



University  
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

**DAVID DOUGLAS**

BA (McGill University, 2017)

**“A Study in Epicurean Poetics: Virgil’s Eclogues”**

Department of Greek and Roman Studies

Wednesday, January 15, 2020

2:30 P.M.

Clearihue Building

Room A307

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Cedric Littlewood, Department of Greek and Roman Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Clifford Roberts, Department of Philosophy, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Allan Mitchell, Department of English, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Pan Agathoklis, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

## **Abstract**

In this thesis I propose a reading of Virgil's Eclogues which draws heavily on the author's background in Epicurean philosophy. My aims are twofold: firstly to illuminate the literary complexities of Virgil's bucolic poetry, a poetry which is highly allusive and whose meaning rests on knowledge of a wide range of both literary and philosophical sources; and secondly to substantiate a more general theory of Epicurean poetics by observing how such a theory can be seen to unfold in Virgil's poetic practice. Beginning with the available biographical sources on Virgil's life, I review the evidence for his adherence to Epicureanism and attempt to provide a rough chronology of his philosophical conversion and early literary output, including the Eclogues. In addition to this historical context I give an overview of Epicurean ethical teachings as they relate to poetry and literature, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the discursive and ideological milieu which would have informed the Eclogues' composition. The remainder of the thesis traces the interaction between Virgil's literary and philosophical inheritances across the textual fabric of the Eclogues. I isolate the shared concerns of Epicurean philosophy and bucolic poetics to regulate their engagement with the ancient poetic genres of epic and elegy, compositional modes which are associated with frustration and moral danger. Finally I show how in the Eclogues Virgil engages with a third poetic genre, (cosmological) didactic, and how this engagement reflects both an Epicurean interest in the ethical benefits of natural philosophy (physiologia) and a tendentious literary program which seeks to innovate on the generic conception of bucolic poetry that Virgil takes over from his bucolic predecessor, Theocritus.