Mars or Venus?

ONE of the puzzles of literature, it has been observed, is Virgil’s Aeneas in praise of the lover, who after watching the splendid display of a queen whose love he had accepted, abandoned her and returned to his fleet. More remarkable than this is the phenomenon presented in Book IV of the Georgics in the passage (lines 67-87) which purports to describe a battle, high in the air, between two reges, each different in kind from other, and their followers.

Commentators seem to be agreed that the reges Virgil speaks of are not queen-bees, and that what he is describing is a battle between two queens and their retinues. But it is an indisputable fact that no such event has ever taken place among bees. To meet this difficulty, one commentator, Page and other commentators, admit that what Virgil has done is to blend together into one imaginary scene two quite separate forms of encounter which are known to occur among bees. One is the combat, inside a hive, between two queens and the other is the encounter that occurs when bees from one hive raid another for its home colony. This explanation might carry some weight, were it possible to suppose that a set of events, which might be true with regard to one form of encounter, has been fancifully combined with other events which are capable, by themselves, of occurring in the other form. But in Virgil’s description the most salient features, even when viewed singly, will be found sheer impossibility. Take for example the statement, concurrunt aethere in alto. In no form of encounter does this ever occur. And in no form of encounter do queen-bees of different varieties fight each other, unless indeed a queen of one variety has been deliberately introduced into a hive of another variety, which Virgil obviously had not done. A fight between two queens of one hive can be no other than a fight between sisters, children of the same parents. And in no form of encounter do queens of whatever variety fight outside the hive. In a raid on another hive the encounter part of the hostilities may, it is true, be carried on just outside the hive or inside it, being the worker-bees.

Deterior qui visus, cum, ne prodigus absit, dede nee.—These words of Virgil (lines 89 and 90) have been understood by commentators as a precept to bee-lover writing directly out of his own knowledge, gathered at first hand and which appeared to him in a truer sense than Virgil could give. Conington and Page accuse Virgil of inconsistency in writing this, but it was not possible for him or his contemporaries to be aware of the drone in the biological light available today. The ancients did not regard drones to be the males of the species. What we now know to be the drones were regarded by them as a male. Nor did they know, as we now do, that of a hive of drones this rex was the swiftest, strongest, and which appeared to be the queen. Virgil’s two reges is the chosen of incomprehensible forces” as Maurice Maeterlinck puts it in “The Life Of The Bee.”

It was then Virgil had seen, aethere in alto, and which appeared to be the royal battle? Has any commentator offered the explanation that in reality no battle at all but royal nuptials? That of Virgil’s two reges was the queen-bee, and the other a rex in a truer sense than Virgil knew? That of a host of drones this rex was the swiftest, strongest, and which appeared to be the queen. Virgil records in lines 198-201, was the queen-bee, and the other a rex.

Quod neque concumbitus indulgent nec corpora sedes
In Venerem solvunt et fetis nixibus edunt
Verum ipsae e joliis nates, e suaoibus herbis
Legunt . . . 

Virgil, although he did not know the queen for a queen, certainly knew the drone for a drone. But it was not possible for him or his contemporaries to be aware of the drone in the biological light available today. The ancients did not regard drones to be the males of the species. What we now know to be the drones were regarded by them as a male. Nor did they know, as we now do, that of a hive of drones this rex was the swiftest, strongest, and which appeared to be the queen. Virgil records in lines 198-201, was the queen-bee, and the other a rex.

Virgo apibus fetis idem atque examine multo
Primus abundare et spumantia cogere pressis
Mella favis.

The supposed inconsistency is due entirely to these commentators taking the verb sedes here to mean either “pregnant” or “newly delivered.” These
however are not the only meanings with which this word is capable of being used. In an appropriate context it may also have the meaning “full of .
and when applied in this sense to bees it would convey the idea that they are stocked to repletion with the honey they are known to produce. With not be better to take the word feta in this passage as having this meaning.
Not only is this quite a legitimate meaning of the word, but it is in every consistent with what Virgil has written in the other passage. It is in this sense also that Virgil (Aeneid II, 237 and 238) uses the word in the sentence of fatalis machina muros, feta armis; and in this sense that Cicero in De
Natura writes terra feta frugibus et vario leguminum generis. It is of course possible, in a figurative way, to view Troy’s wooden horse as giving birth to Grecian arms, and mother earth as giving birth to crops of various kinds. In this very sense is it not equally possible to contemplate bees as bringing forth of honey in lieu of the children of the old man of Corycus, as a result of his labours, was ahead of his neighbo-
found in et spumantia cogere pressis mella favis. What Virgil says is that old man of Corycus, as a result of his labours, was ahead of his neighbours having an abundance of bees teeming with honey. Conington and Page appear to regard examine muto as the direct result of feta. But this result is in no way affected by taking feta to mean “full of honey.” It is well known that the practice of bee-keeping that swarming is most frequent at those seasons when flowers and honey are most plentiful. The modern bee-keeper ascribes to the effect larger supplies of honey have on the egg-laying capacity of the queen. In an age which fancied that bees do not generate as other crea-
do, but find their young among the flowers, it was perfectly consistent to pose that the fact of flowers and honey being plentiful resulted first in older bees finding a larger number of young ones and then in an issue of swarms.

