

The Failure of Orpheus:  
The Difference Between *Lex* and *Praecepta* in Vergil's *Georgics*

### 1. *Praecepta* in the *Georgics*

#### A. Cyrene's instructions for the *bugonia* (4.538–547).

quattuor eximios praestanti corpore tauros,  
qui tibi nunc viridis depascunt summa Lycaei,  
delige et intacta totidem cervice iuencas.  
quattuor his aras alta ad delubra dearum  
constitue, et sacrum iugulis demitte cruorem  
corporaque ipsa boum frondoso desere luco.  
post ubi nona suos Aurora ostenderit ortus,  
inferias Orphei Lethaea papavera mittes,  
et nigram mactabis ovem, lucumque revises:  
placatam Eurydicen vitula venerabere caesa.

Pick out four choice bulls, of surpassing form, that now graze among your herds on the heights of green Lycaeus, and as many heifers of unyoked neck. For these set up four altars by the stately shrines of the goddesses, and drain the sacrificial blood from their throats, but leave the bodies of the steers within the leafy grove. Later, when the ninth Dawn displays her rising beams, you must offer to Orpheus funeral dues of Lethe's poppies, slay a black ewe, and revisit the grove. Then with Eurydice appeased you should honor her with the slaying of a calf.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Aristaeus follows Cyrene's *praecepta* (4.548–553).

Haud mora: continuo matris **praecepta** facessit;  
ad delubra venit, monstratas excitat aras,  
quattuor eximios praestanti corpore tauros  
ducit et intacta totidem cervice iuencas.  
post ubi nona suos Aurora induxerat ortus,  
inferias Orphei mittit, lucumque revisit.

With no delay he at once performs his mother's **instruction**. He comes to the shrine, raises the altars appointed, and leads there four choice bulls, of surpassing form, and as many heifers of unyoked neck. Later, when the ninth Dawn had ushered in her rising beams, he offers to Orpheus the funeral dues, and revisits the grove.

#### C. The didactic persona's *praecepta* (1.176–181).

Possum multa tibi veterum **praecepta** referre,  
ni refugis tenuisque piget cognoscere curas.  
area cum primis ingenti aequanda cylindro  
et vertenda manu et creta solidanda tenaci,  
ne subeant herbae neu pulvere victa fatiscat,  
tum variae inludant pestes.

I can repeat for you many **maxims** of old, unless you shrink back and are loath to learn such trivial cares. And chiefly, the threshing floor must be levelled with a heavy roller, kneaded with the hand, and made solid with binding clay, lest weeds spring up, or, crumbling into dust, it gape open, and then divers plagues make mock of you.

### 2. *Lex* in the *Georgics*

#### A. Natura's *leges*: what grows where (1.56–61).

nonne vides, croceos ut Tmolus odores,  
India mittit ebur, molles sua tura Sabaei,  
at Chalybes nudi ferrum, virosaque Pontus  
castorea, Eliadum palmas Epiros equarum?  
continuo has **leges** aeternaque **foedera** certis  
imposuit natura locis.

Do you not see how Tmolus sends us saffron fragrance, India her ivory, the soft Sabaeans their frankincense; but the naked Chalybes give us iron, Pontus the strong-smelling beaver's oil, and Epirus the Olympian victories of her mares? From the first, Natura laid these **laws** and eternal **covenants** on certain lands.

#### B. Humanity wages war, breaking *leges* (1.505–511).

quippe ubi fas versum atque nefas: tot bella per orbem,  
tam multae scelerum facies; non ullus aratro  
dignus honos, squalent abductis arva colonis,  
et curvae rigidum falces conflantur in ensem.  
hinc movet Euphrates, illinc Germania bellum;  
vicinae ruptis inter se **legibus** urbes  
arma ferunt.

For here are right and wrong inverted; so many wars overrun the world, sin walks in so many shapes; respect for the plough is gone; our lands, robbed of the tillers, lie waste, and curved pruning hooks are forged into straight blades. Here Euphrates, there Germany, calls to arms; breaking the **laws** which bind them, neighboring cities draw the sword.

