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Heerink, M.A.J.

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OVID'S AEGINETAN PLAGUE AND THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE *GEORGICS*

1. Introduction

The influence of the ancient literary tradition upon the *Georgics* is as broad as it is profound¹, but in Virgil's highly allusive didactic poem, the description of the Noric cattle plague at the end of *Georgics* 3 holds a unique position. As RICHARD F. THOMAS comments, "nowhere else does Virgil draw so deeply from a single source"². This source is Lucretius' account of the human plague of Athens in the sixth book of his *De Rerum Natura*, which in its turn draws heavily on Thucydides' account of the same event (2.48ff.). As with Virgil's plague, Lucretius' episode rounds off a book – in fact the entire work – and the pessimistic ending of both Virgil's third book and Lucretius' didactic epic have received a lot of scholarly attention³. Another text that is part of this series of literary plagues, however, Ovid's account of the mythological plague that ravaged the animals and humans of Aegina in book 7 of the *Metamorphoses*, has been rather neglected. As I will argue, this Ovidian episode can be seen as the climax of the series of poetical plague descriptions. Ovid has cleverly reworked Virgil's account in combination with its aftermath in the *Georgics*, as well as in the *Aeneid*, to fit the poetical agenda of his work.

2. *Metamorphoses* 7 and the end of *Georgics* 3 and 4

Ovid's account of a plague on Aegina (*Met.* 7.523–613) is part of a larger story. When Cephalus comes to the island to ask its king, Aeacus, to help his city Athens in the imminent war against Crete, Aeacus agrees to the request, claiming to have enough soldiers. Cephalus concurs, but also says he misses many familiar faces. Aeacus explains at length that a plague, caused by Juno, killed many animals and men on the island. The king continues to give an account of the creation of the Myrmidons (*Met.* 7.614–60). When Aeacus saw a swarm of ants crawling on the bark of an oak from Dodona, he asked his father Jupiter to grant him as many

¹ See esp. FARRELL (1991), e. g. 4: "If not the most allusive poem that antiquity produced, it must be one of the most creatively and ambitiously imitative that literature has yet seen."

² THOMAS (1988) 130f.

³ On the contact between Lucretius' and Vergil's plagues see e. g. HARRISON (1979), WEST (1979) THOMAS (1988) ad loc., FARRELL (1991) 84–94, and CLARE (1995).

subjects as there were ants on the tree. The oak trembled and that night Aeacus dreamed that the oak-tree shook of the ants, after which they were transformed into humans. The dream had become reality, however, and the next morning the king was greeted by new subjects. Aeacus called them Myrmidons, after the Greek word for ant (μύρμηξ), and although they had changed their appearance, they were still thrifty and hard-working. These men Aeacus offers to Cephalus in the war against Minos.

Ovid's story of the plague is heavily influenced by both Lucretius and especially Virgil, who describe a human and an animal plague respectively. Ovid's *aemulatio* consists of a combination of both Roman models, as he describes the effects of the plague on both animals and humans; understandably, the part on the animals (*Met.* 7.536–551) alludes mainly to Virgil and the part on the human sufferings (552–81) mainly to Lucretius⁴. With regard to Ovid's imitation of his most important model in this episode, the *Georgics*, K. GALINSKY has shown how Ovid reveals himself as a sharp reader and creative re-worker of Virgil by both expanding⁵ and shortening⁶ specific passages from *Georgics* 3. As I will show in what follows, however, Ovid's *aemulatio* exceeds the micro-level: Ovid has seen the larger thematic and structural concerns of the *Georgics* and has cleverly transformed and adapted them to the agenda of his own work, i. e. metamorphosis. More specifically, I will treat

⁴ See ANDERSON (1972) ad loc.

⁵ As GALINSKY (1975) 116–7 shows, Virgil spends four lines on the causes of the plague, the first two (478–9) dealing with “the external circumstances of the origin of the plague” (116), the next two (480–1), describing the “sweep of the disease”. In his general description of the plague, “Ovid expands both of Vergil's descriptions to five lines each” (528–37). In the first part (528–32) he expands Virgil's mention of the “sickened sky” to an elaborate description. Ovid also expands Virgil's small temporal marker *autumni* to three lines (530–2). In the second part (533–7), Ovid reworks Virgil's *omne genus pecudum*, “every tribe of household cattle”, to a catalogue of four kinds of animals: dogs, birds, sheep, and oxen (536). “The simple parallel construction *omne pecudum ... omne ferarum*, which Vergil uses to convey the repetitious effect of the plague, yields to artistic *variatio* of syntax in Ovid: *strage canum* etc. on the one hand, *inque feris* on the other.” (117). So whereas his predecessor restricted himself to cattle, Ovid outdoes his model by broadening the scope in another, mythological context. See also ANDERSON (1972) 300 ad loc. for details of Ovid's reworking of the Virgilian passage.