The charge of inconsistency therefore fails. Not Virgil alone, but the Elder, Columella and other ancient writers fully believed that in respect of the honey-bee the ordinary generative principle had been abrogated and the notion persisted long after their day. In the England of Charles II. one can find his Bee-Master, Moses Rusden, still fancying that the worker-bees gather from flowers not only the germs of life but the actual corporal substance of young bees.

In eyes under the spell of such notions as prevailed two millenniums ago, how would the drones appear? So striking in fact are the differences between drones and workers that even to Tickner Edwardes, with all his up-to-

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“Drone and worker bee seem hardly to belong to the same race.”

Is it not then to find the beeman of Virgil’s day concluding that drone bees, while living in one hive, are of duo generis? And would not this take strong confirmation from an observation of those genuinely
occasions when, as Virgil notes (lines 167 and 168) his band of workers, rex, ignavum pecus a praesepibus arcent?

Duo generis says Virgil (line 92). What were the two kinds of bees in mind? In Page’s edition is a note to the effect that Virgil has described the two commonest forms of Apis Mellifica. When a bee is to describe what he believes to be a battle, it is but natural for Virgil to declare to distinguish between what he takes to be the belligerent
But does the distinction Virgil draws apply to two different kinds of Mellifica, or rather to the worker-bees and the drones of any single kind?

Virgil represents as the inferior genus he says (lines 96-98), turpes
in pulvere ab allo cum venit et sico terra spuit ore viator aridus.

Is this kind of worker-bee to which this description can be applied without and grossly defaming her? Look however at the drone when, after the honey-vats, he makes his staggering way over the comb, his still sticky with the liquid into which he has been plunging himself neck, and then see if the description does not fit to the very mandibles.

desidia, lataque trahens inglorius aleum is Virgil’s description of his inferior rex. Does not Maeterlinck almost seem to be doing this when he describes the drone as “coarse, totally and scand-
satiable and enomous?”

Virgil’s supposed precept about killing the inferior rex Page comments that Virgil intends this to apply to the King’s followers also, “who are as exactly like him, and who, it is implied from 100-102, will be stock and produce no honey.” Apart from the drone, is there of Apis Mellifica so unworthy of its name as to produce no honey? What kind of Apis Mellifica is it correct to say that the common bees are like “their queen”? But if by this rex is meant one particular drone, that the other drones of the hive—his “followers”—will undoubtedly only like him.

passage in which Varro also mentions reges of two genera is noted by: What is however most worthy of note in Varro’s statement is reges and cadem albo. In one hive it is of course impossible to find bees distinct varieties. If two sets of bees, each conspicuously different in and behaviour from the other, live in one hive, they can be no workers and drones. About the duo genera in the same hive if explicit than Varro is. But from Virgil’s use of the words erumpunt
and revocaberis (line 88) a legitimate inference is that both out of, and afterwards return to, the same bee-garden, if not the
In Virgil's description of an inferior *rex* the drone appears to have been recognized about a century ago by the entomologist William Kirby and his collaborator, W. Spence. In their work, "An Introduction to Entomology" (page 358, sixth edition) a note to a footnote, which states: "Virgil, it seems, to have regarded the drone as one of the two sorts of kings or leaders of bees, when he says, speaking of the latter: *ille horridus alter de latamens trahens inglorios alvum.*" It seems a pity that Virgil's commentators make no mention at all of this.

In whatever way one may choose to identify Virgil's *duo genera*, the fact that, rather than with the rank and file, it is the leaders of the bees that takes to be two contending hosts that the casus belli arises—*nempe petiec, incisit magno discordia motu* (lines 67 and '68). Rivalry among the bees is assigned by Pliny as a cause of conflict. Impoverishment of the hive, according to Aristotle, may cause its workers to raid another hive. None of these causes is mentioned by Virgil. In his account of battle in the air it is significant that the cause of the supposed conflict is given as the personal one between two so-called *reges*. If these two can now be identified as the queen and a drone, it will be possible to show that there is nothing far fetched to suggest that the drones may be identical with one of Virgil's *duo genera*.

