and then, again laying down the power which he relinquished after victory more hastily than he had assumed it for command, to return to the same bullocks and his small ancestral inheritance of four iugera; from which pursuit came also Gaius Fabricius and Curius Dentatus the one after his rout of Pyrrhus from the confines of Italy, the other after his conquest of the Sabines, tilling the captured land which they had received in the distribution of seven *iugera* to a man, with an energy not inferior to the bravery in arms with which they had gained it.”<sup>1</sup>

This section, though written long after Virgil had died, was clearly looking back to our author — with the tenth book of *De re rustica* in dactylic hexameter, a nod to Virgil.<sup>2</sup> To elite men such as Columella, Virgil, and their peers, these men embody “Roman-ness” (*romanitas*). To be a “real Roman,” a man falls into the “farmer/soldier/citizens” nexus. However, I’ll put forward a fourth dimension: that of an “epic” hero. Virgil stages the *agricola* as the picture perfect protagonist of the Georgics, the “All-Roman” hero, discussing his day-to-day tasks in epic language. In this chapter, we’ll look at how Virgil characterizes the *agricola* and frames him as a hero, resulting in a romanticized picture of life in the countryside for the elite.

### **Meet the *agricola***

Virgil centers the *agricola* in the midst of many “epic” struggles: man versus nature, man versus the divine, and man versus man. Like any convincing protagonist, our *agricola* rises to the challenges thrown his way. In his novel *Playing the Farmer*, Thibodeau hypothesizes that

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<sup>1</sup> Loeb, James. 1911. “*Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella on Agriculture: Book I: Book I.*” Loeb Classical Library

<sup>2</sup> Page 973. Kenney, E.J. (ed); W.V. Clausen. 1982 *The Cambridge history of classical literature, vol. 2: Latin literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Virgil's *agricola* must be a knowledgeable landowner who works his land with care and attentiveness (*cura, scientia, and possessio*).<sup>3</sup> This is in line with the Stoic philosophy, *Georgics*' commentator Miles argues, saying how "Virgil has placed [the] characteristically Roman view of rustic life in the context of the most Roman of the Hellenistic popular philosophies, Stoicism. The view that hard work and stern discipline were the most important of virtues...fit well with the Stoic conviction."<sup>4</sup> For those unfamiliar with Stoicism, it was a Greco-Roman school of philosophy which advocated for the divorce of emotions from decision making and promoted its followers to live a virtuous life.<sup>5</sup> Stoicism pervades the tale not only in the character of the farmer, but also in the poem's attitude towards the divine.

In Book I, Virgil tells the reader "Jupiter himself established what the Moon foretells monthly, by which signal the Winds cease, at what sight often seen, farmers should keep cattle closer to the stables" (*ipse Pater statui.... stabulis armenta tenerent, 1.353-5*).<sup>6</sup> Miles argues that this rhetoric of a "benevolent deity...[who] transformed a too generous world of ease into one that would challenge mortals" is inherently Stoic.<sup>7</sup> Virgil has the *agricola* actively interpreting and responding to signals from the gods; a good farmer must be able to interface with the divine if he wants to be successful. Not only are they responding to signs from a god, but from Jupiter himself (*Pater ipse*), the ruler of the gods. Virgil stresses the importance of a good relationship between the divine and the farmer; the idea of a benevolent divine force helping the farmer is prevalent. At one point, he even instructs the farmers directly to "pray for a humid summer and a fair winter" (*Humida solstitia atque hiemes orate serenas, Agricolae, 1.100-101*). The enjambment of *agricolae* onto line 101, paired with the fact that this is one of the few places

<sup>3</sup> Thibodeau, Philip. 2011. *Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rural Life in Vergil's Georgics*. University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Page 93. Miles, Gary B. 1979. *Virgil's Georgics: A New Interpretation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>5</sup> Baltzy, Dirk. "Stoicism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, April 10, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> All translations provided are my own, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> Page 94, Miles.

where the *agricolae* are addressed directly as a group, is certainly meant to be emphatic. Virgil is urging his farmers to use their relationship with the divine to achieve success when in a sticky situation - Putnam pointing out that “once again, the farmer’s final recourse is prayer (*orate*).”<sup>8,9</sup> Moving forward with our characterization of the *agricola*, let’s keep in mind the influence of Stoicism on the poem.

Virgil’s *agricola* is a diligent and knowledgeable worker who doesn’t ever seem to tire. The focus of section 1.259-310 is on when tasks should be completed, and it’s addressed entirely to the *agricola*. Kicking off the farmer’s “task list” in Book II, Virgil tells us that when the “cold rain restrains a farmer, he is given [the chance] to complete many things, which soon must be done quickly in clear weather” (*Frigidus agricolam...maturare datur* 1.259-261). Even in what could be considered his off-time, the *agricola* is always planning and preparing for the next thing — the next “battle” he must face. The relentlessness of the farmer’s work is apparent through the poem: “three or four times yearly all the soil must be tilled and the land must be perpetually subdued with heavy hoes, the entire forest must be free from its foliage. The work done by farmers in a cycle returns, and the year is turned over through its own track” (*namque omne quotannis terque quaterque...in se sua per uestigia uoluitur annus*, 2.398-402). The language in this section mirrors that in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, with *terque quaterque* used at times of high emotion in the poem. The styles of epic and didactic poetry have always been closely related, with authors using similar word choice and meter. Thus, the structure and the style of the *Georgics*, as a didactic work, lends itself well to creating an environment in which an “epic” hero can live and work, battle and emerge victorious.

