

From Suzanne Verdier to Anna Barbauld: An Ecofeminist Revolution of the Georgics?

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Abstract

This article explores how the tradition of georgic writing in the early 19th century is reinvented through ecofeminist standpoints in France and in England. It focuses on the works of two poets: Suzanne Verdier's *Géorgiques du Midi* (*Georgics of Southern France*, 1799-1812) and Anna Barbauld's English poem "The Caterpillar" (1815). Through a comparative analysis, this article will question the connections between French and English traditions of the georgic and observe how female voices emerge at the dawn of Romanticism, with specific ecopolitical claims and poetic representations. Indeed, Verdier dedicates the first canto of her French georgics, "The Silkworm", to sericulture, an exclusively female practice, which is initially denounced as a form of repressive biopolitics, but later becomes a model of female empowerment and ecological awareness. As for Barbauld, she was a friend of Erasmus Darwin, whose essay *Phytologia*, though not openly political, was connected to radicalism. Both Darwin's and Barbauld's work imply, as Verdier's poem does, that reforming agriculture would lead to social and political change. Barbauld prolonged this reflection by questioning the place of women in this new world in a context of political turmoil with the Napoleonic wars. Yet, despite the hostility between France and England during this period, this inaugural ecological reflection may also be seen to constitute a social and poetical network propitious to the inter-fertilization of revolutionary ideas, knitting secret silk threads of peace between the two countries, and the promise of a fertile future.

Keywords: Suzanne Verdier, Anna Barbauld, georgic, sericulture, ecofeminism.

Resumen

Este artículo explora cómo la tradición de la escritura de las geórgicas a principios del siglo XIX se reinventa a través de puntos de vista ecofeministas en Francia e Inglaterra. Se centra en las obras de dos poetas: las *Géorgiques du Midi* (*Geórgicas del Sur de Francia*, 1799-1812) de Suzanne Verdier y el poema en inglés de Anna Barbauld "The Caterpillar" ("La Oruga", 1815). A través de un análisis comparativo, este artículo cuestionará las conexiones entre las tradiciones francesa e inglesa de las geórgicas y observará cómo emergen las voces femeninas en los albores del Romanticismo, con reclamos ecopolíticos específicos y nuevas representaciones poéticas. De hecho, Verdier dedica el primer canto de sus geórgicas francesas, "El gusano de seda", a la sericultura, una práctica exclusivamente femenina, que inicialmente se presenta como una forma de biopolítica represiva, pero luego se convierte en un modelo de empoderamiento femenino y conciencia ecológica. En cuanto a Barbauld, era amiga de Erasmus Darwin, cuyo ensayo *Phytologia*, aunque no abiertamente político, estaba relacionado con el radicalismo. El trabajo de Darwin y Barbauld implica, así como lo hace el poema de Verdier, que reformar la agricultura conduciría a un cambio social y político. Barbauld prolongó esta reflexión para cuestionar el lugar de las mujeres en este nuevo mundo en un contexto de agitación política con las guerras napoleónicas. Sin embargo, a pesar de la hostilidad entre Francia e Inglaterra durante este período, esta reflexión ecológica inaugural también puede constituir una red social y poética propicia para el intercambio de ideas revolucionarias, tejiendo hilos secretos de paz entre los dos países, y la promesa de un futuro fértil.

Palabras clave: Suzanne Verdier, Anna Barbauld, geórgicas, sericultura, ecofeminismo.

The long eighteenth century was the golden age of the georgic revival on both sides of the Channel. John Dryden's English translation of Virgil's poem in 1697 paved the way for the development of British georgics. These texts often played with the codes of the Virgilian tradition, shifting to descriptive poetry. French georgics were more classical. Indeed, they were closer to the original *Georgicon* and always followed the same structure: four cantos, in French alexandrines,¹ praising French farming and gardening in didactic terms. The most famous example was Jacques Delille's *French Georgics* (1804).² Delille was also the author of a 1770 versified translation of Virgil's poetical works. Even though his works were undeniably a milestone in the conception of French georgics, there were many other georgic rewritings *à la française* before them: François-Etienne Gouge de Cessières's *The Ornamental Gardens* (1758), *The Four Seasons* (1763) by the Cardinal of Bernis, or Pierre-Fulcrand de Rosset's *Agriculture* (1777).

Did women writers also play a role in this eighteenth-century reshaping of Virgilian georgics? Though Kevis Goodman and Rachel Crawford's works opened new perspectives in the study of modern georgics, all the most prominent writers of modern georgics in the 18th century seem to be men. However, some women also took part in the reinvention of the genre. An interesting theory of the origins of georgics was proposed by Anna Barbauld in her 1794 preface to Mark Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination*, which was echoed in her later poem "The Caterpillar" in 1815. In France, only one female poet, Suzanne Verdier, seems to have written French georgics. Both Barbauld and Verdier wrote during a period of political turmoil which mirrored Virgil's troubled times of fallen powers and rising empires; both knew the joys of literary success and the pain of marginalization. Was their conception of the georgic also revolutionary, or did they exemplify a tradition of English or French georgic poetry?

