Elisa Antonella Polignano, *Admiranda tibi levium spectacula rerum: the ideal community of Verg. G. 4. 149-227 and the humanised bee of Nicias AP 9.564 = HE VI 2775-2778*

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Abstract

At the very beginning of his fourth book of the Georgics (l. 3) Vergil claims that he will discourse of the "marvelous scenes of a miniature world", referring to the bees and their well organised social communities. Bees, in fact, have always been taken into account by Greco-Roman literary tradition over the centuries: Homer (Il. 2.87-93, 12.167-170), Pindar (P. 3.62), Plato (Ion 534), Aristotle (G.A. 3.10), Cicero (De Div. 1.78) and Petronius (Sat. 56) considered these little creatures as sacred, symbol of good luck, or simply related to human life. Hence, this paper aims to highlight how this parallel with mankind was carried out by the aforementioned authors, albeit with a particular focus on Vergil, for whom the beehive was but the ideal image of what a homogenous, disciplined, equal and dutiful community should look like.

At the beginning of his fourth book of the *Georgics* (l. 3-4), Vergil claims that, referring to the bees and their well-organised hives, he will speak of the "wondrous pageant of a tiny world — chiefs great-hearted, a whole nation's

character and tastes and tribes and battles"[1]. As Thomas[2] has shown, all these are typical subjects of ethnographical literature and anticipate the treatment that bees will receive later in the poem (ll. 149-227) "progressively more like human beings"[3] able to fight, treasure values, express the sense of community as a "nation"[4].

The aim of this paper is to examine lines 149-227 of *Georgics* 4 by focusing, in particular, on the reference the poet makes at line 189 to an epigram by Nicias (*AP* 9.564 = *HE* VI 2775-2778). I will demonstrate that Vergil not only knew the 3rd c. BC poet but also picked up his epigram, along with other Greek references, on purpose in order to strengthen the aforementioned humanising trend both in content and lexically.

The ancient Greeks had already in archaic times invested bees with familiar human connotations[5]. The poet Semonides (*Types of Women*, fr. 7.84-94 W.[2]), for instance, described the bee-woman as the only positive kind

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[1] The critical edition in use is Roger A. B. Mynors, *P. Vergili Maronis, Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) and the translation is by H. Rushton Fairclough and George P. Goold, *Vergil. Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid, Books 1-6* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999). Note that, ever since the incipit, Vergil gives the bees an emphatic and epic treatment, which is even exalted by the "incongruous juxtaposition of large and small" in the choice of attributes (e.g *admiranda*, "wondrous", and *levium*, "tiny") and "the attribution of human martial fervor" by engaging with a lexicon typical of human heroes (e.g. the description of bees' war in ll. 213-218). This, consequently, produces a sort of estrangement that could be sensed by readers as humor. Cf. Stephanie McCarter, 'Vergil's Funny Honey: The Function of Humor in the *Georgics*', *Classical Philology* 114 (2019), 52-65.

[2] Thomas 1988: 147.

[3] Nappa 2005: 162.

[4] For this definition see Leendert Weeda, *Vergil's Political Commentary in the Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid* (Warsaw, Poland: De Gruyter Open Poland 2015), 96.

[5] For further examples of humanised bees, see Verg. *Aen*. 1.430-436, Plin. *HN* 11.109-110, Cic. *Off*. 1.157, Sen. *Clem*. 1.19.2.

of wife possible due to her ability to manage the household, her care, and her productivity. Aristotle (*HA* 488a8-14) mentions the bees as an example of "social animals" right after the men. Furthermore, the priestesses of Artemis (Ar. *Ra.* 1273), Apollo (Pi. *P*. 4.60), and Demeter (Porph. *Antr*. 18.8) were known as μέλισσαι (cf. *LSJ s.v.* II 2). Poets were another social category particularly close to bees ever since the Homeric Nestor, whose speech poured sweeter than honey from his mouth (cf. *Il*. 1.249)[6]. Bacchylides called himself the "bee from the island of Ceos" (10.10), Aristophanes praised his colleague Phrynichus as if he were a bee "sipping the fruits of ambrosia [...], ever bringing away sweet song" (*Av*. 750), Plato wrote that the souls of the poets "cull from honey-dropping founts in certain gardens and glades of the Muses like the bees" (*Ion* 534b)[7], while Hermesianax referred to Sophocles as the "Attic bee" (*CA* 7.57-60). So, these insects were proverbially related to men (poets especially) and their characterisations long before Vergil.