⁶ Virgil's elaborate description of the slowly dying race horse (498–514) is reduced by Ovid to three lines only (542–4). As GALINSKY (1975) 119 notes, “Ovid was struck with the idea, which Vergil expresses simply with *victor equus* [*Georgics* 3.499], of the former grandeur of the horse and his fall from it. But instead of presenting the horse's decline with vivid pathos, culminating in a depiction of the animal's energies turning in deadly destructiveness against himself rather than against his competitors at the race track, Ovid expresses the whole idea rather tortuously.” Apart from this concluding subjective note, I agree with GALINSKY's observations concerning Ovid's reworking of Virgil's passage, in which Ovid obviously reduces Virgil's amount of lines on the horse, but in fact elaborates an implicit contrast in Virgil's passage between the once victorious horse and the dramatic final scene.

the link between Virgil's plague and the end of *Georgics* 4, as discussed by R.J. CLARE,⁷ whose argument I will shortly summarize first.

In *Georgics* 3.549, the centaur Chiron and Melampus are named of the *magistri*, “experts”, who cannot do anything about the plague and thus retreat:

praeterea iam nec mutari pabula refert,
quaesitaeque nocent artes; cessere magistri,
Phillyrides Chiron Amythaoniusque Melampus.

Georg. 3.548–50

What's more, to move pasture is now no remedy:| the therapies attempted work ill. The experts give up,| Phillyra's son Chiron and Amythaon's son Melampus. (tr. JOHNSON)

Apart from them, the only other specified person in the *Georgics* to be called a *magister* is Aristaeus:

sed si quem proles subito defecerit omnis
nec genus unde novae stirpis revocetur habebit,
tempus et Arcadii memoranda inventa magistri
pandere ...

Georg. 4.281–4

But if a man's whole hive suddenly has failed | and he knows not whence to revive the breed
in a new line,| time to unfold the famed discovery of the Arcadian master | ... (tr. JOHNSON)

These lines refer to the so-called practice of *bugonia*, “birth from an ox” literally, the production of bees from the putrefying carcass of a ritually slaughtered ox. Aristaeus learns this practice and is the first to use it to resurrect his beehive, which died from *morbus*, disease or plague, caused by Orpheus and the nymphs, friends of Eurydice, who are angry at Aristaeus for his pursuit of Eurydice, the ultimate cause of her death. Virgil's text hints at a link between the characters of Chiron and Aristaeus, for just as, for instance, Jason, Achilles and Asclepius, Aristaeus was nurtured by the centaur Chiron. Accordingly, he possesses both the power of his master to heal and to prophesy. Interesting in the context of *Georgics* 3, however, is that Apollonius of Rhodes mentions that “Aristaeus is summoned by the inhabitants of the Minoan islands *as a defender against plague* (λοιμοῦ ἀλεξητήρα)”⁸. Whereas Chiron and religious sacrifice fail to do anything against the cattle plague in book three, however, Aristaeus is able to resurrect his beehive with the newly learned religious practice of *bugonia*. In other words: “the master fails in book 3, while the student succeeds in book 4”⁹. Through these and other parallels CLARE convincingly shows that Aristaeus “displays a willingness to seek out new learning from others” (106), and he concludes: “Virgil's didactic masterpiece concludes with a reaffirmation of the worth of active learning, a message which is lent all the more emphasis by the depiction at the end of book three of the inadequacy of human knowledge, but also a knowledge of failure. This paves the way for Aristaeus' subsequent recuperation of the process of learning.” (106).

⁷ CLARE (1995). Cf. SIMPSON (2003) 332.

⁸ CLARE (1995) 105.

⁹ CLARE (1995) 105.

