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Vergil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*:

Interpreting Vergil's Didaxis in the Weather Signs of the First *Georgic*

Ryan Joyce '09

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However futile the effort may be, trying to define Vergil's Georgics with just one word often yields the response didactic, because the poem's four books do contain a considerable amount of didaxis, despite varying degrees of thoroughness and accuracy on the author's part. At first glance, one of the purest didactic sections of the poem would be Vergil's description of weather signs, roughly 110 lines near the end of Georgics 1, modeled closely on the last third of Aratus' Phaenomena—the Diosemeiae—which deals with weather signs and prognostication.

Though at times a remarkably close adaptation of the original, this passage from *Georgics* 1 is not as strictly Aratean as a first reading may suggest. In Vergil's adaptation of the *Phaenomena*, he has eliminated or condensed source material, rearranged the order of the topics discussed, and referenced the author both explicitly and subtly. The result is a passage that masquerades as more didactic and optimistic than it is, but whose higher purpose is to thematically link the selections on either side of it (a style similar to that used in *Georgics* 4), and to bring the first book of the poem to a dramatic close in a way that exhibits the author's impressive capabilities of adaptation and confirms the poem's theme of toiling in vain.

It is first necessary to examine the source material for this short section of *Georgics* 1. The *Diosemeiae*, lines 758-1154 of the *Phaenomena*, was once considered separate entity from the remaining 757 lines of the poem, which

are essentially a versification into dactylic hexameters of prose sources on the constellations of the night sky and how to calculate the passage of time by observing the moon, sun, and constellations.¹ The Weather Signs, after being reintroduced by a second proem (a tactic also used by Vergil when refocusing his purpose midway through *Georgics* 3), elucidate weather signs gathered from celestial bodies, then signs that foretell different weather conditions (wind, rain, fair weather, and storms), followed by the signs that foretell the seasons and those from animals that foretell bad weather.² The Vergilian adaptation can roughly be broken up into four sections, which, respectively, handle predicting poor weather, predicting good weather,

¹ Douglas Kidd, "Introduction," Aratus, *Phaenomena*, (New York: Cambridge, 1997), 5-7.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

reading signs from the moon, and reading signs from the sun.

The nature of the adaptation seems to be one that alternates close translation with editing and condensation of the Aratean text. At times Vergil produces a near word for word reproduction of the Greek, just as a canon of Latin authors would later closely translate Vergil's text. Such an example is *Georgics* 1.356-359 and its corresponding section, *Phaenomena* 909-912:

*continuo uentis surgentibus aut
freta ponti
incipiunt agitata tumescere et
aridus altis
montibus audiri fragor, aut
resonantia longe
litora misceri et nemorum
increbescere murmur.*³

σῆμα δέ τοι ἀνέμοιο καὶ οἰδαί
νουςα θάλασσα
γινέσθω καὶ μακρόν ἔπ' αἰγιαλοῖ
βοόωντες,
ἀκταὶ τ' εἰνάλοι ὀπότ' εὖ διοὶ
ἠχίεσσαί
γίνωνται, κορυφαί τε βοώμεναι
οὐρεος ἄκραι.⁴

More often, though, Vergil incorporates a compressed version of Aratus' work into the *Georgics*. Most frequently three or four lines in Aratus become two or three in Vergil, and Vergil has collapsed many Aratean ideas into single lines in an efficient process that often maintains qualities of the original. In fact, of the 37 topics that both Vergil and Aratus address, only four times are the

³ "Forthwith, when the winds growing either the sea's channels, agitated, begin to swell and the dry din in the high mountains is heard, or the resounding shores begin to mix and the roaring of the woods strengthens."

Vergilian examples longer than the Aratean versions (and each time by only one line).⁴ In one notably efficient example at *Georgics* 1.378, Vergil condenses the Aratean original, makes reference to Aristophanes, then to Cicero's Latin translation of Aratus, and twice replicates the sounds of the Greek original with the Latin.⁵

The truncated size of Vergil's passage comes only partly from themes being condensed into smaller versions of themselves. Much of Aratus' material is simply left out of the *Georgics*. Opting to omit some of the more technical material from the *Phaenomena* (just as Aratus did in composing his work), Vergil also omits examples from Aratus that either provide additional proof for his claims, or crucially, can mean entirely different things:

Where Aratus gives both the positive and the negative of a sign, Vergil is content to give one or the other, not both. Where Aratus points to two kinds of animal, e.g. pigs and mice, as indicating the same type of weather by the same type of behaviour, Vergil is content with one. In Aratus often one animal or thing, e.g. the crane or the lamp, by variations in behaviour presages different types of weather: Vergil selects one type

⁴ Kidd, "Introduction," 42-43.