Nevertheless Vergil, great observer of the farm life, which he knew thanks to his father (Svet. *Poet*. 2.2), does not diverge from this path, as has

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[6] "It was also said that poets were fed honey by bees at a young age" and their art (μέλος "lyric poetry", *LSJ s.v*. B a) is frequently compared to honey (μέλι) through a pun on their assonance, cf. Athanassios Vergados, *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 574; Oliver Thomas, *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020), 458; Arthur B. Cook, 'The Bee in Greek Mythology', *JHS*, 15 (1985), 7-8. For more examples of the association poet-bee see Call. *h.Apoll*.110, Theoc. 1.146, Lucr. 1.947, 3.12, 4.22, Hor. *Ep*. 1.3.21, 1.19.44, Artemid. 5.83, Mary Lefkowitz, *On Bees, Poets and Plato: Ancient Biographers' Representations of The Creative Process* in R. Fletcher and J. Hanink edds., *Creative Lives in Classical Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Classical Studies, 2016), 182; Jan H. Waszink, *Biene und Honig als Symbol des Dichters und der Dichtung in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Düsseldorf: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1974), 26-28; René Nünlist, *Poetologische Bildersprache in der frühgriechischen Dichtung* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1998), 60-63.

[7] Although generally human souls were compared to flying bees, see Nicholas Horsfall, 'Bees in Elysium', *Vergilius*, 56 (2010), 40.

been recognised by several Classical scholars throughout the years[8]. His bees in *Georgics* 4.149-227 possess, in fact, some of the best qualities that should define Roman *cives* ("citizens", cf. *Quirities* in l. 201) worthy of this title: *fides* ("trust"), *pietas* ("an attitude of dutiful respect towards those to whom one is bound by ties of religion, consanguinity, etc."), *industria* ("industry"), *auctoritas* ("right of ownership"), *concordia* ("mutual agreement"), *constantia* ("resistance to change"), *disciplina* ("discipline"). They are loyal, most of all to the queen, and reciprocally trustful since they rely on one another for the correct functioning of their complex society, where everyone must play his role as a small yet fundamental gear in order to make the entire system work. The *industria* ("industry" in the sense of a "diligent activity directed to some purpose", cf. *OLD s.v.* 1 a) is probably their most noticeable virtue since they would gladly "bruise their wings, and freely yield their lives under their load" (ll. 203-204) in the name of the "their glory in begetting honey" (l. 205). Egoism and self-interest are unknown to them, who prefer instead working without pause for the common good, namely reaching a profit that could benefit every current member of the beehive and their descendants. With that in mind, they get along animated by the same long-term purpose, although wars are likely to happen once the queen is gone. At that time, indeed, "they break their fealty, and themselves pull down the honey they have reared and tear up their trellised combs. [...They] expose their bodies to battle, and seek amid wounds a glorious death" (ll. 213-218).

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[8] See, for instance, Theodore J. Haarhoff, 'The Bees of Vergil', *Greece & Rome*, 7/2 (1960), 161 and Thomas N. Habinek, *Sacrifice, Society, and Vergil's Ox-born Bees* in M. Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde edds., *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer* (Atlanta: Scholars Pr., 1990), 209-223.

Varro transmits that bees fight too, and "they live as in an army" (*Rust.* 3.16.9), but in the end everything returns to normality as soon as a new ruler is found. Indeed, bees are devoted to their one and only sovereign, the queen, whose *auctoritas* ("right of ownership") they undoubtfully respect and honor with their life if necessary (this behaviour is compared by Vergil to the Oriental absolute monarchies such as those of Egypt, Lydia, Persia, and Media in l. 211, cf. also the word *rex* l. 210 used for the bees' queen).

However, besides the aforementioned descriptive content and the socio-political parallel between bees and men, I believe that Vergil leads his work to a more refined level. Instead of just stating the humanisation of bees in *Georgics* 4.219-227 by introducing similes comparing them with Roman citizens (or oriental monarchies, for instance), he uses those similes as starting points and enriches them with lexical forms often derived from Greek models, which he knew well (e.g. Homer, Hesiod, Callimachus, and Theocritus, as I will demonstrate shortly). In 1st c. Rome Greek texts (and Homer on the top of them) were, in fact, part of the school programmes: Horace claimed that "he had the luck to be bred, and taught how much Achilles' wrath had harmed the Greeks" (*Ep*. 2.2.41-42), and Petronius, Quintilian, and Pliny soon after confirmed it[9]. Coming back to Vergil's allusions, at first one may think of Jupiter's gifts to the bees at ll. 149-150, which he granted in return for the honey they provided when he was still an infant and was kept hidden in the cave of Dicte in Crete by the Curetes (Ant.Lib. *Met*. 19, Diod. 5.70, Call. *Jov*.