<sup>1</sup> Translations adapted from Fairclough-Goold (1999).

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C. Bees are the only creatures to live under *leges* (4.153–159).

solae communis natos, consortia tecta  
urbis habent, magnisque agitant sub **legibus** aevum.  
et patriam solae et certos novere penates,  
venturaeque hiemis memores aestate laborem  
experiuntur et in medium quaesita reponunt.  
namque aliae victu invigilant et **foedere** pacto  
exercentur agris.

[Bees] alone have children in common, hold the dwellings  
of their city jointly, and pass their life under great **laws**  
They alone know a fatherland and fixed home, and  
in summer, mindful of the winter to come, spend toilsome  
days and garner their gains into a common store. For  
some watch over the gathering of food, and under fixed  
**covenant** labor in the fields.

D. Orpheus breaks Proserpina's *lex* (4.485–493).

Iamque pedem referens casus evaserat omnis,  
redditaque Eurydice superas veniebat ad auras,  
pone sequens (namque hanc dederat Proserpina **legem**),  
cum subita incautum **dementia cepit** amantem ...  
restitit, Eurydicenque suam iam luce sub ipsa  
immemor heu! victusque animi respexit. ibi omnis  
effusus labor atque immitis rupta tyranni  
**foedera**.

And now, as [Orpheus] retraced his steps, he had avoided  
all mischance, and the regained Eurydice was nearing  
the world above, following behind—for Proserpina had  
imposed that **law**—when a sudden **madness seized**  
Orpheus, the incautious lover ... He halted, and,  
unmindful, alas, and vanquished in purpose, looked  
back on Eurydice, now near the very light! In that instant  
all his effort was wasted and the ruthless tyrant's  
**covenant** was broken.

3. *Dementia* in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*

A. Corydon's *dementia*: desire for Alexis (*Ecl.* 2.69–73).

a, Corydon, Corydon, quae te **dementia cepit!**  
semiputata tibi frondosa vitis in ulmo est. you?  
quin tu aliquid saltem potius, quorum indiget usus,  
viminibus mollique paras detexere iunco?  
invenies alium, si te hic fastidit, Alexin.

Ah, Corydon, Corydon, what **madness seized** you!  
Your vine is but half-pruned on the leafy elm. Nay,  
why not at least set about plaiting something your  
need calls for, with twigs and pliant rushes? You will  
find another Alexis, if this one scorns you.

B. Pasiphae's *dementia*: desire for Minos' bull (*Ecl.* 6.44–52).

Pasiphaën nivei solatur amore iuveni.  
a, virgo infelix, quae te **dementia cepit!**  
Proetides implerunt falsis mugitibus agros,  
at non tam turpis pecudum tamen ulla secuta  
concupitus, quamvis collo timuisset aratrum  
et saepe in levi quaesisset cornua fronte.  
a, virgo infelix, tu nunc in montibus erras.

Pasiphaë—happy one, if herds had never been!—with her  
passion for the snowy bull. Ah, unhappy girl, what  
**madness seized** you! The daughters of Proetus filled  
the fields with feigned lowings, yet not one was led by so  
foul a love for beasts, though each had feared to find the  
yoke on her neck and often looked for horns on her  
smooth brow. Ah! unhappy girl, now you roam the hills.

C. Aristaeus' *experientia* (4.315–316)

Quis deus hanc, Musae, quis nobis extudit artem?  
unde nova ingressus hominum **experientia cepit?**

What god, Muses, forged for us this technique?  
From where did man's new **skill seize** its rise?

4. *Nightingale simile* (4.511–515)

qualis populea maerens philomela sub umbra  
amissos queritur fetus, quos durus arator  
observans nido implumis detraxit; at illa  
flet noctem, ramoque sedens miserabile carmen  
**integrat**, et maestis late loca questibus implet.

[Orpheus sings] just as the nightingale, mourning beneath  
a poplar's shade, bewails her young ones' loss, when a  
heartless ploughman, watching their resting place, has  
plucked them unfledged from the nest: the mother weeps  
all night long, as, perched on a branch, she **makes whole**  
her piteous song and fills all around with plaintive  
lamentation.

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