

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 despatch of a queen whose love he had accepted, abandoned her and repaired 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 the other, and their followers.

Commentators seem to be agreed that the *reges* Virgil speaks of are both 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 ever takes place among bees. To meet this difficulty, one commentator, Page, suggests 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 honey. 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 impossibilities. Take for example the statement, *concurritur aethere in alto*. In no form of encounter does this ever occur. And in no form of encounter do queens of different varieties fight each other, unless indeed a queen of one variety is 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 encounter part of the hostilities may, it is true, be carried on just outside the hive. But in such a fray there will be no queen at all, the only combatants, whether inside the hive or outside it, being the worker-bees.

Deterior qui visus, eum, ne prodigus obsit, dede neci.—These words of Virgil (lines 89 and 90) have been understood by commentators as a precept to avoid the worse-looking of the two *reges*. But how can the thing be done, if both the *reges* are queen-bees? In a fight between sister-queens how is one to distinguish which of them is *horridus desidia, latamque trahens inglorius alvum*? If, on the other hand, the fight is one arising out of a honey-raid, outside the hive and within the hive there will be a non-combatant queen—the queen of the home colony. Would any bee-keeper, no matter how ancient, seriously recommend the killing of this queen? Page and other commentators have indeed noted the strongly didactic tone Virgil adopts right through in gi-

tions. Is it conceivable then that he would first draw on his imagination to present a fantastically impossible scene, and then proceed to describe it in a practical way, advice which on the face of it is preposterous?

It is, it is true, in this book of the *Georgics* an account, which no bee-keeper believes, of how swarms of bees can be generated from the carcass of an ox. But Virgil did not invent this. He merely hands down a legend derived from an old Egyptian source. It was a practice of considerable antiquity, and till a comparatively recent period continued to receive credence. Nor is it difficult to find a plausible explanation for the origin of this belief. But very different from this is Virgil's account of the battle. Here he is talking of something he has actually seen, just as when he tells (lines 125-146) of the activities of an old Corycian he saw him dig up a plot of neglected land. As Tickner Edwardes in "The Lore of the Honey-Bee" observes of this book of the *Georgics*, "we cannot fail to find the true bee-lover writing directly out of his own knowledge, gathered at first among his own bees."

What was it then Virgil had seen, *aethere in alto*, and which appeared to him as a royal battle? Has any commentator offered the explanation that there is 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 has known? That of a host of drones this *rex* was the swiftest, strongest and fiercest, "the chosen of incomprehensible forces" as Maurice Maeterlinck has said of him in "The Life Of The Bee.?"

It is true, of course Virgil, although he did not know the queen for a queen, certainly mistook a drone for a drone. But it was not possible for him or his contemporaries to distinguish the drone in the biological light available today. The ancients did not know the drones to be the males of the species. What we now know to be the queen was regarded by them as a male. Nor did they know, as we now know, that the drones and the workers of a hive to be of the same parentage. Of the origin of the bees their notion, as Virgil records in lines 198-201, was:—

*Quod neque concubitu indulgent nec corpora segnes
In Venerem solvunt aut fetis nixibus edunt;
Verum ipsae e foliis natos, e suavis herbis
Ore legunt . . .*

Conington and Page accuse Virgil of inconsistency in writing this, which is written in lines 139-141:—

*Ergo 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 word *fetis* here to mean either "pregnant" or "newly-delivered." These

however are not the only meanings with which this word is capable of used. In an appropriate context it may also have the meaning "full" 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. Would not be better to take the word *fetis* in this passage as having this meaning? Not only is this quite a legitimate meaning of the word, but it is in every way 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 *scelerata fatalis machina muros, feta armis*; and in this sense that Cicero in *De Natura* writes *terra feta frugibus et vario leguminum genere*. 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 bringers of honey in lieu of the children they are deemed incapable of having? A horse does not normally become the mother of arms, the complement of which is necessary to make clear the meaning of *feta* when applied to *machina*, because the earth may be the mother of other children besides vegetable complements are also needed to explain *feta* when applied to *terra*. No need is there to specify the substance produced when the word *fetis* is applied to honey-bees. The word has however a virtual complement, which is found in *et spumantia cogere pressis mella favis*. What Virgil says is that the 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 multo* as the direct result of *fetis*. But this result is in every way affected by taking *fetis* to mean "full of honey." It is well known in 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 creatures do, but find their young among the flowers, it was perfectly consistent to suppose that the fact of flowers and honey being plentiful resulted first in the 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. The notion persisted long after their day. In the England of Charles I. we 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 the young bees.

