

Vergil's Funny Honey: The Role of Humor in the *Georgics*

Numerous readers (e.g. Griffin 1979, 63; Dalzell 1996, 118-25; Gale 2000, 268; Nappa 2005, 61; Maclennan 2011) have sensed humor in certain sections of the *Georgics*, particularly in the anthropomorphic treatment of the bulls and bees of Books 3 and 4. Others (e.g. Thomas 1988, 159), however, have denied the humorous tone of these passages, particularly those scholars who consider the overall tenor of the work to be somber and pessimistic. The dark tone of these passages is indeed undeniable since both the bulls and the bees participate in civil war, a topic uncomfortably familiar to Vergil's contemporaries, but this darkness does not necessarily eliminate their potential for comedy. This paper considers Vergil's yoking of humor and seriousness in these passages, focusing on his description of the honey produced by the superior class of bees at 4.100-102: *haec potior suboles, hinc caeli tempore certo / dulcia mella premes, nec tantum dulcia, quantum / et liquida et durum Bacchi domitura saporem*. The programmatic significance of this honeyed wine has gone unexamined.

This honey's primary virtue is that it counters the "harsh flavor" of wine, and the blending of a drink combined of sharp and sweet elements recalls well-known passages in poetry and philosophy. Lucretius most famously compares his poetry to honey used to sweeten the bitter doctrines of his Epicurean subject matter, likened to wormwood. Vergil's bees produce a honey similar to Lucretius' insofar as it sweetens a drink that would otherwise prove too pungent, but whereas Lucretius' metaphors (honey = poetry; wormwood = Epicureanism) are clear, the symbolic functions of Vergil's honey and wine are not. Just a few years prior to the *Georgics*' publication, Horace in *Satires* 1.1 had recast Lucretius' simile to describe the presence of humor in poetry that has serious moral objectives, comparing his serio-comic approach to teachers giving cookies to pupils to trick them into learning. Diogenes the Cynic similarly likens

his use of humor to honey used to sweeten his bitter teachings (Giannantoni fr. 330). Vergil's honey, I argue, stands likewise for the amusing aspects of his anthropomorphic treatment of animals, while the harsh wine alludes to the more disturbing qualities they share with humans, i.e. the penchant for civil strife. Vergil's honeyed wine places him in the philosophical and didactic tradition of using humor to trick a reluctant audience into greater understanding. The humor can be regarded as a sweetener meant to render harsh lessons more palatable.

Vergil's honeyed wine furthermore elucidates one of these very lessons: that violence and passion (the "bitter flavor of Bacchus") must be curbed (*domitura*) in favor of the arts of civilization. Vergil describes wine's capacity to lead to violence in the *vituperatio vitis* (2.455-7), where he laments the alcoholic excess that gave rise to the Centauromachy. As Smith (2007) has shown, Vergil fashions instead a civilized, tempered Bacchus more in line with Augustan ideology. By infusing his descriptions of animal civil war with comic levity, Vergil refuses to grant full rein to the martial furor that has afflicted the human world. Humor becomes one means by which such madness can be kept at bay and controlled. When projected onto the animal world, civil strife can stir a laugh, but among men its consequences are deadly and must be avoided.

Finally, Vergil's mixture of a drink both sweet and harsh sheds light on the complicated tone of the *Georgics*. The honey significantly does not eradicate the wine's bitterness but simply reduces it. The resulting drink is bittersweet and thus nicely illustrates the ambivalence that pervades the epic. Throughout the *Georgics* Vergil famously stands "optimistic" and "pessimistic" passages side-by-side with no seeming resolution, and the presence of humor in the epic adds to its polyphonic nature. The mixture of sweet honey and harsh wine is therefore

nicely programmatic for a text that is simultaneously cheerful and despairing, hopeful and bleak, humorous and solemn.

Bibliography

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