

Ants and Bees in Ovid's Theater: *Ars Amatoria* 1.89-100

Early in the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid catalogues the best places in Rome for a prospective lover to hunt for a girlfriend. The site receiving the greatest attention is the theater. In this paper, I argue that Ovid's use of ant and bee similes (93-96) to describe the *cultissimae* (97) women who attend the theater is intended to recall the relationship between Dido and Aeneas in the *Aeneid*, to invert it, and to demonstrate the disruptive force of love.

Both similes are modeled on passages from the *Aeneid*. When Dido looks down from her tower on the Trojans preparing to depart, they are compared to ants (*Aen.* 4.402-407). When Aeneas first arrives in Carthage, he sees her people industriously building the city, like bees (*Aen.* 1.421-436). And so, these two similes neatly bracket the time that Aeneas spends in Carthage, and as such, the love affair between him and Dido.

The ant simile puts Ovid in a similar position to Dido, looking down (we must imagine Ovid sitting in the back row of the theater) on people, who, from an elevated perspective, look small, just like ants. However, unlike Dido, Ovid is in complete control, scouting potential prey, and not Trojan escapees. Bee similes have a complicated position in the epic tradition, from the *Iliad* to *Argonautica* to the *Aeneid*. Bees are also used to represent ideal qualities in women (Semonides 7) and microcosms of ideal societies (*Georgics* 4). The passage in the *Aeneid*, on which Ovid models his simile, is seen through the eyes of Aeneas, as he marvels at the construction of Carthage, which seems to be an ideal society. However, by the time that Aeneas leaves the city (as an ant), Carthaginian society is in ruins and the queen is close to suicide. There can be no doubt that the cause of this collapse is Aeneas, and specifically the introduction of *amor* into the city (Briggs 1980). For one of the things that is remarkable about the bee society in *Georgics* 4 (and one of the things that makes it exceptional), is that *amor* is absent, and

the bees reproduce asexually (*G.* 4.198-205). Therefore, the introduction of *amor* would be a distraction and only serve to disrupt the productive society. This certainly holds true in Carthage, where we hear from Anna, Dido's sister, in the *Fasti*, that the invasion of Iarbas followed close on the heels of Dido's death and scatters the Tyrians like bees (*Fasti* 3.551-556). As Stephen Hinds has demonstrated, the bee simile in this passage of the *Fasti* also plays with both the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics* (Hinds 2006). And so, by comparing the women of Rome to Virgilian ants and bees, Ovid suggests that the introduction of his type of *amor* will have a disruptive effect in the Rome.

Bibliography

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