[9] Petron. *Sat*. 5, Quint. *Inst*. 1.8.5, Plin. *Ep*. 2.14.2. Cf. Bonner 2012: 212-213.

49)[10]. "Just as human beings are subject to a law laid down by Jupiter himself, so too did the bees receive their nature from him"[11] and with it the opportunity to have "children in common" (l. 153, cf. Pl. *Rep*. 457c10-d10 where a similar solution is proposed by Socrates), to hold "the dwellings of their city jointly" (l. 153), and to spend their entire life "under the majesty of law" (l. 154). Related to the *pater deorum* is then the activity of the Cyclopes said in ll. 170-175 to be as busy as the "Attic" bees (*Cecropias apes* at l. 177)[12]. Vergil, who seems keen on admitting the rather hyperbolical nature of such a parallel with the explicit concession "if we may compare small things with great" (l. 176, cf. μέγα ἔργον "big work" in Call. *H*. 3.49), echoes in this way what he said at the beginning of book 4 of the *Georgics* to introduce "the wondrous pageant of a tiny world". In addition, he draws attention and importance to this microcosm by comparing it with "the grandest industrial spectacle available to the imagination of Antiquity, the busy forging of Jupiter's thunderbolts"[13]. According to Homer (*Od*. 9.106-115) and Euripides (*Cyc*. 114-128), the Cyclopes were uncivilised shepherds living among men in Sicily (cf. *Aetna* l. 173, Verg. *Aen*. 8. 416-420), although in their description Vergil seems to have taken inspiration not only from this humanising tradition but also from the Hesiodic *Theogony* (139-146), where they fabricate the

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[10] For more information on bees as τροφοί ("nurses") see Momolina Marconi, 'ΜΕΛΙΣΣΑ dea cretese', *Athenaeum*, 18 (1940), 164-166, Hein Verbruggen, *Le Zeus crétois* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1981), 41-42, Fabio Roscalla, *Presenze Simboliche dell'Ape nella Grecia Antica* (Pavia: La Nuova Italia, 1998), 16-18.

[11] Nappa 2005: 178.

[12] Cecrops (Κέκροψ in Greek) is precisely the name of a mythical king of Athens, later extended to the entire Attic region (cf. *LSJ s.v.*). In antiquity the honey produced from Attic bees (esp. from Mt. Hymettus) was proverbial, cf. Richard F. Thomas 1988: 181.

[13] Cf. Mynors 1990: 310 and Thomas 1998: 280. Cf. also Góráin 2009: 7

thunderbolt for Zeus (cf. A.R. 1.730-732)[14]. Behind this simile there is the presence of Call. *H*. 3.46-61[15] as well, who "seems to be the first to connect the Hesiodic Cyclopes with Hephaestus in the island of Lipari"[16], where they were smiths working side by side the god (another connection with war, cf. Verg. *G*. 4. 213-218) and making the Aetna "crying aloud" for the sound of their hammers (cf. *gemit* "groans" in Verg. *G*. 4.173). In the Callimachean *Hymn to Artemis* (l. 48) the volcanic island of Lipari is symbolically called Μελιγουνίς ("Meligounís"), as it was known in the past, which recalls once again the beehive and the honey (μέλι) stored in there.

In addition to the preceding Greek literary references, another plays a pivotal role in this context: Nicias *AP* 9.564 = *HE* VI 2775-2778.

Αἰόλον ἰμεροθαλὲς ἔαρ φαίνουσα, μέλισσα
ξουθά, ἐφ᾽ ὡραίοις ἄνθεσι μαινομένα,
χῶρον ἐφ᾽ ἡδύπνοον πωτωμένα, ἔργα τίθεσσο,
ὄφρα τεὸς πλήθῃ κηροπαγὴς θάλαμος[17].

"Bee, that revealest the presence of many-coloured
spring in her delightful bloom; yellow bee, revelling;
in the prime of the flowers; fly to the sweetly-
scented field and busy thyself with thy work,
that thy waxen chambers may be filled".

