

Introduction to Vergil's *Georgics*
 CL903-3B: The Classical Roots of Western Literature



Georgics - Context

In its title and general theme, the *Georgics* ("Farmer Poems") engages the great tradition of Hellenistic didactic ("conveying instruction") poetry. The ambition and artistic achievement of Vergil's poem, however, dwarfs that of its predecessors. Into his simple agrarian themes, Vergil weaves mythological digressions and comments on poetry and culture to create a complex affirmation of the civilization's ability - when applied with effort and diligence - to withstand and harness natural forces and the darker impulses of the human soul.

The *Georgics* earned Vergil the recognition of the public, wealth from patrons, and the favor of the emperor, and the poem has long been recognized one of the greatest achievements of literature. To John Dryden (1631-1700), the accomplished Restoration poet and dramatist, the *Georgics* were simply "the best poem by the best poet." In our own age, less attuned to the rhythms of the pastoral life and the aesthetics of this style of poetry, the reputation of the *Georgics* has suffered, but the profound genius that animates the work remains.

The passage we will discuss comes from the close of the *Georgics* and describes the famous descent of the prototypical poet, Orpheus, into Hades to retrieve his beloved Eurydice [Book 4.453-527]

Georgics - Outline

	Type of Labor	Human Effort	
Book 1: Field Crops 1-42 (External) Proem to the whole work: invocation to country gods and Caesar. 43-203 Work, especially on field crops. 204-350 The farmer's calendar 351-463 Weather-signs, leading into... 464-514 Portents of Rome's disasters and prayer for salvation	Agriculture	High	
Book 2: Trees 1-8, 39-46 (Internal) Proem; Invocations to Bacchus and to Maecenas. 9-38, 47-258 Variety, especially as regards trees. (138-76) Eulogy of Italy. 259-457 Care of trees, especially of vines. 458-540 Eulogy of country life. 551-2 Epilogue.			
Book 3: Animals 1-48 (External) Proem, to Maecenas. The poet and Caesar. 49-283 Part I: large animals; horses and cattle (209-83) Sex 284-92 Proem to Part II. 295-473 Part II: small animals; sheep and goats. 475-566 The Noric animal plague	Animal Husbandry		Low
Book 4: Bees 1-7 (Internal) Proem. 8-115 Bee lore. 116-48 Interlude: the old Corycian farmer's garden. 149-280 The peculiarly wonderful features of bees. 281-558 Replacement of dead stock by the <i>Bugonia</i> method (generation of bees) (453-527) Aristaeus story with Orpheus story 559-66 Epilogue to the whole poem; Caesar and the poet.			