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

"drone and worker bee seem hardly to belong to the same race." It is interesting then to find the beeman of Virgil's day concluding that drone and worker, while living in one hive, are of *duo genera*? And would not this conclusion take strong confirmation from an observation of those genuinely inferior occasions when, as Virgil notes (lines 167 and 168) his band of workers, *...to, ignavum fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent?*

What were the two kinds of bees in Virgil's mind? In Page's edition is a note to the effect that Virgil has described the two commonest forms of *Apis Mellifica*. When a beekeeper attempts to describe what he believes to be a battle, it is but natural for him to endeavour to distinguish between what he takes to be the belligerent parties. But does the distinction Virgil draws apply to two different kinds of *Apis 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 genus in pulvere ab alto cum venit et sicco terram spuit ore viator aridus*. Is it not a kind of worker-bee to which this description can be applied without being and grossly defaming her? Look however at the drone when, after leaving the honey-vats, he makes his staggering way over the comb, his legs all sticky with the liquid into which he has been plunging himself, his head on a neck, and then see if the description does not fit to the very mandibles. *...desidia, latamque trahens inglorius alvum* is Virgil's description (lines 92 and 94) of his inferior *rex*. Does not Maeterlinck almost seem to be justified in saying this when he describes the drone as "coarse, totally and scandalously insatiable and enormous?"

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 inferior as exactly like him, and who, it is implied from 100-102, will be inferior as stock and produce no honey." Apart from the drone, is there any other kind 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 inferior like their queen? But if by this *rex* is meant one particular drone, it is not surprising that the other drones of the hive—his "followers"—will undoubtedly be inferior like him.

The passage in which Varro also mentions *reges* of two *genera* is noted by Page. What is however most worthy of note in Varro's statement is that he speaks of *reges* and *eadem alvo*. In one hive it is of course impossible to find bees of two distinct varieties. If two sets of bees, each conspicuously different in appearance and behaviour from the other, live in one hive, they can be no other than workers and drones. About the *duo genera* being in the same hive Varro is explicit than Virgil is. But from Virgil's use of the words *erumpunt* (line 78) and *revocaberis* (line 88) a legitimate inference is that both sets of bees go in and out of, and afterwards return to, the same bee-garden, if not the

very same hive. Aristotle, not confining his description to the occupants of a single hive, speaks (*Historia Animalium* IX, 40) of four kinds of bees, which he says, is the drone. This is clear proof that the ancients regarded drones as constituting a separate kind of bee; and it is therefore by no means far-fetched to suggest that the drones may be identical with one of the *duo genera*.

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) is a note to a footnote, which states;—"Virgil is thought 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 dicitur latamque trahens ingloriosum 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 with the leaders of which takes to be two contending hosts that the *casus belli* arises—*nam saepe discordia motu* (lines 67 and 68). Rivalry among the colonies of bees is assigned by Pliny as a cause of conflict. Impoverishment of a 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 a 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 fanciful or imagination in the scenes Virgil depicts. They are true to bee-life, and bee-keepers know them well, though by other names. One scene follows another as naturally and truly as the noon follows the sunrise, and is followed by the sunset. What is more, Virgil has chronicled them in the precise order in which they actually occur.

FIRST, PRIMARY SWARM (lines 58-66).—As the commentators note, Virgil describes in this passage the departure of a primary swarm, and he gives the directions for living it. The queen that goes with this swarm is the mother-queen.