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[14] Cf. Mynors 1990: 310 and Thomas 1998: 179.

[15] Cf. Farrell 1991: 243-245.

[16] Giusti 2014: 38.

[17] The critical edition in use is Andrew S. F. Gow and Denys L. Page, *The Greek Anthology. Hellenistic Epigrams* (Cambridge: University Press 1965). The following translation is by William R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology with an English translation*, vol. III (London: W. Heinemann, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1917).

In this epigram the 3rd c. BC poet indulges in the description of a bee which buzzes energetically around some blooming spring flowers and flies towards the fragrant fields nearby, thus performing her work of honey making and filling the hive (θάλαμος, l. 4) with it. Generally, θαλάμη is the Greek word used to indicate the hive or cell of bees in poetry (cf. *LSJ s.v.* I 2), like, for instance, in Nic. *Alex*. 449, Apollonid. *AP* 6.239.6 = *GPh* III 1142, and Antiphil. *AP* 9.404.2 = *GPh* XLII 1044. Although θάλαμος ("hive", lit. "bed") does not differ much in signifier and meaning in Nicias' poem (cf. Gow-Page 1965, 433), it does in Vergil though. As Thomas[18] points out, *thalamis* (a linguistic calque on θάλαμος) of *Georgics* 4.189 is "the only non-human [...] application of the word" in Latin literature (cf. *OLD s.v.* 1 a), where it stands for either an inner chamber or an apartment. Likewise, θάλαμος as "hive" or "cell" was firstly attested in Nicias *AP* 9.564.4 = *HE* VI 2778. Hence, the choice of resuming this specific noun is noticeable, even more if considering the similar bee-context. But where does such a finding lead the investigation and how can it be used in relation to Vergil's humanisation of bees?

Nicias' *floruit*, whom the epigrammatist Meleager of Gadara (I c. BC) mentions in the selective introduction to his *Garland* (*AP* 4.1.19 = *HE* I 3944) where every poet is compared to a flower or a plant (Nicias is likened to the green bergamot-mint), was probably in the first half of the 3rd c. BC. According to the hypothesis to Theocritus' *Id*. 11 (scholion d)[19], he was Milesian and a pupil of the Greek anatomist Erasistratus. For this reason, Nicias has been later identified as "the medical friend of Theocritus, four of

[18] Thomas 1988: 182.

[19] Wendel 1914: 240-241.

whose poems are concerned with him" (*Id*. 11, 13, 28, and *AP* 6.337 = *HE* I 3373-3376)[20]. Given that the dependence of Vergil on Theocritus is confirmed by the Latin poet himself (cf. *B*. 6.1-2)[21], there is no reason to exclude that he could have known Nicias' epigrams too, since he was explicitly mentioned in Theocritus' works and was an epigrammatist of Meleager's anthology[22].

To sum up, what I argue is that Vergil chose to use the word *thalamis* in *Georgics* 4.189 in full awareness that it designates human dwelling in Greco-Roman literary tradition (where it indicates a delimited space in the house). Moreover, he took inspiration for such an occurrence from the Greek poet Nicias, who is the only (and first) to relate it to the beehive instead. By so doing, Vergil proved to go beyond the content humanisation of bees, compared to Roman citizens in their everyday activities and ideals as it is clear at this point, and to refine this aspect even further by accurately engaging with the vocabulary that would reflect it best.

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[20] Gow and Page 1965: 428.

[21] Although the scholarship on the relationship between Vergil and Theocritus is vast, see as examples Wendell Clausen, *Theocritus and Virgil* in E. Kenney and W. Clausen (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 301-319; Karl-Heinz Stanzel, 'Theocrits Bukolika und Vergil', *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft* 20, 1994-95, 151-66; A. Grilli, *Virgilio e Teocrito* in G. Ramires (ed.), *Teocrito nella Storia della Poesia Bucolica. Atti del Convegno Nazionale, Milazzo, 7-8 novembre 1998* (Milazzo: Spes 1999), 85-108; Styliani Hatzikosta, 'How did Virgil read Theocritus?', *Myrtia*, 16, 2001, 105-10.

[22] Such an anthology was known in I c. BC Rome and to Vergil, cf. Kathryn Gutzwiller, 2015, 233 (esp. n. 1), and *Catullus and the Garland of Meleager* in I. Du Quesnay and T. Woodman (eds.), *Catullus: Poems, Books, Readers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 79-111.

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