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<sup>8</sup> Page 83. Thomas, Richard. 1988a. *Virgil Georgics: Books I-II*. Vol. I. II vols. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Page 31. Putnam, Michael C. J. 1979. *Virgil’s Poem of the Earth: Studies in the Georgics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Another key trait of a Virgilian farmer is knowledge of the land and plants around them. In Book 2, Virgil directly calls on the *agricolae* to maintain their horticultural knowledge, saying “oh farmers, learn the particular care for each kind, and tame the wild fruits through cultivation, and do not let the land lie stagnant.” (*quare agite o proprios generatim discite cultus, agricolae, fructusque feros mollite colendo, neu segnes iaceant terrae*, 2.35-37). Through a series of imperatives, he instructs the farmers to learn (*discite*) and to tame (*mollite*). Not only does being an *agricola* require cultivation of fruits and vegetables, it requires a cultivation of knowledge. The *agricola* is responsible for using his knowledge to turn the wild (*feros*) into the civilized, which will play into our later discussion on the *agrestis*.

In the section on curing apiary diseases, Virgil explains “there is a flower in the meadows, to whom the farmers have given the name Italian starwort (*amellus*), a herb easy to find” (*est etiam flos in pratis, cui nomen amello fecere agricolae, facilis quaerentibus herba*, 4.271-24). He goes on to tell the reader that these flowers are used to decorate the altars of the gods (*deum nexis ornatae torquibus arae*, 4.276), again connecting the work of the farmer with the divine. The flowers themselves have purple and gold coloring, “the colors announc[ing] regality, power, perhaps a kinship with restorative honey and wine...Garlands of the flowers often bedeck altars of the gods as if their appropriateness at a ceremony of thanks or petition was unquestioned.”<sup>10</sup> The *agricola* is responsible for the nomenclature of the flower, showing not only his botanical knowledge, but also horticultural authority; our farmer is credited with the naming of the flower, showing a sort of ownership over both the land.

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<sup>10</sup> Page 270, Putnam.

## A hero for the ages

Virgil plays into this tradition of *romanitas*, painting a portrait of a quintessentially Roman farmer who follows the tenets of Stoicism — both in his interactions with the divine and with the land. Essentially, he sets the elite reader up with the perfect story protagonist, someone that they can see themselves in (or at least, who they want to see themselves in). Then, Virgil goes about creating a tantalizing tale, centering our *agricola* protagonist in the midst of several different battles, particularly against the uncontrollable forces of nature.

One of the first places we see the *agricola* engage in a “battle” is in Book I, when Virgil is describing a storm. He describes how “often, when the farmer led out the harvester onto golden ground, And he clipped off the barley now with a brittle stalk, I’ve seen the battles of winds, clashing together from all sides, which had ripped up fertile crops from the deepest roots having been ejected on high” (*saepe ego, cum flauis messorum...sublimem expulsam eruerent*, 1.316-320). In these lines, the farmer is placed in the role of military general, and his farm tool the soldier, since “*inducere* is often used of generals leading their troops into the field.”<sup>11</sup> Thomas specifically connects the language in these lines to Book XI of the *Aeneid* when “the commander Asilas leads out the troops” (*princeps turmas inducit Asilas*, 11.620). The *Georgics’ agricola*, much like Asilas, is a commander — his tools acting as his faithful soldiers in the battle against the gods for the bounty of this land. Putnam elaborates on this, saying how “these hints of heroic confrontation are expanded...as poet (the watching ‘I’), farmer and reaper, tawny fields and fragile stalk...tamer and tamed, suffer heaven’s impulse helplessly together.”<sup>12</sup>

The transformation of a farmer into a military general climaxes in Book I when Virgil describes the farmer’s “curved blade being cast into a sharp sword” (*et curuae rigidum falces*

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<sup>11</sup> Page 122, Thomas (a).

<sup>12</sup> Page 50, Putnam.

*conflantur in ensem*). The Latin here is beautifully constructed, Virgil taking care to create a pseudo-golden line, patterning the words in an interlocking order around the verb (*conflantur*). This structure not only emphasizes the transition from farming tool to a weapon of war, but the discontinuous word order (known as hyperbaton) also stresses the complex relationship between the farmer and soldier. In war, a soldier often has a clear enemy and is following orders — yet our *agricola* has neither a clear enemy or someone directing him. In this way, our farmer is less like a soldier and more like a skilled commander. He acts with his own agency and has his own goals, which he can do because of his intelligence, diligence, and close relationship with the divine. Yet, he's always out on the front line, “fighting the good fight” and tending to his crops himself, once more playing into the farmer/citizen/soldier nexus created by the *romanitas* ideal. We'll look more closely at who our *agricola*'s “soldiers” might be in the next chapter, but for now let's look at how the farmer is rewarded for his excellence.

