Leaf from the third book of the Georgics / by Virgil; Johann Grüninger, printer.

The Tisch Miscellany leaf from the third book of Georgics is from an edition of Publīi Virgili Māronis Opera edited by renowned humanist Sebastian Brant. The Tisch leaf is page XCI of the 1502 edition. Printed by Johann Grüninger in Strasbourg in 1502, Brant’s edition is one of the best-known illustrated editions of Virgil and is a landmark in early printed editions of Virgil. 1 Sebastian Brant was a well-known German humanist and scholar; born in Strasbourg, he went to the University of Basel and is possibly best known for his popular satirical poem, Das Narrenschiff. Although his role as an author is well known, he was also pivotal in the dissemination of Virgil’s writings during the early Renaissance. 2 One example of his efforts is his comprehensive edition of 1502, which brought together Virgil’s works, Donatus’ Vita, and the commentaries of Servius, Landino, Mancinelli and Domenicus Calderini. The 1502 edition thus represents Brant’s efforts to create a collection of unrivaled comprehensiveness, bringing together a vast quantity of scholastic material. 3

Although the 1502 edition clearly had a scholarly audience in mind, Brant made other claims for the usefulness of the text. 4 The edition contains over 200 woodcuts, and in the preface Brant states that the exceptional clarity of these illustrations allow for even the unlettered to understand Virgil’s texts. 5 Though appealing, Brant’s claims to the accessibility of the text through images are dubious. Brant himself may have helped to design many of the woodcuts, and the complexities of the image are clearly illustrative of a scholar’s understanding of Virgil. 6 The images not only illustrate the text but provide interpretive glosses which require prior knowledge of Virgil’s works to fully comprehend. Therefore Brant’s images would at the very least have presented a different type of narrative depending on the extent of the reader’s prior familiarity with Virgil. In any case, the sheer volume and detail found in the illustrations creates a narrative that can certainly be ‘read’ independently of the text. The woodcuts complete the understanding of Virgil Brant sought to create, providing insights parallel to those of the text as well as offering new ones.

Illustration of the leaf:

The Miscellany leaf is an illustration of Virgil’s instructions for rearing cattle and horses, found in lines 155-184 of the third book of Georgics. Illustrations of the Georgics often look to the labors of the month from Books of Hours, where the tradition of

---

1 Princeton University, Junius Morgan Collection: 2945.1502.4q
3 Leach. pg 176.
4 Patterson. pg. 93.
6 Leach. pg. 177.
agricultural imagery was well established. The Tisch leaf depicts three different techniques for this process, though the artist has chosen to illustrate only horses. These scenes are set in an idyllic landscape rendered in full color, with a small house in the right background framed by cliffs and a winding stream. The first illustration is of lines 166-169, and it shows the yoking together of two horses to accustom them to moving in unison; the second illustration, from lines 170-171, shows a horse dragging an empty cart over the ground as preparation for future burdens; and the final illustration, from line 182, is of a horse being trained for warfare through subjugation to the “cavalry’s shrill trumpet”.

The woodcut uses various techniques in order to clarify and order the scenes he presents. The scenes progress not only from left to right in the order they are found in the text, but also from farthest to closest. The artist thus exploits both 2D and 3D space to illustrate the progression of the narrative. The variance in the costume of each man is also an important aid to the clarity of the text, the intentions of the one preparing his horse for warfare clarified by his suit of armor. Finally, the division of space is also important: the difference in intention of the two men at left, who train their horses for agricultural use, and the man at right, is reinforced by the tree at center that divides the page in two.

The ordering of the image thus creates a clear illustration of Virgil’s text, however not all elements of the image are harmonious. The setting itself, though clearly representative of the ‘rural’ is not completely consistent with the imagery. Instead of a field men and horses are depicted in a rather generic hilly setting: more of a stand-in for the rural than an attempt an accurate setting. This underlines the purpose of the illustrations, which don’t attempt to create a ‘handbook’ for the farmer, but rather to illustrate chosen sections of the text. Furthermore, though the men and horses hard at work are at home in this landscape, their visible strain provides a contrast to its sense of idyllic calm. The straining horses and the raised whip of the farmer illustrate the difficult nature of the work—a nuance appropriate to the text of the Georgics, which consistently highlights the harshness of the workingman’s lot.

The exploitation of space in the Georgics as well as the clarity of narrative depiction is a characteristic of the images from the 1502 edition. The spatial relations between episodes depicted in the same woodcut are particularly key, helping to establish a gloss on the text that underlines both the progression of the narrative and often provides an analysis of events depicted.