3. Ovid's metamorphosis of Virgil

In book 7 of the *Metamorphoses*, as I will argue now, Ovid has reworked this thematic link between the endings of *Georgics* 3 and 4 by combining his plague on Aegina with the resurrection of the population in the form of the metamorphosis of ants into humans. The intertextual contact between Virgil's and Ovid's plagues is clear and has been discussed in detail by W.S. ANDERSON in his commentary and by K. GALINSKY¹⁰. The second part of Ovid's story – the metamorphosis – and its relation to *Georgics* 4, however, have not received the attention they deserve¹¹. It is important to realize on beforehand that, although the myth of the origin of the Myrmidons was very old and is, for instance, already mentioned by Hesiod¹², Ovid is to our knowledge the first to combine this story with a plague¹³. An ancient reader of Ovid's metamorphosis story after the plague description will therefore *a priori* have been very attentive to see meaning in this suggestive coupling of stories, and in the relevance of the *Georgics* to the sequel to the plague, the metamorphosis of the Myrmidons. It is also important to realize that the story of the Myrmidons holds a unique position, because, as M. PECHILLO has pointed out, it is the only instance in the *Metamorphoses* where insects change into humans. "In fact, it is one of the rare instances of upward metamorphosis. Stones become people, and there are a few instances of catasterism and deification, but there are no other changes of animals into human beings"¹⁴. This fact also draws special attention to the metamorphosis of the Myrmidons, and helps to suggest an allusive link with *Georgics* 4, for which I will argue now.

As Aeacus remarks, the transformed Myrmidons retain the characteristics of their former nature, positive traits, such as thrift and tenacity:

corpora vidisti; mores, quos ante gerebant,
nunc quoque habent: parcum genus est patiensque laborum
quaesitique tenax et quod quaesita reservet.

Met. 7.655–7

You have seen their bodies: and the character they showed before they still have now; a thrifty race that endures toil and clings to what is acquired, and such as stores away its acquisitions.
(tr. HILL)

As in indicated by the underlined similar words, in the same line position, Ovid alludes to a passage in *Georgics* 4, and through this allusion Ovid's Myrmidons recall Virgil's bees:

¹⁰ See ANDERSON (1972) ad loc., and notes 5 and 6 above for the observations of GALINSKY (1975).

¹¹ To my knowledge, the parallel between Ovid's combined episode and *Georgics* 3 and 4 has only been noted by SIMPSON (2001) 332, but he does not argue for self-conscious intertextual contact, as I do here.

¹² Hesiod, fr. 205 M.-W. See BÖMER (1976) 331 for other occurrences.

¹³ Cf. BÖMER (1976) 331: "Erst bei Ovid und einer von Strab. VIII 6,16 (...) abgelehnten Version (...) findet sich die Ansicht, der Verwandlung sei die Vernichtung der Menschen auf Aegina durch die Pest vorangegangen."

¹⁴ PECHILLO (1990) 39.

et patriam solae et certos novere penates,
 venturaeque *hiemis memores* aestate laborem
 experiuntur et in medium quaesita reponunt.

Georg. 4.155–7

They alone recognize a fatherland and constant home,| and mindful of the coming winter endure
 summer toil | and in common store lay in their gleanings. (tr. JOHNSON)

It has long been recognized that “anthropomorphism” plays an important part in Virgil’s *Georgics*¹⁵. Virgil’s animals, dying in the plague at the end of book 3, for instance, resemble Lucretius’ dying Athenians through allusion. But the phenomenon “reaches a climax with the bees in book 4”¹⁶, where the insects with their organized society clearly evoke a comparison with human beings¹⁷. Virgil himself comments on this anthropomorphism in *Aeneid* 1:

Qualis apes aestate nova per florea rura
 exercet sub sole labor, cum gentis adultos
 educunt fetus, aut cum liquentia mella
 stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas,
 aut onera accipiunt venientum, aut agmine facto
 ignavom fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent:
 fervet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.

Aen. 1.430–6

They [*the Carthaginians*] were like bees at the beginning of summer, busy in the sunshine all through the flowery meadows, bringing out the young of the race, just come of age, or treading the oozing honey and swelling the cells with sweet nectar, or taking the loads as they come in or mounting guard to keep the herds of idle drones out of their farmstead. The hive seethes with activity and the fragrance of honey flavoured with thyme is everywhere. (tr. WEST)

Virgil here clearly alludes to *Georgics* 4, as the three identical lines, printed in italics in this passage and the next, indicate:

sunt quibus ad portas cecidit custodia sorti,
 inque vicem speculantur aquas et nubila caeli,
 aut onera accipiunt venientum, aut agmine facto
 ignavum fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent.
 fervet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.