Anna Laetitia Barbauld, née Aikin (1743-1825) is better known than Suzanne Verdier today. Born in a family of Dissenters, she received a nonconformist education which encouraged her to develop her literary talents, as well as a taste for natural history which she shared with her brother John. Her *Lessons for Children* were popular until Barbauld fell into disgrace after having criticized the role of Britain in the Napoleonic wars in her poem "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven". A few years later, in 1815, Barbauld wrote her poem "The Caterpillar", which is often seen as the perfect example of the Romantic notion of interconnectedness between man and nature (Nichols 74). More recently, it has also been analyzed as heroicomic and satirical (Smith 551) and related to Barbauld's political commitment (Den Otter 209). Analyzing it in the light of the georgic model may reveal new perspectives about this poem but also on the evolution of Barbauld's poetic and political choices.

¹ Alexandrines are lines of twelve syllables; they are the most common line in French poetry and are considered as the "noblest". The tragedies of Racine were written in alexandrines.

² The original title in French is: *L'Homme des Champs ou les Géorgiques Françaises*. Hughes Marchal provides more details on the popularity of Delille in France and in England, where the poet lived as an *émigré* during the French Revolution (Marchal 1). His editorial success contributed to the ever-increasing popularity of the georgic on both sides of the Channel.

Suzanne Verdier, née Allut (1745-1813) was born in Montpellier. She was an accomplished woman of the Enlightenment: having received the same education as her brother, she was fluent in Greek, Latin, English and Italian, and Virgil was one of her favourite poets. She saw the effects of the French Revolution, but also the dreadful aftermath of the Terror, with civil war, conspiracy, and mass executions (her brother died on the scaffold). After 1794, a lonely, broken-hearted woman, she took a keener interest in farming and wrote her own georgics, *Georgics of Southern France (Géorgiques du Midi)* between 1799 and 1812. Verdier's poetic talents were officially acknowledged and celebrated in her times: she was appointed "Maître des Jeux Floraux" in 1809.³ However, her names and works are largely forgotten now despite the efforts of her grandson, Gustave Fournier de Clausonne, who republished most of her poems in his 1862 edition. There is little scholarly criticism on them, except a few demeaning pages in a French literary journal in 1989. Her name is also mentioned in a list of "forgotten female writers" (Slama 91), which is sadly indicative of the work that still has to be done by teachers and academics to rehabilitate such authors.

By comparing Barbauld's poem "The Caterpillar" and Verdier's first canto on silkworms, which bear similarities in their themes and sociopolitical issues, this paper will analyze both poems in the light of their possible connections with the georgic literary tradition, to see if they could be defined as instances of an "eco-Georgic" or not (Fairer 201).⁴ Silkworms and caterpillars indeed seem to be used to subvert the didacticism of the georgic on agricultural practices, by adding specific bioethical and political concerns. This article will also question the possibility of early iterations of ecofeminism in the georgic model, as it would be defined later by Carolyn Merchant: Verdier's poems and Barbauld's show that women and nonhuman nature are both marginalized and exploited, and this situation is precisely what raises questions about the socio-cultural structures of power. New connections may then appear in a broken Europe to "reweave the world"⁵ through a silken fabric of words, and a nature provided with an agency of its own.⁶

The Virgilian Model

"If Virgil really designed to instruct the farmer by his Georgics, he might have done it much more effectually in plain prose" (Aikin 58): John Aikin's view on the *Georgics* in his 1777 *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry* may sound a bit harsh. Though Aikin was a true lover of Virgilian poetry, his criticism on the *Georgics* is unusually

³ "Maître des Jeux Floraux" (literally "Master of the Games of Flora") was a highly honorific national distinction in French poetic writing, the modern equivalent of which could be the status of Poet Laureate.

⁴ David Fairer indeed suggested to analyze Wordsworthian poetry in terms of "eco-Georgic" rather than pastoral.

⁵ The expression "reweave the world" is used by Irene Diamond and Glorian Feman Orenstein in the title of their pioneering essay on ecofeminism (1990).

⁶ For more information on ecofeminism and new materialism, especially regarding the notion of "agency", see Esther Rey Torrijos's article on the history of ecofeminism (Torrijos 24-28) and Serpil Oppermann's chapter on the same subject (Oppermann 19-36).

scathing: “we may lament that he pursued a plan that necessarily threw so much of his work into details which even his versification cannot render pleasing” (Aikin 59). He firmly stands against the danger of writing poetry for exclusively didactic purposes, to the detriment of sensibility. He praises Thomson’s *Seasons* but despises authors who “shackle themselves with teaching an art, or inculcating a system” (59).