### **Reaping the rewards**

If the *agricola* is our hero, he's won his battle. Though he's been toiling against the will of the gods and the land, his diligence pays off. Throughout the Georgics, Virgil includes scenes of prosperity and the land providing bountiful rewards. When talking about the spring harvest, Virgil he tells the reader how “at last, that field responds to the prayers of the greedy farmer, which twice has felt the sun, twice has felt the cold; The farmer's boundless crops burst open the storehouse” (*illa seges demum uotis respondet....immensae ruperunt horrea messes*, 1.47-49). The *agricola* is successful not only because of his diligence and desire for success, but also because of his Stoic relationship to the divine. “At last” (*demum*) signifies the “reluctance manifested by the crop”<sup>13</sup> — this was not an easy battle for our farmer, and is something he could

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<sup>13</sup> Page 27, Putnam.

not have accomplished without the help of the benevolent divine. In the world of the *agricola*, “prayer and labor hold equal importance.”<sup>14</sup>

This idea of bounty and prosperity continues into Book II, in perhaps one of the more famous sections in the poem. Virgil discusses, at length, the joys of country life:

Oh farmers, how fortunate if they should ever recognize their bounties! The most prosperous land creates an easy way of life from the soil, far off from the disagreement between weapons. If no tall mansion with proud entrance disgorges a tide of guests at dawn, if they don't gaze at doors inlaid with tortoiseshell, clothes threaded with gold, or bronzes from Ephyra, if their white wool's not dipped in Assyrian dyes, nor the clear oil they use spoiled by rosemary, still there's no lack of tranquil peace, life without deceit, rich in many things, the quiet of broad estates (caves, and natural lakes, and cool valleys, the cattle lowing, and sweet sleep under the trees): they have glades in the woods, and haunts of game, a youth of patient effort, accustomed to hardship, worship of the gods, and respect for old age: Justice, as she left the Earth, planted her last steps among them.<sup>15</sup>

Virgil paints quite the picture of country life here. The passage is sprinkled with idealistic buzzwords like fortunate (*fortunatos*), bounty (*bona*), prosperity (*iustissima*), ease (*facilem*), peace (*secura*), wealth (*dives*), quiet (*quies*), respect (*sancti*), and justice (*Iustitia*). Essentially, very sweet, pastoral, and idyllic. This portrait is even more striking after he's spent two books telling the readers the trials and tribulations of life in the country. Here, he paints the rural idyll as quintessentially Roman; a humble rural life that is in direct opposition to the chaos, opulence, and avarice of life in the city — particularly, the kinds of corruption that foreign influence introduces. If city life is for “foreigners,” life in the countryside is for the true Romans.

### **The ordinary farmer**

Interestingly enough, the term *agricola* is absent from Book III of the *Georgics*, which focuses entirely on animal husbandry. The care and keeping of animals wasn't usually seen as a

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<sup>14</sup> Page 28, Putnam.

<sup>15</sup> Poetry in translation

task “fit for a landowner” as it was considered the most "wretched" type of work a man could do. <sup>16</sup>Well, then who would take care of the cattle, if not our *agricola*? There’s an entire side to life in the country that we haven’t yet touched upon. Commentator Mynors writes “that the advantages of country life recounted [in Book II] are such as would strike the eye or ear of a visitor, but might be hardly recognized by the countryman himself.”<sup>17</sup> Life in the country isn’t all picnics and overflowing stores of crops, and not all farmers are the “hero” *agricolae*. It’s time to look at how Virgil perceived the *actual* inhabitants of the countryside; not necessarily the elite Romans who moved in from the city, but those folks who were indigenous to rural spaces.

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<sup>16</sup> 11.22-24 Lutz

<sup>17</sup> Page 162. Virgil, R. A. B. Mynors, and Virgil. 1990. *Georgics*. Oxford [England] : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press.



## CHAPTER II: THE AGRESTIS

Growing up in suburban Michigan, I often straddled the line between rural and urban. I spent most of my leisure time in urban areas until I started horseback riding at the age of twelve. While I was excited to start spending time with horses, I remember being so nervous on my first trip out to the barn. I had absolutely no idea what “country folk” were like (though in all honesty, I was only still about forty-five minutes outside of Detroit) — in my head, everyone who didn’t live within the confines of metro-Detroit had the potential to be some sort of “backwards hayseed.” However, when I began to immerse myself in rural spaces (including competing in Western riding shows and running barrels), I found myself surrounded by people from all walks of life, with a diverse set of experiences and views.

