

Aude DOODY

Virgil the Farmer? Critiques of the *Georgics* in Columella and Pliny

For Columella and Pliny, Virgil's *Georgics* occupied an important place in a Roman discourse on agriculture. They use Virgil as a source, alongside Cato and Varro, to illustrate points or to give an alternative view, and criticise him for inaccuracy, when they think necessary. In modern scholarship, the question of Virgil's authority as an agriculturalist rarely arises, nor are mainstream readings often concerned with the detail of his advice. Virgil's claim to follow Hesiod, and his literary engagement with Lucretius, have been creatively explored, but his relationship with the prose writing of Varro and Cato has usually been seen as a straightforward borrowing of information. The dichotomy we see between the genres of didactic and technical writing makes it difficult for us to come to grips with Virgil's self-positioning, and later reception, within an ancient discourse on agriculture. It is clear that the *Georgics* is not a practical handbook on agriculture; the question is in what ways does it matter to Pliny or Columella that it is a *poem*?

The *Georgics*, of course, is not just any poem: its writer is already 'noster Maro' in both authors, a writer who had become a national symbol. Already Virgil's importance influenced how the *Georgics* could be read: the authority of the poet behind the poem is part of the reason why the *Georgic's* information gets such high profile treatment in Columella and Pliny's work. But although both writers use Virgil, their patterns of use and their attitudes to his work seem quite different. Columella often quotes lines from the poem, Pliny usually only refers to the content; Columella is usually positive, Pliny often criticises. But if we look closer at the citations of Virgil in the context of source criticism and the value placed on tradition in each of the later writers, the simple division of good from bad critique becomes harder to uphold. Virgil means many things to the Roman writers who come after him: for Pliny and for Columella, Virgil's value is partly symbolic; he is a means of situating themselves in relation to an earlier tradition of agriculture and in relation to the Roman literary tradition. The style and the substance of the *Georgics* come under scrutiny, but Virgil's place within a canon of agricultural writing is taken for granted. The extent to which Virgil seems to place himself within that tradition needs to be assessed, his engagement with Varro and Cato needs to be analysed in terms of creative engagement rather than simple borrowing of information. The focus here, however, is on Columella and Pliny's readings of the *Georgics*, how they attempt to reconcile its poetry with its information when they appeal to its authority.