His sister Anna may have changed his mind about didactic literature in general, and more particularly the georgic. Her volume of children’s stories, *Evenings at Home*, which she wrote together with her brother in 1792-1796, may be read in the continuity of her former educational works, including *Lessons for Children*. While she was publishing the first collections of their *Evenings at Home*, she also wrote a preface to the 1794 edition of *The Pleasures of Imagination* by Mark Akenside, in which she defended didactic poetry, as if to reply to her brother: “didactic, or preceptive poetry, seems to include a solecism, for the end of Poetry is to please, and of Didactic precept the object is instruction. It is however a species of poetry which has been cultivated from the earliest stages of society” (Akenside 1). The terms “species” and “cultivated”, at the crossroads between biology and literature, suggest a natural harmony between the poetry of nature and the nature of poetry.⁷

This fertile metaphor becomes clearer as Barbauld quickly shifts to the georgic, which she regards as one of the earliest forms of didactic poetry and poetry in general. It was invented “at first, probably, for the very simple purpose of retaining, by means of the regularity of measure and the charms of harmony, the precepts of agricultural wisdom” (Akenside 1). Then, poetry became an art, and the very purpose of this early didactic poetry became different: the aim of poetry was not directly to instruct, but to help the reader remember instructive lessons, while enjoying the pleasure of reading. Barbauld makes it clear that the reader must have at least some previous knowledge on the subject and mentions the example of Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* published in 1792. Georgics must educate, but also please and move the reader: *docere, placere, movere*, according to the famous Horatian principle. Contrary to her brother John, Anna Barbauld praises Virgil’s *Georgics* and their pleasant descriptions of Italy (Akenside 5).

Suzanne Verdier agrees with the principles of modern georgics defined by Barbauld. A certain sense of didacticism is also present in her *Georgics of Southern France*, but she is always careful to maintain the fragile balance between technicality and accessibility, so that her readers learn about technical details of farming in an accessible yet elegant style. She follows the main precepts of the genre, moving “between praxis and poesis” (Fairer 22).⁸ She uses imperative forms, just as Virgil would do, to describe the different steps in the process of wine-harvest, and she gives her readers advice by using some of her characters as mouthpieces for instructive lessons. However, poetry prevails over pedagogy, and her work is not strictly didactic.

⁷ Though the term “species” can be used as a synonym for “kind”, it may be understood metaphorically too. The first use of “species” related to natural history dates back to the early seventeenth century according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Its specific association with the verb “to cultivate” suggests a metaphorical use, in keeping with Barbauld’s claims on georgic poetry.

⁸ David Fairer defines the georgic poet as “trapped between the pragmatic critic and the idealist critic”, “forced to compromise between praxis and poesis” (Fairer 20).

Verdier is not as critical as John Aikin on Virgil's *Georgics* and she wants her own poem to follow the tradition of Virgil. She pays tribute to the author of the *Aeneid*, "who sang the tragedy of Troy", and the *Georgics*, in which he "praise[d] the dances of the playful bee", when she introduces her first subject, sericulture, in an address to the silkworm:

If he who sang the tragedy of Troy,
The immortal voice of Dido's grief and joy,
Finally tuned his lyre
To praise the dances of the playful bee,
Who could refuse to pay tribute to thee? (Verdier 33-34)⁹

She draws a parallel between Virgil's topic (the bee) and her own (the silkworm): Virgil ended his *Georgics* on an insect; she shall begin hers with another. In each case, the products of these insects, honey and silk, are metaphors of the sweetness of poetry, characteristic of the *placere-docere* mission of the georgics, and closely connected to the poetic recreation of rustic life. Verdier wants to mirror Virgil and give a faithful transposition of his *Georgics* in modern France.

Moreover, Virgil's *Georgics* provide a stylistic pattern for Verdier's own georgics. They were written in a style which was half-way between the low style of the *Eclogues* and the high style of the *Aeneid*. Verdier chooses to represent this intermediate style in her prosodic choices, with an alternation of alexandrines, the "noble" line, and octosyllabics, the "lower" line. She also insists on her lines being humble, modest: "down to earth", "as humble as my song, my flight, from high to low, / Shall explore the hamlets, the hills and the meadows" (Verdier 30).¹⁰ The structure of Verdier's poem is also a reflection of Virgil's *Georgics*. Both poems are divided into four cantos. Virgil's *Georgics* are based on the following structure: Canto I is on harvest; Canto II, on grape-harvest and olive-trees; Canto III, on cattle; Canto IV, on beekeeping. Verdier follows a similar pattern, replacing beekeeping with silkworm breeding: Canto I is on silkworms; Canto II, on harvest; Canto III, on grape-harvest and nut-picking; Canto IV, on olive-Trees.

Finally, the political context in which both Barbauld and Verdier write bears similarities with Virgil's. When Virgil wrote his *Georgics*, the Roman Empire had just started to rise after years of civil war and the fall of the Roman Republic and Triumvirate, with the advent of Octavius who became Emperor Augustus. At the time when Barbauld wrote her later poems and Verdier published her georgics, France had also come out of a civil war, with the Terror, and the Republic led by the Directoire had fallen with the crowning of Bonaparte who became Emperor Napoleon. In each case, it was a time of political turmoil and deep uncertainty.