Americans aren’t the only ones who grapple with negative stereotypes of rural inhabitants. We’ve spent some time discussing the elusive *agricola*, or the Roman version of the ideal farmer. The *agricola* is a wealthy landowner, who knows his fields like the back of his hand, is able to skillfully plan where crops should be grown, and isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty from time to time — he acts with care, knowledge, and ownership of the land (*cura, scientia, possessio*). So now, let’s take a closer look at the *agricola*’s less glamorous counterpart - the *agrestis*. In a literal sense, *agrestis* can be taken to mean a thing or person pertaining to land, fields, or the country — rural, rustic, or even wild. However, if you were to plug the word into an ancient *Urban Dictionary*, you’d find that it’s most often used in a negative sense — meaning uncultured, savage, boorish, or crude. To gain a better understanding of how Virgil himself understands this term, it’ll be helpful to look at its usage among his contemporaries.

Perhaps one could argue that Virgil is simply using the literal meaning of *agrestis* and trying to describe something as rustic or rural, rather than the more disparaging meaning. However, there’s a word stripped of the negative connotations *agrestis* carries — *rusticus*, which

is often used in a positive sense, or at worst neutrally.<sup>18</sup> The term *agrestis* is often used disparagingly by Cicero, a famed Roman orator and statesman who lived around the same time as Virgil. We'll see that he draws a distinction between someone being *rusticus* and something being *agrestis*. In his work *On the Orator (De Oratore)*, written in 55 BC) he writes to his brother Quintus, describing the ideal orator and his role in society. He details how some men will even put on a country accent to make themselves seem antiquated, describing how “certain people are delighted by a rustic, even yokel-like, voice” (*rustica vox et agrestis quosdam delectat, De Orat.* 3.42). He makes it very clear to his reader that the voice of the *agrestis* is distinct from the voice of the *rusticus* — the *agrestis vox* is even more “countrified” than the *rusticus vox*. He draws the very same distinction between the two words in his defense of Sextus Roscius (*Pro S. Rosc*), where he argues while “this rural life, which you call the life of the yokels, is the mistress of parsimony, diligence and justice” (*vita autem haec rustica...iustitiae magistra est, S. Rosc* 75). He defends Roscius by describing his client as living a *rusticus* life, which he extols as virtuous (as compared to the immorality that takes place in the city). Yet, he points the finger at the prosecutor, Erucius, for labeling his client’s lifestyle instead as *agrestis*; with Cicero drawing a clear line between the two, we can assume Erucius used *agrestis* in a negative manner.

At one point, Cicero explicitly paints the life of the *agrestis* as the antithesis of a cultured, urban citizen, writing “what other force could either have brought together in one place scattered mankind or led them from the wild rustic way of life to this humane and civilised condition of the citizen?” (*quae vis alia...civilemque deducere? De Orat.* 1.33)<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Sallust, in his first published work on The Conspiracy of Catiline (*De coniuratione Catilinae*, written around 40 BC) uses *agrestes* to describe the indigenous people of Latium, who he says were “a savage race

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<sup>18</sup> Adams, J.N. 2007. *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200 BC-AD 600*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Translation provided from J.Adams’ *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200 BC - AD 600*

of men, without laws or government, free, and owning no control” (*genus hominum agreste...solutum*, 6.1).<sup>20</sup> It’s of particular interest to us that Sallust uses this word to describe the Latins, as Virgil writes about them at length in his *Aeneid*. In fact, the word *agrestis* is used six times throughout Book 7 (by far the highest number of occurrences in a single book), where Aeneas and company find themselves landing in Latium. Most often, Virgil uses the word to describe both the Latin landscape and the Latins themselves, particularly when chaos breaks out.

We’ve taken a quick look at how *agrestis* was used in Virgil’s time, so let’s now turn our attention back to the Georgics. Throughout this chapter, we’ll explore how Virgil uses the term *agrestis* in the Georgics, paying particular attention to the application of the term in relation to our *agricola*; he paints the *agrestes* as aggressive, fearful, and ignorant — the antithesis of an *agricolae*, who Virgil clearly believes are superior to our bumpkins.

### **The bumpkin warrior**

Earlier on, we explored the Roman ideal of the countryside being the perfect, peaceful escape from the fighting and chaos of city life. Yet throughout the Georgics we see the battle between man and nature play out; while our *agricola* acts as an elite army commander, we’ll see our bumpkins acting as his “soldiers.” While they might not be in the midst of urban civil disputes, they face the ultimate battle of man versus nature. Early on in Book I, we see the first instance of the “militarization” of the *agrestes* when Virgil describes the various instruments necessary to cultivate crops. Virgil himself says that without the *arma agrestibus*, no crops are able to grow (*Dicendum et, quae sint duris agrestibus arma, quis sine nec potuere seri nec surgere messes*, 1.160). The life of the *agrestes* are not the same as the *agricolae*, who have the ability to use their life in the countryside as a respite from the chaos of the city. Rather, they’re

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<sup>20</sup> Conspiracy of Catiline. Sallust. Rev. John Selby Watson, M.A. New York and London. Harper & Brothers. 1899.

fighting a battle against the land everytime they use their tools — and they're toughened by their work. Virgil describes them as “hardened” (*duris*) here which can be kind of a back-handed compliment. While it can mean uncultured, rude, or wild, this can also be a praiseworthy quality in poetry; instead of a negative meaning, it can also be used to describe someone as vigorous, lively, or hardy.<sup>21</sup> Here, we find the beginnings of a “Homeric arming scene”<sup>22</sup> which is strikingly similar to Book 7 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the *agrestes* rush off to battle. In this section of the *Aeneid*, rural Latium wages war on the Trojans, the local *agrestes* using their farming tools as weapons against the Trojans — so ferociously in fact, it's as if they're using actual swords (*non iam certamine agresti...seges ensibus*, *Aeneid* 5.23-26). Virgil sees the *agrestes* as characteristically bellicose, whether it be against a foreign enemy or the land itself.