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"When the young queen sallies forth in quest of her lover, Maeterlinck, "they will often abandon the labours they have begun, will take the home of a day that already is dear to them, and accompany her in a dreading to let her pass out of sight, eager as they form closely around her and shelter her beneath their myriad devoted wings, to lose themselves in her should love cause her to stray so far from the hive that the as yet unfallen road of return shall grow blurred and hesitating in every memory." A rush out of the hive and, rising higher and higher, close thicker and thicker around the queen, the impression they give the observer below is that Virgil describes in lines 78 and 79:

Erumpunt portis : concurrunt aethere in alto : 
Fit sonitus, magnum mixtæae glomerantur in orbem,

Whirling through space goes the globe of bees, until a point is reached when what was its central figure has outsoared it. Disintegrated, it falls to the earth and the dust of a greater globe. Says Virgil (lines 80 and 81)

Præcipitesque cadunt : non densior acre grande
Nec de concussa tantum prœtul ilicie glandis.

Their trepidation as they search for the queen they were eager to possess Virgil an impression of soldiers moving up and down the ranks of lines 82-83:

Ipsi per medias acies insignibus alis
Ingentes animos angusti in pectora versant.

There seems to be great misunderstanding of the purport of the use of *ipsi* in this passage. Dryden, Papillon and Haigh, Conington, Page, and Skipper and Nesbitt have taken *ipsi* to refer to the two rival chiefs. And this is clearly refers to the chiefs in contrast with their followers. They search for a queen- bee are comparatively shorter than the wings of other bees. This would therefore not be a mark of distinction in the sense that a military commander is distinguished from the rest by his accoutrements. Nor is there any warrant in the text for inferring that the followers in Virgil's scene are less courageous than the chiefs. Leading up successively to the present paragraph there has been a series of verbs.—Coeunt, coruscant, exacuunt, impulsi, centur, vocant, erumpunt, glomerantur and cadunt. *Ipsi*, when rightly understood, can only refer to the unexpressed subject of these verbs.

A contributory cause of the misunderstanding is probably the use of the masculine in *ipsi*, when the feminine, were grammar the sole consideration...
Let us now go back to the nuptial flight and to the point when the of bees crumbled, and they twain, followed by a very few others, left worlds behind them to pursue their lofty flight in the depths of the vault. "She rises still. A region must be found unhaunted by birds else might profane the mystery. She rises still; and already the ill-ass troop below are dwindling and falling asunder. Only a small, indefatigable cluster remain, suspended in infinite opal. She summons her wings for final effort; and now the chosen of incomprehensible forces has reached her, 

Here let Maeterlinck's account break off. Like those less worthy that fall behind, the language of translated prose seems unable to keep abreast scarce adequate to convey the vibrant intensity of the eternal moment. is not the whole scene poised "All breathing human passion far above"? 

Down below is Virgil, throwing up a handful of dust for the purpose inducing his bees to settle. Her nuptial flight over, the queen too returns. And when Virgil sees her, he sees also what tc him is unimpeachable evidence of deadly battle. To be stung by a bee is painful; but what the bee-keeper regrets more than his pain is the death of the stinger. "The sting of a is a finely pointed tubular instrument which pours poison into the wound the surface is serrated so that it cannot be withdrawn, but is torn out of body, dragging with it some of the intestines and so causing death"—(Pl 

Now, when Virgil's returning queen comes within his view, he sees, trail after her, a larger portion of the intestines of the drone she has met. To modern bee-keeper the meaning of this would of course be clear. But Virgil it is a sign of the battle he thinks has been fought; and it signifies him that the battle has proved deadly to the other rex. The returning he esteems as the better of the two. About the other, the worse-looking, need not worry. Knowing that one for an idler and a prodigal, the bee-keeper is more than willing to surrender him to the death that has visibly claimed him. deterior qui visus, he writes, eum, ne prodigus obsit, dede neci. 

And so, what had seemed a puzzle disappears. Yet, not less remarkable is the colossal error that furnishes the solution. Other errors—errors geography and astronomy—there also were in those far-off days. But was error so grand as standing in the face of Venus, mistaking her for Mars. 

Never was Virgil's song so memorable as when he sang of Mars, with an and a hero for his theme. Did the theme turn upon a queen of Carth forsaken by a man who had accepted her love? It was then the faithless he sang as pius for refusing to let a woman's ruin stand in the destined of his founding a City. In Virgil's own day did there reach him tidings another hapless queen as she fled in dishonour from the sea-fight off Actium. But it was as a second Dido he viewed her, not to be tolerated by the descendant of pater Aeneas in his lofty enterprise of founding an Empire. And did Virgil, in the shadow of his orange-groves, see that queenlies
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As, the queen of the hive? He certainly did, but it was with an eye that
her not for a queen, even while she too was founding a city, though of
that has outlasted both the laurel-shaded Town of Latinus and the
ate-sung Empire of Augustus. “Light among the vanished ages,” chosen
orthiest to be the leader and instructor of Dante amid the secret things of
her world, he has also left a monumental example of man’s proneness
 misunderstand and misinterpret what passes before him in this perhaps
the unfathomable world of nature.

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