Virgil did not say a word on the political context in his *Georgics*—at least, not directly.¹¹ Barbauld and Verdier took a stand against an increasingly oppressive system:

⁹ « Si le chantre immortel des restes d'Iliion / Voulut bien consacrer à l'abeille volage / Cette lyre qui d'âge en âge / Eternisa l'amour et les pleurs de Didon, / Qui pourrait de sa voix te refuser l'hommage ? »

¹⁰ The quotes from Verdier in English are my personal translation (no English translation has ever been published). The original French text will be inserted as footnotes in the present article: «Terre à terre mon vol, humble comme mes chants, / Parcourra les hameaux, la colline, la plaine.»

¹¹ The idea of considering Virgil's *Georgics* as part of the Augustan propaganda has been widely debated by scholars, as the position of Virgil remains resolutely ambiguous. His *Eclogues* are more telling. For recent scholarship on paradoxical politics in Virgil's *Georgics*, see Fiachra Mac Góráin's 2014 article. See also Greg

Barbauld openly criticized the consequences of the British warlike policy in “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven”. Verdier used the traditional model of georgic writing to articulate a reflection on the radical political changes of her times. Moreover, she rewrote Virgil’s *Georgics* to think about the place of women in this changing world, and to conceive ethical farming as a key to social harmony. In this way, she replaced politics (from *polis*, the town) with georgics (from *georgos*, farmer), which then are turned into an unexpected manifesto for post-1794 France.

Paradoxically, the similarity of the political situation between Virgil, Barbauld and Verdier brings those two women closer to Virgil than anyone has possibly ever been before them, with the climate of civil war and the rise of a new empire. At the same time, their attempt to blend the georgic with radical republican and proto-feminist reflections also leads them away from their model.

Suzanne Verdier’s Revolutionary *Georgics*

The first canto of the *Georgics of Southern France*, “The Silkworm”, is dedicated to sericulture (the cultivation of silkworms to produce silk). This choice is original for two reasons: first, sericulture did not exist in Europe before the 13th century. No Greek or Roman poet from the ancient times, no Hesiod, no Virgil had ever praised its virtues. Second, sericulture in France and in England was generally a female practice. It was mostly developed in the South of France where mulberry trees would grow. Male poets of the 18th century generally described activities like ploughing or harvesting which were shared by men and women.

In the late 18th century, sericulture was mainly an indoors activity: the eggs of silk moths (*bombyx mori*) were found on the leaves of mulberry trees, the branches of which were cut and moved inside the house where they were maintained at an even temperature. The eggs hatched and became larvae, or pupae. Pupae fed on mulberry leaves and then secreted a cocoon of fine silk with their salivary glands, as a caterpillar forms a chrysalis before its final transformation into a butterfly. However, in sericulture, pupae were not given the opportunity to change into moths: indeed, the silken envelope they had spun was taken out from them very quickly to be chemically preserved; otherwise, the silk becomes rough after a few days. As for the pupae, they were doomed to an untimely death, and were generally burnt, or boiled.

Sericulture was, then, a female activity because it conveniently fitted in the daily routine of the farmers’ wives who sometimes had to stay at home to take care of their youngest children. It also involved a lot of caring, which was considered as one of the cardinal female virtues according to Rousseau in *Emile*. Verdier’s poem is naturally addressed to women. It first seems to be didactic, using the second person plural (“you”) and imperatives to describe the first steps of sericulture, with women tending the larvae of the silk moth:

Ah! Work again, and work e’en more!

Garrard’s comment on the “overt politicisation” of Virgil’s *Georgics* and their posterity in 19th century literature and politics (Garrard 119).

And let your care, both day and night,
Keep them enclosed in clean delight;
Preserve their avid mouths from hunger,
And feed them well: the more, the better! (Verdier, 41-42)¹²

Verdier then describes the almost motherly “care” (“soin” in French) of the female cultivator of silkworms (which are called “nourrissons” in French, that is “babies”). Verdier does not neglect any details about the transformations of the larvae and the conditions of their survival (light, temperature, feeding), closely following the Virgilian model in her technical precision. Women working in sericulture are identified as devoted mothers. Thus, the reader first supposes that a traditional role of caregivers is attributed to those women, a role which Carolyn Merchant, in her essay *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, connects with an influential representation of nature as female.

However, when she reaches the last stage of sericulture, Verdier strategically changes her focalization: the addressee is not human anymore but becomes the silkworm which is fatally destroyed by its cultivators, who keep only the silk and burn the animal and mulberry leaves. The Virgilian model of the georgic is subverted in favour of the epic model, as Verdier describes the flames burning the palace of the silkworm, like the walls of Troy burning down in the *Aeneid*:

I can still see that cruel hand,
Tearing from every leafy tree
Thy silken treasures: shameful end!
In these obscure rooms, still I see
Thy vaults and walls consumed with fire,
The ruined halls and countless dead;
The choking smoke, rising higher,
Soon finds the place where thou hast fled,
And, slowly creeping to thy bed,
Changes at last with poisonous breath
Thy troubled sleep into sharp death. (Verdier 45-46)¹³

Through this epic depiction, the “animaux” are reduced to “maux”, or pain, according to Jacques Derrida’s terminology, but the anthropomorphic depiction paradoxically goes against anthropocentrism, as the agony of the silkworm, described in epic terms, arouses the reader’s empathy, thus breaking up the boundaries between human and animal. This is not a movement of vain tenderness, nor a mock-heroic parody of the *Aeneid*, but an acknowledgment of a tyrannical biopolitical regime founded upon utility. “So it was taken care of, so it was destroyed”: « l’intérêt en prit soin, l’intérêt le proscrit » (Verdier 46). Verdier delights in hypotyposis and dramatic reversals: the unexpected turn from motherly care to utter destruction could be read as an “anti-pastoral” move (Gifford 42) criticizing the hypocrisy of a strictly mercantile system.

¹² « Ah! Redoublez d’activité! / La nuit comme le jour, que votre vigilance, / Entretienne autour d’eux l’ordre et la propreté, / Et de leur faim surtout, servant l’avidité, / Sur eux à pleines mains répandez l’abondance. »

¹³ « Je la vois, cette main cruelle, / Arracher à chaque rameau / Les trésors confiés à sa garde infidèle; / Je vois, dans ces réduits obscurs, / Dont la flamme a rougi les voûtes et les murs, / Habitants et palais amoncelés par elle. / L’étouffante vapeur qui pénètre soudain / Au fond du lieu qui te recèle / Passe bientôt jusqu’à ton sein / Et te fait rencontrer enfin / Dans ta mort apparente une mort trop réelle. »

Indeed, Verdier is not shocked only because innocent creatures are being murdered, but because an individual life is being reduced to a commercial value. She denounces the dangers of blind pragmatism over ecological awareness which leads to the banalization of violence. What follows the address to the silkworm is a striking depiction of Bellona, the goddess of war, spreading terror over the country:

Such are the deeds of dreadful War,
Barbaric Goddess! Won't you cease
To ban the Arts from France's shore,
The fearful children of our peace. (Verdier 48)¹⁴

The allusions to the climate of the civil war of 1794 are transparent: the “Arts” are “banned” from the shores of France, as Delille, among many other poets belonging to the Church or aristocracy, had to emigrate to England, far away from the French guillotine. The original French poem mentions “les arts et l'industrie”, implying that technical knowledge on agriculture and manufacture is also under threat: industry is here subservient to the productions of war. The criticism of violence done to animals is thus hinged to political violence. In warfare, soldiers lose their individuality; they are not recognized as individuals but merely as parts of a greater force, just as silkworms are not recognized as individuals but merely as elements of the silk production.

“The Caterpillar”: from Bioethics to Politics

Verdier's poem bears similarities to Barbauld's better-known poem “The Caterpillar”, written in 1815, even though Barbauld seems to step away from the principles of the georgic genre. Barbauld describes the banalization of violence and an ecological awakening made possible through an acknowledgment of individual life, as one caterpillar hangs around her finger. This poem is probably not about sericulture, though. Rather, it is about the Lackey caterpillar, as the specific description makes clear (Den Otter 209),¹⁵ a moth caterpillar. Known as a notorious pest, this variety of caterpillar was not used as a silkworm, though technically it is one.

An ingenuous reader dazzled by the beauty of the description (azure and orange sides, silvery back, velvet skin) might think that Barbauld indeed is sparing an innocent life and that the caterpillar should be saved. However, the lackey moth can be deadly to an orchard, causing devastating damage to trees and vegetables. Realizing how deadly this specific kind of caterpillar can be is the only way to understand the last line: “'tis not virtue, / 'Tis the weakness of a virtuous mind” (Barbauld 280). It would be a “virtue” for the good farmer of the georgic to kill the last caterpillar. In a georgic poem, the author would describe the different ways of struggling against the most notorious pests to protect the young crops from certain devastation. Instead of following that convention,

¹⁴ « Des fureurs de Bellone infaillibles effets ! / C'est elle dont la barbarie / Exile de nos bords les arts et l'industrie, / Timides enfants de la paix... »

¹⁵ Den Otter identifies the Lackey Caterpillar which indeed perfectly matches Barbauld's specific and colourful description: “For I have scanned thy form with curious eye, / Noted the silver line that streaks thy back, / The azure and the orange that divide / Thy velvet sides...” (Barbauld 279).

Barbauld describes the violence of pest control and sides with the caterpillar, turning the criminal into a victim:

I have sought
With sharpened eye and persecuting zeal,
Where, folded in their silken webs they lay
Thriving and happy; swept them from the tree
And crushed whole families beneath my foot;
Or, sudden, poured on their devoted heads
The vials of destruction. (Barbauld 279)

What “vials” is Barbauld talking about? In the early 19th century, there were several possibilities to control pests. Some of them were very innovative and were changing the practices of gardening. They are described in *Phytologia*, a treatise on gardening and agriculture written by Erasmus Darwin, who suggests using chemical solutions. Erasmus Darwin conducted experiments with saturated solutions of lead and water to test the resistance of the aphid (Darwin 365). It was an early form of pest control through chemicals.¹⁶

Erasmus Darwin was a friend of the Aikins (Aikin L. 26). Barbauld admired the pleasant quality of his didactic poetry, as much as Darwin revered Barbauld’s educational writings which he recommended in his 1797 essay on female education.¹⁷ It is therefore rather likely that he advised Barbauld and she, being interested in science, may have reproduced Darwin’s agricultural experiments. If so, “The Caterpillar” would be one of the first ecological works against the use of pesticides.

However, this poem is not only about pest control. Barbauld, just like Verdier, is keenly aware that what is at stake is not merely spontaneous sympathy but attitudes which are conditioning radical social and political changes. The maxim according to which what is dangerous must be systematically destroyed potentially leads to the tyranny of a biopolitical regime, involving different kinds of pests. Her comparison is the same as Verdier’s:

So the storm
Of horrid war, o’erwhelming cities, fields,
And peaceful villages, rolls dreadful on:
The victor shouts triumphant
[...] Yet should one,
A single sufferer from the field escaped,
Panting and pale, and bleeding at his feet,
Lift his imploring eyes, –the hero weeps;
He is grown human. (Barbauld 279)

Moving from cruelty against animals to human cruelty and warfare was not uncommon. A person who beats his horse will soon beat his wife and kill his neighbour:

¹⁶ “There must be great difficulty in destroying the larvae, or grubs, or caterpillars, of many insects, which are injurious to the fruits and kernels, as well as to the foliage of plants, by any chemical mixtures [...] I remember putting a worm [...] into a saturated solution of sugar of lead in water.” (Darwin 365)

¹⁷ Darwin, Erasmus, *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools*, Derby and London, Drewry and Johnson, 1797. *Evenings at Home* is said to “join amusement with instruction” (13) and several works of Barbauld (*Hymns, Spelling-Books, Lessons*) are quoted in Darwin’s educational catalogue at the end of his essay.

such was the morality of Hogarth's engravings in *The Four Stages of Cruelty*. The argument of violence against animals encouraging human cruelty had already been used by Immanuel Kant. Other defenders of animals' rights would use it: William Wilberforce in England, and the Vicomte de Grammont in France.¹⁸ Barbauld's poem goes beyond the strict didacticism of the georgic tradition, and even against it, by paradoxically siding with pests and parasites.

Barbauld's thoughts on the subject can be connected not only with Erasmus Darwin's reflections on agriculture in *Phytologia* but also with a wider anti-authoritarian and scientifically minded tradition, including the work of Joseph Priestley, who was another friend of Erasmus Darwin's and a member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham. However, though Joseph Priestley was a radical thinker, he did not stand for animal rights: Anna Barbauld tried to convince him to stop animal testing by writing "The Mouse's Petition" (1772), in which she lends a voice to a mouse trapped by the scientist for his experiments. The ecological concerns of that text resonate with her later poem "The Caterpillar".

Thus, bioethics are closely connected with the political: paradoxically, the georgic (from *georgos*, farmer) is blended with politics (from *polis*, the city), which makes this poem truly satirical—satire being, etymologically, *satúra*, blending. It is not a satire of the georgic, though, but rather of the violence inherent in agricultural practices. Barbauld steps away from georgic culture to create a counterculture against the arts of cultivation. Town and country, animals and humans, struggle for life and national conflicts are unexpectedly reunited in Verdier's and Barbauld's silkworm poems. Across borders both poets seem to be in dialogue with each other, knitting secret threads between the orchard garden and the political field, farming and warfare, France and England.

Verdier: Using the Georgic as an Ecofeminist Plea

Verdier, bearing in mind that sericulture is a female practice, addresses women in the final part of her first canto, as silkworm breeders who hold life and death in their hands. She rejects gender stereotypes with a subtle irony:

You I address, fair sex among mankind,
You, whom by Fate were probably designed
To please, e'en though the sweet business of passion
Must never be women's sole occupation... (Verdier 49)¹⁹

By showing that women may have been created to please men, Verdier pretends to comply with a flat, conventional vision of femininity, and her euphemism—pleasing must not be a woman's sole business—is tinged with a biting irony ("e'en though the sweet

¹⁸ The anthropocentric argument often prevailed in the first parliamentary debates against animal abuse: mistreating an animal was thought to encourage violence against one's wife or servants. For more details, see *Romanticism and Animal Rights*, by David Perkins.

¹⁹ «C'est à vous d'y veiller et je m'adresse à vous, / Sexe que le destin fit sans doute pour plaire, / Mais dont ce soin, quoique bien doux, / Ne doit pas toutefois être l'unique affaire...»

business of passion”, “quoique bien doux”). Verdier thus shows that she is perfectly aware of patriarchal gender stereotypes, but plays with them the better to distort them:

To the moth’s school, come and look,
Learn a page from love’s handbook,
And do observe with great attention
The worms to whom you owe all your lessons of fashion. (Verdier 50)²⁰

From a rustic cliché on feminine elegance in light octosyllabic lines, Verdier shifts to a solemn reminder with the gravitas of the alexandrine. The usual comparison between women and butterflies, reducing women to ephemeral elegance and vanity, is here subverted by the harsh reality of silk produced by “worms”. Indeed, the fashionable silk dresses worn by women can be made only by the sacrifice of the silk moth. Women are then expected by Verdier to remember the real cost of this elegance by keeping in mind the tragedy of the pupae’s death, and to be aware of the shared materiality of human clothes and silk threads spun by nonhuman animals. By encouraging women to learn from the tragic fate of the silkworm, she draws a comparison between the condition of women in the late 18th century and the nonhuman forms of life exploited by mankind for profit, which may be read in the wake of Merchant’s modern approach to ecofeminism. Indeed, according to Carolyn Merchant, women and nonhuman nature have both been marginalized and instrumentalized by patriarchal structures of power. This provides a basis for ecological as well as political action.

Verdier recommends different practices: keeping the larvae alive until the end, even though the silk is less beautiful afterwards. Moreover, she advises her readers not to destroy the whole silken fabric but to spin it: it is not as good as silk, but it is still better than to burn it all down. This practice goes against the laws of the market, as the silk will not be as beautiful and solid and will probably be sold cheaper; its commercial value will be diminished. Here Verdier stands against the tradition of georgic writing which, by virtue of its anthropocentric didacticism, only aims at increasing agricultural production. She creates a breach in this tradition to question its values and suggest different methods, refusing the commercial totalitarianism of the late 18th century and the tyranny of production and efficiency. She chooses to apply utilitarianism on a wider scale: that of nature, to make it the sum of general happiness in a non-anthropocentric way, including animals.

Yet, this nature is deeply interconnected with culture, a female culture, which is both physical and intellectual, *cultus* meaning both culture and cultivation. The occurrences of “nature” in Verdier’s text reveal a more shifting definition which paradoxically moves toward aporia, or the impossibility of a strict definition of nature, paving the way for more complex and radical questionings of this notion, such as Timothy Morton’s, who will later criticize “nature” as an anthropomorphic construct secretly subservient to man’s fantasies of domination. Nature is first personified as a generous goddess (the word “nature” is feminine in French), but then becomes an ungraspable power with “impenetrable secrets” (Verdier 130).

²⁰ « À l’école d’un papillon, / Venez apprendre comme on aime, / Et surtout discernez avec un soin extrême / Ceux à qui vous devez cette aimable leçon ».

Women thus have the power to make change happen on a local and global scale, encouraging social cohesion through ecological awareness and new practices. The first canto ends on a very Virgilian eulogy of country life which is similar to Virgil's last canto on beekeeping:

If somewhere in our climes there is a sanctuary
Where quiet peace may hide,
It must be in a hamlet, peaceful and solitary
[...] There the factions' madding trance,
The furious shouts and parties' pride,
Never breaks up our silence. (Verdier 56-57)²¹

The "parties" and "factions" are explicit references to the political dissensions which had emerged from the revolutionary period: such lines would have been less powerful before 1789, because there was no such thing as party politics in France yet. Though Verdier rejects the political fights which led the country to civil war, her praise of women's power in the first canto may also remind the reader of the fact that women could participate in the political debates during the French Revolution. Verdier certainly hoped to see further advances in the rights of women and may have been disappointed by the limited opportunities left to them by the Empire.

Barbauld: Refusing the Georgic Mode to Denounce a Biopolitical Tyranny

Barbauld's poem could also be seen as an ecofeminist work in its own way. In Barbauld's time, gardening was considered a proper activity for women, just like sericulture. Agricultural production had become crucially important, for several reasons. First, during the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Erasmus Darwin would think that a better agriculture, with better yields, would be intricately connected to moral and intellectual progress. That was his first motivation when he wrote *Phytologia*. Second, agriculture had become especially important after the Napoleonic wars and Napoleon's attempt to organize a continental blockade against the United Kingdom. The British government needed agricultural production to be increased for the troops, as Barbauld bitterly notices in another of her poems, "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven", written just a few years before "The Caterpillar":

The tramp of marching hosts disturbs the plough,
The sword, not sickle, reaps the harvest now,
And where the Soldier gleans the scant supply,
The helpless Peasant but retires to die... (Barbauld 233)

As Barbauld precisely compares pest-killing with warfare, her gesture is eminently political in "The Caterpillar": she refuses to obey the government's demands for more agricultural supply. This is not sabotage, as only one caterpillar is removed whereas all the others have been eliminated, but it may be an inaugural gesture of resistance, an embryo-revolution, to echo the "embryo nations" (Barbauld 279). By refusing to be on the

²¹ « Ah ! Si sous nos climats il existe un asile / OÙ la paix puisse se cacher, / C'est au sein d'un hameau solitaire et tranquille [...] La fureur des partis, les cris des factieux / Jamais de nos échos ne troublent le silence ».

side of mass agricultural production, dictated by a patriarchal regime based upon biopolitical control, Barbauld acts as a rebel. She does not only commune with the parasite, but she is herself seen as such a one after the publication of “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven”, a pamphlet against Britain’s commitment in the Napoleonic war.²²

One question remains: does Barbauld suggest alternative solutions for pest control, as Verdier does? Such solutions already existed, but only for trees, not for cabbages, for instance, or any other vegetable which would have been the caterpillar’s favourite meal. Once again, such solutions could be found in Darwin’s *Phytologia*: one option was, in autumn, to take the fallen leaves of the trees and make a heap of them with the addition of lime and other vegetable components, cover with soil, wait for fermentation and then use it as manure (Darwin 248).

Barbauld could have chosen to expatiate on harmless solutions for pest controls in a georgic fashion. After all, it would have matched her reputation as a didactic writer, and it would have provided a nice morality to her poem. It would have made it fit for children and become an optimistic educational fable. It would also have become a nice eco-friendly poem for readers of the 21st century concerned with global environmental crisis and looking for more respectful agricultural practices.

But Barbauld chose not to do so. Contrary to Suzanne Verdier or Charlotte Smith who subtly play with Virgilian intertextuality,²³ she refused the georgic mode, precisely because she refused the didactic value which is correlated with the imperative of better yields, as well as economic and military power. Virgil would be elusive on politics in his *Georgics* because he was the protégé of the Emperor. Barbauld said nothing (at least explicitly) on politics for the opposite reason: because she was on the other side, and she refused to bring help to a system of biopolitical oppression which crushed female writers and poor peasants the same way a gardener would crush an insect.

Instead, she ended her poem with “Tis not Virtue, / Yet 'tis the weakness of a virtuous mind”, which contributed to re-asserting her reputation as a virtuous thinker, even though many considered “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” as a political betrayal. The true morality may be that this weakness is strength, because a tiny weakness, a soft spot in the silken fabric of political power is enough to tear up the whole piece. Weakness in a highly patriarchal, bellicose system means the ability to escape control. The weakness of the lyrical persona contrasts with the “*virtus*” in Virgilian poetry, an ideal of manhood based on strength, reason and temperance, embodied by the male heroes of the *Aeneid*. It is also an echo of the “Roman virtue” mentioned in “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven”, in a passage ridiculed by the *Quarterly Review*. It is finally the last remnant of her own reflection on the georgic in her preface of Akenside’s *Pleasures of Imagination*, where didactic poetry was supposed to “breathe the love of virtue” (Akenside 3). The weakness in Barbauld’s poem is not a virtue from a conventional point of view, but it is, in itself, an alternative: the way of parasites (biologically and metaphorically), the road not taken by farming: one that goes far, very far into the undergrowth, beyond the rich fields and the closed meadows of the georgic.

²² See the scathing criticism published in the *Quarterly Review* in June 1812.

²³ See Juan Pellicer’s article for more details on Charlotte Smith’s connections with the Virgilian hypotext.

Conclusion

Using or not using the georgic mode in the 18th century could be a significant choice, poetically as well as politically. Suzanne Verdier closely followed the Virgilian tradition in her poem which may be considered as an early manifestation of the ecofeminist mindset. Anna Barbauld, on the contrary, refused to follow the georgic tradition, despite its poetic elegance and didacticism which are often to be found in her previous works. Both women used what was considered as a female quality (“care” for Verdier and “weakness” for Barbauld) to turn it against traditional social and poetical representations and criticize the violence inherent in agricultural practices, as well as the tyranny of productivity. Thus, they opened the georgic genre to the ecophilosophical questionings of the age of sensibility. However, because of Verdier’s late publication, and Barbauld’s choice of tacit resistance, this ecofeminist turn remained silent for a long time.

Nevertheless, the fact that the georgic model is used and subverted by female authors to reflect upon the condition of women makes it outstanding in the long tradition of georgic writing. Verdier’s and Barbauld’s poems are gendered critiques on agricultural practices on a male-dominated field of writing. The slow, vegetative growth of such poems finally revealed a female radicalism, the term “radicalism” itself being understood as a dynamic border-crossing force. This radicalism shows that their poems, and the political ambitions that they carry, do not belong to a human culture which is apart from nature: on the contrary, politics must be firmly rooted in the ground, in the earthly world from which they have sprung. They carry a biopolitical strength closely linked to the earth (as “radix” originally means “root”), cultivating an agricultural as well as intellectual soil in which seeds of feminist revolutions may grow in the vast field of literature, and keep blossoming in the vast field of georgics, among butterflies, silk-moths and mulberry-trees.

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