There's also an adjectival form of the word (*agrestis*, *agreste*), which Virgil uses as a descriptor. In Book II, *agrestis* is used to describe the wrestling that takes place: the farmers “make their hardened bodies bare for rustic wrestling” (*corporaque agresti nudant praedura palaestrae*, 2.531). In this passage, the *agricolae* are celebrating the rich harvest of the season — with food, drink, relaxation, and most importantly, some games. In order to partake in the rustic wrestling, the *agricolae* must strip off their clothing and compete nude (*nudant*); they're shedding their clothes and with this action, their status as an *agricola*. Only when they prepare for this bumpkin wrestling does Virgil describes them as hardened (*praedura*) — nowhere else does the *agricola* receive this descriptor. Miles picks up on this, explaining how these farmers “make it an occasion to display the very toughness demanded of them in their daily routines.”<sup>23</sup> Slipping into the role of the *agrestis*, or “playing the bumpkin,” is meant to be a fun activity.

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<sup>21</sup> “Durus.” Logeion. University of Chicago. Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/durus>.

<sup>22</sup> Page 95, Thomas (a)

<sup>23</sup> Page 160, Miles.

### Knowing your rustic gods

So far, Virgil has described the *agrestes* as bellicose and aggressive — soldiers warring against the land, and “rough-and-tumble” wrestlers. However, there’s another layer to this presentation. Early on in the poem, Virgil connects the *agrestes* with rural deities: Pan, Silvanus, and the Fauns. By looking more closely at the characterization of these deities (both by Virgil and contemporary authors), and the relationship between *agrestes* and the divine, we can learn more about our *agrestes*. Additionally, by contrasting the separate relationships that the *agricolae* and *agrestes* have with the divine, we’re able to further understand the dichotomy between the two portraits of rustic inhabitants.

Virgil introduces our first rural deity early on in the poem, when he invokes the Fauns — describing them as “the propitious gods of the yokels” (*praesentia numina agrestum*, 1.10-11). *Praesens* appears twice more in the poem: when Virgil describes the technique of lancing an animal’s ulcer as useful (*praesens* 3.452) - and again when he describes citron-tree juice as a more useful (*praesentius*, 2.127) cure for poison. This is an interesting quality to attribute to a deity (*numina*) whom he invokes alongside more established, well-respected gods such as Bacchus and Ceres. Looking more closely at their background, one commentator, Mynors, describes the Fauns as a “group of *di agrestes* with Grecian colouring, who have a special interest in *silvae* and pastoral life.”<sup>24</sup> While our *agricolae* interface with Jupiter, who’s not only king of the Gods, but so utterly Roman (the Stoic *ipse pater*), the *agrestes* have the Graecian Fauns. We see the trope of “othering” foreigners come into play when Virgil talks about the *agrestes*, who he will often categorize as barbarous, or primitive (such as with the Latins in his *Aeneid*).

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<sup>24</sup> Page 5, Mynors.

Virgil goes on to tell his readers that “he who knows the rustic gods is happy” (*fortunatus et ille deos qui nouit agrestis* 2.493), Thomas choosing to translate *fortunatus* as happy, rather than blessed or lucky. Again, here we see *agrestis* in connection with religion, Virgil saying that, if you know these *rustic* gods, you too can be happy. *Novit* has a connotation of familiarity, a “becoming acquainted;” the success of the *agricola* is dependent on the farmer entering the realm of our *agrestis*. Virgil then introduces our colorful cast of rural deities “Pan, aged Silvanus, and the Nymph sisters” (*Panaque Siluanumque senem Nymphasque sorores*, 2.494). Mynors comments on how “if [these] deities were to be taken to represent a literary genre, it would be bucolic rather than didactic poetry...they stand for the idyllic country life”<sup>25</sup> Pan and Silvanus are two very different deities, who perhaps can help us understand the *agrestes/agricola* dynamic better.

According to Peter Dorsey, author of *The Cult of Silvanus*, by “Augustan times, Silvanus was considered a deity of long-standing, tied to the very foundation of the Roman state.”<sup>26</sup> Silvanus is a purely Roman deity, free from the foreign influence that both Pan and the Fauns bring. Interestingly, Silvanus is seen as both an agricultural and a woodland god, the scholar Dumézil putting forth the idea that Silvanus simply did not move away from the woods when they were transformed into cultivable fields and this is how he became both an agricultural and “bosky” deity.<sup>27</sup> These woods often surrounded the farms and pastures, cementing Silvanus as a god of boundaries. Dorsey tells us how the poet Horace had “a notion of [Silvanus] as a *tutor finium*, the overseer of the boundaries, separating the farm from the woods.”<sup>28</sup> As *tutor finium* and *custos* (guardian) Silvanus straddled the boundary between the untamed, rustic wilds and urbane

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<sup>25</sup> Page 169, Mynors.