SECOND, PREPARATIONS FOR AFTER-SWARMS. (lines 70-76).—When one of the princesses leaves the hive for her nuptial flight she may be attended by a large concourse. These two modes of departure were perhaps in Varro's mind when he wrote, in the passage quoted by Maeterlinck, . . . *quod fuget, aut cum multitudine fugetur*. Of the occasions when a princess departs *cum multitudine*, Maeterlinck says "that her subjects are so afraid of losing her that they will all accompany her on this distant and tragic flight of love." This is what Virgil, without knowing it, describes in lines

from cell to cell, stabbing each of the royal nymphs in turn. If on the occasion of the decision is to have one or more after-swarms, the proceedings are very different. "In that case, as before, urged by the same desires, the nymphs will approach the royal cells; but instead of meeting with docile subjects who second her efforts, she will find her path blocked by a numerous and vigilant guard. In her fury, and urged on by her fixed idea, she will strive to force her way through, or to outflank them; but everywhere sentinels are posted to protect the sleeping princesses."—(Maeterlinck). Observation of this hostile guard and these protective sentinels, but believing that their hearts are beating for war, Virgil says (lines 69 and 70):—

*Continuoque animos vulgi et, trepidantia bello
Corda licet longe praesciscere.*

In this stage of preparation for an after-swarm there emerges from the interior of the hive a sound, made by the eldest princess in her unsatisfied quest for a mate, which, observes Maeterlinck, resembles somewhat the note of a distant bell of silver. To Virgil's ear this is how it sounds (lines 70-72):—

*. . . namque morantes
Martius ille acris rauci canor inrepat et vox
Auditur fractos sonitus imitata tubarum.*

Maeterlinck's comment on this is that Virgil seems writing here from genuine observation. The genuineness of his observation need not be less obvious in his description of the after-swarm.

THIRD, NUPTIAL FLIGHT AND AFTER-SWARMS. (lines 77-109).—The after-swarm, of which there may be several, differs from the primary swarm in this important respect, that the queen in an after-swarm is always accompanied by a large concourse. And of the after-swarms all are not alike. For it sometimes happens that the young queen, "finding herself surrounded by males, chooses to use herself to be impregnated in the swarming flight, and will then drag her subjects to an extraordinary height and distance."—(Maeterlinck). The scene described in this passage would in certain aspects closely resemble the scene Virgil describes. The only difference is that in a swarming flight the bees do not, when left to themselves, come back to the hive they go out of. An after-swarm, when it occurs on a nuptial occasion, is what Virgil describes in lines 103-111.

When one of the princesses leaves the hive for her nuptial flight she may be attended by a large concourse. These two modes of departure were perhaps in Varro's mind when he wrote, in the passage quoted by Maeterlinck, . . . *quod fuget, aut cum multitudine fugetur*. Of the occasions when a princess departs *cum multitudine*, Maeterlinck says "that her subjects are so afraid of losing her that they will all accompany her on this distant and tragic flight of love." This is what Virgil, without knowing it, describes in lines

"When the young queen sallies forth in quest of her lover, Maeterlinck, " they will often abandon the labours they have begun, will fly to 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 and shelter her beneath their myriad devoted wings, to lose themselves who should love cause her to stray so far from the hive that the as yet unfamiliar road of return shall grow blurred and hesitating in every memory." As they 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 the one which Virgil describes in lines 78 and 79:—

*Erumpunt portis : concurritur aethere in alto :
Fit sonitus, magnam mixtae 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)

*Praecipitesque cadunt ; non densior aere grando
Nec de concussa tantum pluit ilice glandis.*