Georg. 4.165–9

There are those to whom guard duty at the gates falls by lot;| in turn they eye heaven’s showers and overcast,| or receive loads from incomers, or in mustered squads | blockade the drones (that shiftless ruck) from the stalls.| The industry glows, and the fragrant honey breathes if thyme. (tr. JOHNSON)

By comparing the Carthaginians with bees in the *Aeneid*, however, Virgil has reversed tenor and vehicle. So whereas Virgil’s bees were metaphorically humans in

¹⁵ See e. g. HARDIE (1998) 36: “The anthropomorphism of the poem is signaled in its third word, (1.1) *laetas (segetes)*, both ‘fertile’ and ‘happy’ (crops), exploiting a countryman’s turn of phrase to suggest a parallelism between vegetable or animal and human experience that is developed in the four books through an almost evolutionary progression”.

¹⁶ HARDIE (1998) 37.

¹⁷ See e. g. DAHLMANN (1954) and HARDIE (1998) 37–8 for the anthropomorphism of Virgil’s bees.

the *Georgics*, the humans are changed back into bees, as it were, in *Aeneid* 1. This is at least how Ovid seems to have read Virgil, for in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid takes the play one step further by *literally* changing animals into humans. That Ovid is indeed reacting to Virgil's move is made clear in lines 624–5 of *Metamorphoses* 7, where, as the underlined words indicate, Ovid alludes to Virgil's bees in the passages just quoted from *Georgics* 4 and *Aeneid* 1:

forte fuit iuxta patulis rarissima ramis
sacra Iovi quercus de semine Dodonaeo;
hic nos frugilegas adspeximus **agmine longo**
grande onus exiguo formicas ore gerentes
rugosoque suum servantes cortice callem.

Met. 7.622–6

There happened to be, nearby, a very special oak with spreading branches, sacred to Jove and from the seed of Dodona: here we saw in a long column, carrying a large load in tiny mouths, corn-collecting ants keeping to their track on the furrowed bark. (tr. HILL)

Ovid does not change his humans into Virgil's bees, however, but into ants, which makes the play with Virgil as outlined above not entirely satisfactory as it stands. The last link in the chain is provided by Virgil in *Aeneid* 4, where the Trojans are likened to ants:

migrantis cernas totaque ex urbe ruentis.
ac velut ingentem formicae farris acervum
cum populant *hiemis memores* tectoque *reponunt*,
it nigrum campis *agmen* praedamque per herbas
convectant calle angusto; pars **grandia** trudent
obnixae frumenta umeris, pars **agmina** cogunt
castigantque moras, opere omnis semita fervet.

Aen. 4.401–7

You could see them [*the Trojans*] pouring out of every part of the city, like ants plundering a huge heap of wheat and storing it away in their home against the winter, and their black column advances over the plain as they gather in their booty along a narrow path through the grass, some putting their shoulders to huge grains and pushing them along, others keeping the column together and whipping in the stragglers, and the whole track seethes with activity. (tr. WEST)

The words in italics, which highlight similarities with *Georgics* 4.156–7 (see p. 5 above), as well as the words *opere ... fervet* (407), which recall *fervet opus* in *Georg.* 4.169 (and their reworking in *Aen.* 1.436), make the ants evoke Virgil's bees and create the impression that this text is part of an intertextual nexus. Ovid's allusion in *Met.* 7.656–7 (*laborum l ... quaesita reservet*) to the same passage from the *Georgics* (156–7: *laborem l ... quaesita reponunt*) is in this respect particularly relevant, as this Virgilian passage is intertextually connected to the passage in *Aeneid* 4 that also deals with ants. Ovid has seen the link between Virgil's "human" bees and ants, and has contaminated them. Something similar seems to be the case in *Met.* 7.624–5 (*agmine longo l grande onus*), where Ovid alludes both to the bees of the *Georgics* (4.167: *onera ... agmine facto*) as well as to the ants in *Aeneid* 4 (405–6: *grandia ... l ... agmina*), as I have indicated with the underlinings and bold print respectively in the passage above: both Ovid's and Virgil's ants move in an *agmen* and carry a heavy load (compare *grande* with *grandia*).