<sup>26</sup> Page 7. Dorsey, Peter F. 1992. *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion*. Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, v. 20. Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill.

<sup>27</sup> Page 21, Dorsey.

<sup>28</sup> Page 23, Dorsey.

development. In a way, Silvanus is standing between the “uncivilized” *agrestis* and the more refined *agricola*.

Pan is often equated with Silvanus (Silvanus-Pan) in prose and poetry, but Virgil separates them here. He does so for good reason, as there are some key differences in their representations. Pan is portrayed as sexually aggressive, takes a goat form, and is disinterested in agriculture (rather focuses his attention on spending time with his Nymph companions) — Dorsey points out while Pan and Faunus both often assume “erotic roles,” Silvanus is known for his stately demeanor, and is never found in an erotic sense. Thus, we can read Pan as a true god of the *agrestis*, and the stately Silvanus acting as a sort of go between for our urban *agricola*. By looking at the characterization of these gods, we’re able to find out more about our two archetypes; the dichotomy between Pan and Silvanus is akin to that of the *agrestis* and the *agricola*. One god being a stand-in for a foreign, untamed wilderness and the other for the “civilizing” force the good farmer provides.

### **Cultivation, on and off the field**

Thinking more about the characterization of the “bumpkin,” let’s look at how their depiction differs from the *agricola*. As we’ve discussed, the *agricola* is first and foremost an intelligent, diligent worker, acting with *cura* and *scientia*. However, we can see from the way Virgil discusses our *agrestes* that he doesn’t see them as having the same intelligence. Near the beginning of the poem, Virgil describes *himself* as “pitying the bumpkins, who are ignorant of the way” (*ignarosque viae mecum miseratus agrestis*, 1.41). Not only does he see that *agrestes* as *ignaros*, but he even feels pity for them — creating a sort of power dynamic with Virgil and our *agricolae* on top. Looking more at the specific language used, *ignarus* means ignorant,

unknowing, or unmindful. Its usage isn't uncommon for Virgil, who uses the word throughout the Aeneid (28 times, to be exact). At one point, Virgil describes Aeneas and company as *non ignari*, or not ignorant (1.198). However, notably this passage is the only time *ignarus* appears in the Georgics, making its use as a descriptor for *agrestes* is particularly significant. Thinking back to our earlier discussion, Aeneas and his men are perfect examples of *romanitas* — meaning they're akin to an *agricola*, whom Virgil would see as knowledgeable (*non ignari*). This means a character trait of the Roman bumpkin, according to Virgil, is ignorance, or lack of intelligence.

Later on he instructs his readers to train their cattle for “rustic use” (*agrestem usum*, 3.163) when they are young and their minds are pliable (*faciles animi iuvenum*, 3.165) and they're easily-swayed (*mobilis*, 3.165). Thomas details how the rhetoric of this section matches up with texts on education of children.<sup>29</sup> In this section, he not only details the need for a calf's “education,” but also he describes this act as putting them on “the path of submitting” (*viam domandi*, 3.165) - mirroring the language used in 1.41 when discussing the country folk. This again creates a power dynamic between Virgil (and presumably the *agricola*) and the *agrestes*, akin to that between a teacher and a child, or even a farmer and his animal in need of “corrective” education.

Bringing our discussion to the 21st century, there's a similar rhetoric surrounding “rural folk” in America. In pop culture and media, rural Americans are often portrayed as “simple-minded” or ignorant as compared to their urban counterparts. In politics and social justice circles, there's a discourse surrounding the “education” of misinformed rural voters, that can often perpetuate stereotypes about those in rural areas. Let's turn our gaze to today, to see where both negative stereotypes and idealizations of rural spaces intersect with the ancient.

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<sup>29</sup> hortare cf. Cic. De Or. I. 234



### CHAPTER III: THEN & NOW

In the early 2010s, Americans were captivated by the Robertsons, the stars of A&E's *Duck Dynasty*. The show follows the family, who live in deep-South Louisiana, where they've built their duck-call empire. Part of the charm of the show, and what drew in millions of viewers, is watching the Robertsons both fulfil and defy rural stereotypes; while they walk around with big bushy beards, crossbows, and a Southern twang, the family lives in opulence: mansions, fancy cars, and flat-screen TVs. The show is pseudo-scripted by the family themselves, which means they often play into the "redneck" stereotype for audience laughs. The A&E marketing team clearly leans into this, the *Duck Dynasty* app advertisement explaining gameplay by saying "[when] players successfully complete the challenges, their beards grow to epic proportions and they start to transform from a yuppie into a full-blown redneck!"<sup>30</sup> By exploiting rural stereotypes, both A&E and the Robertsons are able to profit. We've examined both the idealized and denigrated portraits of country life in Virgil's *Georgics* through the caricatures of the *agricola* and *agrestis*, the "All-Roman" farmer and country bumpkin. Taking into account our analysis of the *Georgics*, let's now turn our gaze towards 21st century America.

Similar to how elite Romans would "play the farmer," we see countless examples of wealthy Americans trying to insert themselves into rural America for a number of reasons. Most notably, in recent years, is the GOP's appropriation of rural spaces. Looking at the rhetoric of the GOP through the lens of our recent analysis, we'll find striking similarities between the ways the Republican party and Roman elite treat both the countryside and its inhabitants. Over the past few decades, Americans have watched the Republican party's attempt to court rural voters —

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<sup>30</sup>Magary, Drew, and Photography by Jeff Riedel. "Duck Dynasty's Phil Robertson Gives Drew Magary a Tour of West Monroe." GQ. Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.gq.com/story/duck-dynasty-phil-robertson>.

mostly by appealing to them as “fellow” religious, morally-upright country folk. Let’s begin by looking more closely at language used in the most recent presidential campaigns by none other than Donald Trump.

### **Donald Trump and the Republican Party “Playing the Farmer”**

Looking at speeches and tweets from the former president, we’ll find the way he talks about farmers mirrors how they’re treated in the *Georgics*. In a speech given on January 19th, 2020 addressing the American Farm Bureau, Trump said “America has always been a farming nation—founded, built, and grown by people just like you, who pour out their heart, soul, and sweat into this land.”<sup>31</sup> Here, he connects the action of farming with “patriotism,” an American brand of *romanitas*. In fact, he goes as far as to explicitly say so — extolling farmers as “great patriots...[who] understand that they're doing this for the country.”<sup>32</sup> Thinking back on our discussion of *romanitas* and the paradigm of the “farmer/citizen/soldier,” it’s clear that this is the trope Trump is unknowingly playing into. He goes on to frame the farmer as a good citizen and a dutiful soldier, who through the act of farming is providing for and “defending” his country. Trump directly makes this connection in a May 2020 tweet from the White House, saying “thank you to the farmers and producers across the country who have kept our nation fed and nourished

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<sup>31</sup> “Speech: Donald Trump Addresses the American Farm Bureau Federation in Austin - January 19, 2020.” YouTube. YouTube, January 19, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmoQP8li8fU>.

<sup>32</sup>Tatum, Sophie. “Trump Assures Farmers He Has Their Back amid Mounting Trade War | CNN Politics.” CNN. Cable News Network, July 25, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/25/politics/donald-trump-china-trade-farmers/index.html>.

as we battle the invisible enemy!”<sup>33</sup> The invisible enemy, of course, is referring to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

For a moment, let’s take a step back from literal farmers to who they represent — the working class, or “real Americans.” Conservatives will often tell constituents that the “elite liberals” aren’t looking out for “real” Americans - but who is considered part of this “real” America? This rhetoric plays off the myth of the American Heartland, which Kristin Hoganson talks about in her book *The Heartland: An American History* (2019). Hoganson, a history professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, explores the concept of the “Heartland,” which she describes as “seen as static and inward-looking, the quintessential home referenced by 'homeland security,'” the steadfast stronghold of the nation in an age of mobility and connectedness, the crucible of resistance to the global, the America of America first.”<sup>34</sup> The idealization of rural, midwestern America is something we see time and time again. Plenty of media tie the concepts of farming and the American Heartland together. For example, PBS has a docu-series called *America’s Heartland*, which “celebrat[es] the people, place, and processes of American agriculture.”<sup>35</sup> There’s a duality in the way the Heartland is discussed - one San Francisco newspaper describes “those living in the Heartland [as] weigh[ing] more and mak[ing] less. They use more opioids and fewer of them are college educated. And a larger percentage of

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<sup>33</sup>Archived, The White House 45. “Thank You to the Farmers and Producers across the Country Who Have Kept Our Nation Fed and Nourished as We Battle the Invisible Enemy! Pic.twitter.com/GX1h2EgWbf.” Twitter. Twitter, May 24, 2020. <https://twitter.com/WhiteHouse45/status/1264697430378983426>.

<sup>34</sup>Babendir, Bradley. “‘The Heartland’ Aims To Debunk Myths About The Midwest.” NPR. NPR, April 25, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/25/716079591/the-heartland-aims-to-debunk-myths-about-the-midwest>

<sup>35</sup>“America's Heartland.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/show/americas-heartland/>.

them do not have access to high-speed internet compared to [the] rest of the country.” Yet, the same article goes on to say “but when it comes to agriculture, the Heartland shines.”<sup>36</sup> The idea of the Heartland and the agriculture industry are inseparable, meaning farmers and their livelihood are subject to the same rhetoric imposed on the Heartland. This connection means that the act of farming itself is an act of patriotism — just as Virgil connected the two in the *Georgics*. At one point, Virgil describes “the farmer cleav[ing]the lands with a curved plow...this is how he supports his country and small grandchildren, and his herd of cattle and deserving cows" (*agricola incuruo terram...meritosque iuencos*, 2.513-515). Family, God, and country are the cry of American “patriots,” so it’s interesting to see Virgil connecting the concepts of family, country, and farming. Through their profession, both the American and Roman farmer are seen as quintessential members of their society, whether they exemplify patriotism or *romanitas*.