Their trepidation as they search for the queen they were eager to protect gives Virgil an impression of soldiers moving up and down the ranks of a battle (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 phrase *ipsi* in this passage. Dryden, Papillon and Haigh, Conington, Page, and Shipley and Nesbitt have taken *ipsi* to refer to the two rival chiefs. And this is probably all Virgil's other translators, commentators and critics have also done. Page says that *ipsi* clearly refers to "the chiefs in contrast with their followers." It is not clear however what the point of contrast is, when it is assumed that the chiefs and followers have all fallen together. As Conington says, the wings of a queen-bee are comparatively shorter than the wings of other bees. It 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 more courageous than the chiefs. Leading up successively to the present passage there has been a series of verbs.—*Coeunt, coruscant, exacuunt, aptant, accedunt, 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 considera-

been expected. Because *apis* is a noun of feminine gender, *trepidae, praecipitae* and *mixtae* are in the feminine. Then Virgil was seeing his bees fall. But now *praecipitesque cadunt* has suggested an image of soldiers falling on the ground. And now the poet begins to envisage his bees as warriors. In the next line and a half he likens their fall to the fall of acorns from the sky and the fall of acorns from a shaken oak-tree. Along with this likeness there flashes on him the powerful contrast. They, his bees, by reason of their *insignibus alis*, act in an eminently different way from the fallen and still prostrate figures of the mineral, the vegetable and the animal kingdoms. For mentioning such warriors nothing but the masculine would suffice. This is one of the instances where Virgil delights to make his poetry his grammar. In the next two lines (84-85) *hos* and *hos* are also used for just this reason.

But apart from the meaning of *ipsi*, a point not to be lost sight of here is that the stage of the drama where Virgil is in the best possible position to observe the bees at close quarters and to observe exactly what it is they are doing. What does he say here of actual fighting. Figuer, whom Page quotes, says that when two bees are struggling in the air, "they descend to the ground, for in the air they would not be able to get purchase enough to be sure of striking their enemy. They then engage in a hand-to-hand fight. . . . They are continuing to stab with their stings." How is it that Virgil has nothing to say about this? Of what he took to be preparations for the battle he gives a vivid and picturesque description. The joining of the battle *aethere in alto* far off for precise observation, he has duly noted. But now, with the bees themselves itself raging at his very feet, why has he not a word to say of this hand fighting and of these stabs the bees make with their stings? The answer is that there is in fact no fighting and no stabbing for him to see. As a witness, he records faithfully no more than what he sees and hears, and that he believes to be the feelings that animate the bees.

Walter Edwardes, while recognising that Virgil writes "directly out of his own knowledge, gathered at first hand among his own bees," confesses to be puzzled by Virgil's account of a bee-battle, "because nothing of the kind seems to take place at the present day." But much of the bewilderment of the modern writer, and in fact of most others, is due to their reading into Virgil's account a great deal more than Virgil says. Virgil is accused of describing "the carnage—the wounded and dying falling like rain out of the summer sky." So far as Virgil's text goes, the charge is entirely groundless. *Praecipitesque cadunt* is what he says. It is true that soldiers fall in battle when they are wounded or dying. But this is just the contrast Virgil draws between the falling of soldiers and the falling of his bees. If there is imagination here, it is hardly not on the part of Virgil.

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-assured 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. It 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 of inducing his bees to settle. Her nuptial flight over, the queen too returns. And when Virgil sees her, he sees also what to 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 bee 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 the body, dragging with it some of the intestines and so causing death"—(Pope).

Now, when Virgil's returning queen comes within his view, he sees, trailing after her, a larger portion of the intestines of the drone she has met. To a modern bee-keeper the meaning of this would of course be clear. But to Virgil it is a sign of the battle he thinks has been fought; and it signifies to him that the battle has proved deadly to the other *rex*. The returning queen he esteems as the better of the two. About the other, the worse-looking, he 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 of geography and astronomy—there also were in those far-off days. But never 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 eye to a hero for his theme. Did the theme turn upon a queen of Carthage forsaken by a man who had accepted her love? It was then the faithless queen he sang as *pious* for refusing to let a woman's ruin stand in the destined way of his founding a City. In Virgil's own day did there reach him tidings of 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 august descendant of *pater Aeneas* in his lofty enterprise of founding an Empire. And did Virgil, in the shadow of his orange-groves, see that queenliest

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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
nd 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
ther world, he has also left a monumental example of man's proneness
isunderstand and misinterpret what passes before him in this perhaps
e unfathomable world of nature.

A. C. SENEVIRATNE.