Georgics, the role of its images:

Discussion of illustrations of the Georgics in Brant’s edition are more scant than those of the Eclogues or Aeneid. This may have something to do with the particular nature of this imagery, which derives from the ‘didactic’ tone of the poem. The didactic nature of the imagery in Georgics also raise certain issues as to the nature of the text.

---

7 Patterson, pg. 106. In these scenes of labor agricultural tasks were used not only to illustrate the various activities appropriate to each month, but to qualify the place of each member of society by showing them in their proper role. Images of peasants at work were also sometimes used to reflect the fallen state of man, their image therefore served to reflect a hierarchy both socially and divinely enforced. See Liana Vardi, below.

8 Leach, pp. 178-180.
itself. The *Georgics* covers a variety of information in its four books, the first book is devoted to crops and weather signs, the second is devoted to the subject of trees and vines, the third takes as its topic animal husbandry, and the fourth and final discusses the ‘parallel’ species of bees. Didactic though it may be the fact that it is also a poem has long posed problems regarding how the *Georgics* are to be read. Within each of these books and the didactic information they provide, are parallel themes: the various struggle of human existence and the question of how a man can live a dignified existence, emerge from each of these books. The fourth book ends with a somewhat hopeful suggestion about the ability of man to outlast death through art.\(^9\)

It is the more ‘poetic’ interpretation of the text, which establishes the primacy of theme over content, which is taken as the ‘true’ meaning of the poem today. Modern critics disregard the poem’s role as a didactic tool, instead suggesting that discussions of the various aspects of rural life provide Virgil with ground to explore the ups and downs of human existence. David R. Slavitt expresses this sentiment quite clearly,

> “The poem is a marvel of shifting tonalities and textures, an almost abstract composition that hangs on the didactic frame but seems virtually irrelevant to any discussion of farming…the poem’s subject, is not agriculture but labor, any labor, and the redemption that is possible through the achievement of excellence.”\(^10\)

Though this interpretation is firmly established today, it does not have historical primacy. In Late Antiquity the likes of Columella and Pliny cited Virgil as an authority on agriculture—though Pliny did so with a rather negative tone, pointing out the many factual discrepancies in Virgil’s work. In fact, for Pliny, it was the verse which got in the way of the function—quite the opposite of the modern view.\(^11\) Although the Columella and Pliny’s motivations for citing author of such high reputation may not be based purely on the usefulness of his information, the fact remains that they viewed the poem as an authority a information—regardless of whether or not was written in verse. In fact, Columella tended to highlight this aspect of the poem pointing as useful to the reader—reading about agriculture should be a pleasurable pursuit.\(^12\)

Though the *Georgics* were less influential than the *Eclogues* or *Aeneid*, its influence can be seen in certain poems of the medieval period.\(^13\) In the Renaissance, the *Georgics* were often praised as an exemplar of Virgil’s mastery of a variety of styles. Together his *Eclogues, Georgics, and Aeneid* presented each of the three styles: low, middle and high.\(^14\) The Georgics however were also seen as a manifestation of Virgil’s great erudition and learning, an example of his status as a philosopher/poet and role as an intellectual authority.\(^15\)

Though the varying degrees of accuracy found in the *Georgics* may shape its use as an actual text for teaching agricultural techniques that Virgil’s goal was to some extent

---

\(^10\) Slavitt, pg. 48.
\(^12\) Doody, pg. 195.
\(^15\) Wilson-Okamura, pp. 79-80.
didactic was not questioned in these earlier readings. How, then, are we to look at the images found in the Georgics? The plethora of images found in Brant’s *Georgics* include images didactic, moralizing and fantastical.\(^{16}\) They reflect a diversity of material paralleled only in Virgil’s own text. Although a single story may be absent, they have the same textual and narrative complexity and merit as those found for the *Eclogues* or the *Aeneid*.

However, the presence of a central narrative or theme may be a non-issue, particularly in the context of Brant’s other designs for the *Eclogues* and the *Aeneid*. These illustrations belie the creation of a single, unified theme and illustrate many diverse points of the narrative. The images provide certain glosses on the events of the poems but do not seek to create a single thematic interest.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, the commentaries themselves as a corollary to the text encourage a plurality of interpretations. Further exploration of the illustrations of Brant’s *Georgics*—particularly in conjunction with the treatment of other narrative cycles in the 1502 edition of Virgil’s works-- is required to establish the relationship of these images to the didactic tradition of the Georgics. What is the narrative role of this non-narrative imagery?

\(^{16}\) *See Princeton: Junius Morgan Collection: 2945.1502.4q, pages: XCVIII, CII*

\(^{17}\) *Leach. pg. 205.*
Bibliography: