



Kadue, Katie. Domestic Georgic: Labors of Preservation from Rabelais to Milton

Jonathan Locke Hart

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Kadue, Katie.

Domestic Georgic: Labors of Preservation from Rabelais to Milton.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 227. ISBN 978-0-226-79749-6 (paperback) US\$27.50.

Katie Kadue's book makes an important contribution, defining domestic georgic, and how selected authors from Rabelais to Milton labour to preserve a kind of poetic housekeeping or daily literary chores. The study is well designed, well argued, and well written. What is particularly interesting is that Kadue sees that the domestic georgic comes up short of, or is indifferent to, "the triumphant optimism associated with early modern literary and philosophical engagements with georgic" (5). She argues for a domestication of this "georgic ethos" that the authors she discusses "perform and describe," that is "a form of labor that—because it focuses on preservation more than the production of anything really new, or because it achieves results that are at best temporary—formally resembles the mundane maintenance work of housewives and domestic laborers rather than the trailblazing feats of modern and modernizing heroes" (5).

Kadue likens this literary labour to preserving and pickling, storing and organizing and explores this aspect in François Rabelais, Michel de Montaigne, Edmund Spenser, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton, examining how these activities play out "in the mentalities of those authors, in their attitudes toward their own writing processes and toward cultural production" and how they reveal "a shared and surprising preoccupation with the repetitive, uneventful labors necessary to preserve life, and with how those labors inform the metabolic processes of thinking and writing" (5). Kadue examines the imagination of male writers who repeat "rhythms of domestic labor in the form and content of their work" (9). She looks at the private labours of public figures. Appealing to *dispositio* or arrangement in rhetoric and discourse, Kadue views in these authors "intellectual work as domestic labor, in a strongly figurative and sometimes literal sense, while still maintaining the possibility of its relevance to the public" (10, see 11). The introduction is clear and thoughtful and the rhetoric of domesticity is a key focus in this book (1–25).

After discussing Erasmus at some length, Kadue, in chapter 1, "Rabelais in a Pickle," sees a concern about the fragility of culture and community in the textual excess of *Tiers Livre* (1546) and *Quart Livre* (1552), interprets that excess as a crisis to be managed and concentrates on pickling and tempering,

maceration and fermentation as textual strategies (26–53). Chapter 2, “Spenser’s Secret Recipes,” examines the dependence of the male protagonist in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590) on the labour of servants and women, focusing on the House of Holiness in book 1, the Castle of Alma in book 2, and the Garden of Adonis in book 3 as examples (54–76). In chapter 3, “Correcting Montaigne,” Kadue looks at the revisions in the *Essais* (1580, 1588, 1595) and interprets “De la vanité” and “De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres” as making adjustments, local and domestic, to preserve his legacy and household (77–102). Chapter 4, “Marvell in the Meantime,” explores how *Upon Appleton House* (1651) works out connections between poet and patron (103–27). In chapter 5, “Milton’s Storehouses,” Kadue examines Milton’s preservation in *Areopagitica* (1644), how Adam and Eve maintain Eden by pruning in *Paradise Lost* (1667) and the role of the Son in *Paradise Regain’d* (1671) (128–52). The conclusion discusses Mary Collier’s “The Woman’s Labour” (1739), which responds to Stephen Duck’s “The Thresher’s Labour” (1730), a contrast in male and female labour, as well as Alice Oswald’s *Memorial* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2011), which reconfigures the *Iliad*, another instance of the repetitive labour that preserves men (152–62).

Throughout the book, Kadue makes many apt observations about domestic georgics and these key authors. For instance, she observes: “Ultimately, for Rabelais, the labor of maintaining the external world is a primarily interior process: the best way to keep words is not by preserving them in straw, but by preserving the mechanisms that produce them from within” (53). This view is suggestive and invites Kadue’s readers to explore the relation between word and world, inside and out, the preservation of culture and the work of letters. I would add that the *copia* of Rabelais’s style—the abundance of his words and the fertility of his imagination—brings together the quotidian and the horizon beyond each day, the texture of a labour in words that seem to bristle effortlessly. Of Spenser, Kadue says: “In *The Faerie Queene*, encounters with the labor that preserves domestic spaces, no matter how tedious or routine that labor may be, consistently evoke wonder” (57). Here, Kadue prompts further interpretation, and I would say that Spenser makes wondrous mundane matter, the domestic being part of the allegory, the endless work of epic, the making of words in the mythical space, the pastoral and romance, heroic labours of the everyday, moments of fame. Kadue aptly notes that in *The Faerie Queene*, “the Muses’

‘euerlasting scryne’—identifies domestic georgic as the source, and the secret, of both heroic virtue and poetic production” (76).

Like the other authors Kadue discusses, Montaigne, as she says, shares “the frequent futility, or even apparent counterproductiveness, of the daily operations we perform to keep ourselves and our writing going” (79). Kadue reminds us of Montaigne’s view that we often correct others as we correct ourselves—stupidly (79). Our labour in life and writing is not just right or easy to correct. Concerning Marvell, Kadue says: “*Upon Appleton House* is an encomium to the kind of symbolic domestic labor that preserves the fiction of aristocratic lineage in particular and of the linear narrative of history more generally *as a fiction*” and this work “presents literary production as the preservative and conservative domestic labor of putting futurity itself into suspension” (126–27). Kadue shows us the richness of Marvell’s art, its labour as poetry and of the land, of the secular and religious realms. Kadue mentions Richard Bentley’s response in which in a moment, as at the end of book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton can go from epic to georgic in description, diction and image (129, 151). The domestic and the heroic mingle.

To conclude the book, Kadue discusses two female poets, the one in the eighteenth century and the other in the twenty-first: “But for Collier and Oswald, as well as for the male authors studied in this book, domestic georgic cultivates meaning out of means; its endlessness is inseparable from its open-endedness” (161). Like the domestic georgic itself, Kadue’s book on that topic is a labour worth our labour, a work that opens up the making of letters, words, and books in a liminal space where writer and reader meet in a theatre of meaning.

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Shandong University

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