So Virgil's bees are (metaphorically) transformed into humans in the *Georgics*, and the humans are turned back into bees again in *Aeneid* 1, and then into ants in *Aeneid* 4. That is at least how Ovid seems to have read the sequence of interrelated Virgilian passages, who has then taken the next step by turning the ants back into humans. Unlike Virgil, however, Ovid's transformation is not metaphorical: his ants have really become human beings, although they still recall their former selves, both as Virgilian bees and as Virgilian ants. Ovid's metamorphosis of the Myrmidons can thus be said to constitute an incorporation and transformation of the literary tradition before him. The phenomenon of metamorphosis can accordingly be seen as a metapoetical statement: Ovid has transformed Virgil. This is completely in line with the agenda of Ovid's work, of which the main theme, metamorphosis, has a metapoetical dimension, as is already made clear at the start of the work:

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
 corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa)
 adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
 ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!

Met. 1.1–4

My spirit moves me to tell of shapes changed into strange bodies; oh gods (for it was you who changed these) inspire my undertakings and from the first beginnings of the world lead my continuous song down to my own times. (tr. HILL)

As S.J. HARRISON conveniently comments on this passage: “Metamorphosis is the theme of the poem, both in terms of its formal content, and in terms of its generic variety. Genres appear and disappear and are transformed into each other through the long course of the poem, following its explicit programme (1.1–2): literary *forms* are transformed into new *bodies* of poetic work”¹⁸. Accordingly, scholars have shown how the *Metamorphoses* has incorporated and transformed epic (and in particular the *Aeneid*), tragedy, elegy and pastoral poetry¹⁹. Ovid's allusive play with Virgil in the plague episode and its aftermath is just another example strengthening the impression that Ovid's work is indeed a metamorphosis of the entire literary tradition.

4. Conclusion

Ovid's episode can be seen as the climax of the series of poetical plague descriptions. In Lucretius' first Roman account all humans died at the end of the work. Virgil transformed Lucretius' humans into animals, which nevertheless still resembled

¹⁸ HARRISON (2002) 89 (who also provides examples). Cf. KEITH (2002) 238: “Its [*the prologue's*] self-referential commentary on the literary aims of the *Metamorphoses* is buttressed by Ovid's use of *forma* and *corpora* (1.1–2), which in stylistic discussion can refer to literary ‘forms’ and ‘works’ respectively: the poet undertakes to transform the diverse literary forms of his sources into the hexameter body of his epic.” See also FARRELL (1999) and THEODORAKOPOULOS (1999) on the metapoetical meaning of *corpus* here and throughout the *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁹ See HARRISON (2002) 87–9 and KEITH (2002) for examples and further bibliography.

Lucretius' humans. Although Virgil's plague also ended in death, also at the end of a book, there was hope, for Aristaeus learned how to resurrect his beehive, which resembled a human society. Ovid's version has incorporated all the previous ones and changed them, for both Lucretius' humans and Virgil's animals make their appearance – and again die – but Ovid's climactic version provides more than hope. Through metamorphosis, the main theme of the work, the humans are at last resurrected²⁰.

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²⁰ Incidentally, Ovid's reworking of *Georgics* 3 and 4 may continue after the story of the Myrmidons, as the ensuing story told by Cephalus about himself and his wife Procris (*Met.* 7.661–865) seems to evoke Virgil's story of Orpheus and Eurydice at the end of *Georgics* 4: see e. g. HARDIE (2002) 76–7 for the parallel between Cephalus' triple repetition of Procris' name in *Met.* 7.707–8 and the triple invocation of Eurydice by Orpheus' head in *Georg.* 4.527–7. Cf. SIMPSON (2001) 335, who notes a parallel with Ovid's own story of Orpheus and Eurydice, later in the *Metamorphoses*: "The look Procris gives Cephalus just before she dies and they are separated forever will be paralleled by the split second in which the eyes of Orpheus and Eurydice meet in a glance that dooms her return to earth and forbids them a life together (10.56–59) ...". – I would like to thank JOAN BOOTH, for her comments and suggestions, and the Niels Stensen Stichting for the grant that made the writing of this article possible.

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Leiden

M.A.J. HEERINK