### **From *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* to Hilary’s “basket of deplorables”**

It’s not just Republican elite who are guilty of rural stereotyping; we can find similar rhetoric in liberal spaces. Harkening back to our discussion of the *30 Rock* episode, there’s an undeniable air of superiority in northern liberal spaces. Sticking with our theme of contemporary American politics, it’s also important to look at how “liberals” treat rural Americans. While Donald Trump courted rural voters in the 2016 presidential campaign by declaring them “great patriots” and the “heart and soul of the nation,” Hilary Clinton blasted them as “a basket of deplorables.” Doing so, she incurred the wrath of rural constituents, who used the term as a rallying cry (with hats, shirts, and stickers plastered with the slogan). Sociologist Arlie

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<sup>36</sup>Moore, Doug. “What Exactly Is America's Heartland? A New Study Says It's 19 States.” SFGATE. San Francisco Chronicle, October 18, 2018.  
<https://www.sfgate.com/nation/article/What-exactly-is-America-s-Heartland-A-new-13318520.php>.

Hochschild explores this dynamic in her 2016 book *Strangers in Their Own Land*. A West Coast progressive, she travels to rural Louisiana to investigate how residents respond to this rhetoric. In the heart of “Cancer Alley” lies a rural community deeply affected by the toll capitalism has taken on the environment. Yet, the residents still identify with republican party (the far-right republican party, at that), whose policies supporting big business and lack of environmental regulations directly harm them. Hochschild explores the reasoning behind this dichotomy, and realizes it stems from a feeling of alienation — particularly from those they identify as “the liberal elite.” Many people in Hochschild’s novel admit they felt scorned and patronized by “liberals,” leading them further away from a party that would protect their own interests and into the arms of the GOP. Hochschild explains how the portrayal of the American southerners in the media - as ignorant rednecks, white trash, etc - furthers this feeling of alienation. Hochschild talks about some negative perceptions of rural inhabitants:

“Crazy redneck.” “White trash.” “Ignorant Southern Bible-thumper.” You realize that’s you they’re talking about. You hear these terms on the radio, on television, read them on blogs. The gall. You’re offended. You’re angry.... “Two missing front teeth, all raggedy, that’s how they show us,” one man complained. The stock image of the early twentieth century, the “Negro” minstrel, a rural simpleton, the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich notes, has now been upgraded, whitened, and continued in such television programs as *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. ‘Working class whites are now regularly portrayed as moronic...’<sup>37</sup>

We saw this dynamic play out through the Georgics as well — at the very beginning of the poem, Virgil described his desire to put the *agrestes* on the “path of submission” (*viam domandi*), which was the same rhetoric used in educational texts for young children. In liberal circles, there’s a rallying cry to educate republicans — that if they knew more about police brutality, LGBTQ+ issues, exploitation of labor under capitalism, and environmental issues, they would change their

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<sup>37</sup> Page 143. Hochschild, Arlie Russel. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land*. The New Press.

views. These calls to “educate,” while made in good faith, can come off as patronizing to individuals who are often portrayed in the media as a moronic “other.” Additionally, this call to educate is never directly addressed to conservatives who are considered well-educated and well-off — it’s almost always directed at rural conservatives. There’s a component of classicism, similar to the power dynamic we witnessed in the *Georgics*.

The idyll of the American Heartland and the idea of a farmer-patriot is akin to the portrait of the *agricola*, while the idea of a “moronic,” backwards country bumpkin as portrayed is comparable to our *agrestis*. Bringing the ancient past into conversation with our current moment shows us we’re not quite so different from our ancient counterparts — we grapple with similar questions, especially when it comes to issues of classicism and power struggles.

## IN CONCLUSION

Looking at how the ancient and the modern interact is an essential part of a critical approach to Greco-Roman studies, and we can certainly see the interplay between the two when it comes to perceptions of rural areas and their inhabitants. There is a huge gap in our knowledge of the ancient past, specifically because we're missing the stories of everyday people. By putting our current moment into conversation with the past, perhaps we can gain some insight into how ancient "bumpkins" felt.

Just like us, Romans had a complex relationship with temporality. We repeatedly read ancient authors complaining about how much better things were in the "good ole days." However, near the end of Book I, Virgil paints the reader a picture of an idyllic, rural future. He describes how "the time will come, when the farmer, having labored on the land with a curved plow, will discover javelins having been consumed by rough rust, or will beat empty helmets with heavy drag-hoes and will be amazed at the large bones in the excavated tombs" (*scilicet et tempus ueniet... ossa sepulcris*, 1.493-495). In this section, we see our poet simultaneously looking to the future, speculating on the past, and writing in the present. Our approach to studying the ancient, Greco-Roman past should incorporate this same idea of temporality; as ancient scholars, it's our duty to bring the past and present into conversation with one another, while looking ahead to how it can inform our future.

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