⁵ L.A.S. Jermyn, "Weather Signs in Vergil: An Attempt to Discover Something of the Poet's Working-Method by Close Examination of Two Passages in *Georgics* I and the Sources on Which They Are Based," *Greece & Rome* 20, no. 58 (1951), 36 and Richard F. Thomas, "Notes," *Vergil, Georgics I-II*, (New York: Cambridge, 1988), 132.

of behaviour as signifying wind, rain, storm, or calm.⁶

This is the type of clever, selective editing that makes me believe what I suggested earlier: that the Weather Signs of *Georgics* 1 is merely masquerading as didactic, like the work as a whole, and that these didactic sections must be working towards some loftier end. Perhaps in some secondary sense this passage is didactic; it does adhere to what were accepted views of prognostication in the classical world, but anyone seeking even a moderately complete treatment of the topic was better off looking elsewhere.

L.P. Wilkinson points to one obvious factor contributing to incomplete nature of Vergil's didaxis. With the publication in 37-36 of Varro's *De Re Rustica*, the thorough agricultural didacticism of that work would have been far too similar in content to any true didactic work Vergil might have been thinking about producing.⁷

It makes good sense then, and perhaps is even beneficial, for Vergil not to write true didactic poetry. Doing so would have severely restricted not only the content of his finished product, but also the source material from which he could have culled that product. Given the importance of reference and allusion to a Neoteric poet imitating Alexandrians, this would have dealt a harsh blow to the quality of the end result. But a modified version, though still somewhat didactic, allows the poet to espouse larger themes and incorporate multiple sources from multiple genres. Because the accuracy of the content is

not tantamount in the *Georgics*, Vergil is free to incorporate material not only from other didactic poetry, but also from epic – the richest font for the allusions that make Vergil, to borrow Wilkinson's term, the "descriptive" poet he is.

This "semi-didactic" style is not unique to the Weather Signs, though. Wilkinson is also quick to point out two more examples from *Georgics* 1. In the first, compared to Cato's list of all the requisite supplies for growing crops and the best places to acquire those goods, Vergil's list of six items seems rather inadequate. Later, Vergil will list three important days of the month for cultivation and a few important details about them. Compared with Varro's exhaustive list of appropriate times for the completion of farm tasks, any reader of Vergil would seem lost and ill-prepared to manage crops.⁸

What is remarkable about these incongruities, though, is the amount of space each takes up in the text. Both lists of supplies account for five lines of text, and yet Vergil (not surprisingly) barely scratches the surface, providing enough didactic material to preserve his didactic guise without sacrificing the poetics of the passage. The description of the important days of the month occupies ten lines, including a brief recounting of the Gigantomachy—a detail likely to be found unnecessary by a true didactic author, for whom the brief *quintam fuge* of 1.287 would have done the trick.⁹ Like the Weather Signs, details here have been reduced to the bare minimum (although done so artfully, and on occasion render the same meaning in fewer words), and embellishment in the form of myth and allusion has been given a higher priority.

⁶ Jermyn, "Weather Signs," 28-29.

⁷ L.P. Wilkinson, "The Intention of Virgil's 'Georgics,'" *Greece & Rome* 19, no. 55 (1950), 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁹ "avoid the fifth day [of the month]."

In a touch that further proves Vergil's lack of concern for the didactic, he remarks that he does not intend to bore his audience with trivial details, exactly what anchors other works in the didactic tradition¹⁰:

*possum multa tibi ueterum
praecepta referre,
ni refugis tenuisque piget
cognoscere curas.*¹¹

Vergil attempts to be informative, but never comprehensive, and in doing so can either sidestep long passages of didaxis or choose to include them.¹² The technique adopted by Vergil here is one that molds his didaxis to accommodate form instead of fact, as Seneca said, things written *decentissime* as opposed to *verissime*, and as Wilkinson nicely surmises, “not to teach farmers, but to delight readers.”¹³

One certainly gets the impression, having read the Vergilian Weather Signs, that the poet's goal was style and not veracity. A striking feature of the Aratean original is the anaphora of *ske/pteo* used to open three separate sections, which expand outward from moon, to sun, and last to other stars¹⁴:

σκέπτεο δὲ πρῶτον κερῶων
ἐκάτερθε σελήνην.¹⁶

σκέπτεο δ' ἐς πληθὺν τε καὶ

ἀμφότερον διχόωσαν

σκέπτεο δ' εἴ κε τοι αὐγαὶ
ὑπέικωσ' ἠελίοιο,
αὐτὸν ἐς ἠέλιον...¹⁸

σκέπτεο καὶ Φάτην· ἢ μὲν τ' ὀλίγη
εἰκυῖα
ἀχλύϊ βορραίῃ ὑπὸ Καρκίνῳ
ἠγηλά ζει.¹⁹

In these cases Aratus delivers his message with the full force of his Greek behind him. In those four instances, and in other cases, he opens with the rather harsh sounding verbal adjective *ske/pteo*, a form with the force of the Latin future passive participle. In each of these lines the object of observation is made clear: the crescent moon, the full or half moon, the sun, and the Manger, a star cluster in the constellation Cancer.¹⁵ For Aratus' readers there is no question about the author's stance on the subject. He is stating loud and clear what the best course of action is. In Vergil's Weather Signs, however, the anaphora is dropped, and with it the conviction with which the didaxis is provided:

*si uero solem ad rapidum
lunasque sequentis
ordine respicies, numquam te
crastina fallat
hora, neque insidiis noctis
capiere serенаe.*¹⁶

Also detracting from the didaxis is a paradoxical and ironic use of the word *certus* in three examples from the Weather Signs. The preceding passage,

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ *Georgics* 1.176-177. “I can report to you many lessons of old men, unless, of course, you flee and it disgusts you to come to know trivial matters.”

¹² Wilkinson, “Intention,” 20.

¹³ Seneca, *Epp.* 86.15, in Wilkinson, “Intention,” 20.

¹⁴ Joseph Farrell, *Vergil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic*, (New York: Oxford, 1991), 79.

¹⁵ Kidd, “Notes,” 480.

¹⁶ *Georgics* 1.424-426. “If indeed you gaze at the swift sun and the moon following it, never will the following day deceive you nor will you ever be caught off guard by the snares of a calm night.”

the first storm, is the first of many examples of things going horribly wrong, despite (or perhaps because of, as some would argue) human precautions to prevent disaster. The plague will close the third *Georgic* and the disease will take the lives of the bees in the last book.

And so the reader must take the advice given by Vergil in the Weather Signs with a grain of salt:

*atque haec ut certis possemus
discere signis*¹⁷

*nec minus ex imbri soles et
aperta serena
prospicere et certis poteris
cognoscere signis*¹⁸

*sol quoque et exoriens et cum se
condet in undas
signa dabit; solem certissima
signa sequuntur*¹⁹

Are we really to believe Vergil here in light of what he just recounted? Of course not. In the context of the *Georgics* as a whole, one finds that signs precede disaster, but are of no use in trying to stop the destruction, that signs of fair weather may be false, and that fortunes can change in an instant. Not a particularly optimistic outlook on the world, but at a minimum the *Georgics* admit that with hard work one can at

¹⁷ *Georgics* 1.351. "And so that we might be able to learn these things on account of certain signs..."

¹⁸ *Georgics* 1.393-394. "You will be able to see the calm sky and sun after the storm and you will learn on account of certain signs."

¹⁹ *Georgics* 1.438-439. "Even the sun will provide signs, both when it rises and when it sinks itself into the waves; very certain signs follow the sun."

least survive in such an unpredictable world.

The question remains, though, as to why Vergil would include a greatly abridged, incomplete, somewhat disjointed, and unfocused adaptation of Aratus in his poem after all. An assessment of weather signs hardly seems necessary, especially if the author is going to invalidate his own didaxis. Does it make sense to include the Aratean adaptation here?

To answer this question, looking at the fourth *Georgic* will help. As far as the structure of the book, excluding the *sphragis*, which can be thought of as ending the poem as a whole, the fourth *Georgic* ends in with three episodes: the sickness of the bees and the initial didaxis on bugonia, Aristaeus' misfortunes and the account of the Orpheus and Eurydice episode, and the second bugonia, after which Aristaeus is returned his bees. Similarly, *Georgics* 1 ends with three distinct episodes: the first destructive storm, the Weather Signs, then the portents of the civil war and its effects. In both instances, Vergil required a transitional passage between the first and third episodes, which in both books are thematically linked. The epilyon worked well in *Georgics* 4, with the introduction of Aristaeus as a central character. To connect the two passages by means of a myth is sensible. In the first *Georgic*, Vergil needed a way to connect two passages centered around storms and destruction—and an adaptation of Aratus, a popular Greek poet—would have been a fitting, if one is to subscribe to Thomas' ideas on Vergilian intertextuality.²⁰ The

²⁰ Namely the ideas posited in: Richard F. Thomas, "Virgil's *Georgics* and the Art of Reference," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 90, (1986): 171-198.

adaptation would have been a challenge. Vergil needed to compress Aratus' material, for any lengthy diversion on weather signs would make this passage as dull as that on soil types, and create too large a gap between the two significant events—the storm and destruction of the civil war—that close *Georgics* 1.²¹ Vergil would have to further poeticize an already poeticized version of a prose source, adapting the source material in a way that was simultaneously faithful to the original, but more interesting than it.

Both the Aristaetus episode and the Weather Signs change the focus of their respective books from those of the previous episodes, without completely extinguishing them from the mindset of the reader. Though the reader may be entranced by the sorrow of Orpheus, he knows it is merely a digression from the real issue – that Aristaetus has lost his bees. The bugonia passage immediately preceding the epillyon always seems a logical answer to the *pastor*'s problems, and sure enough is the course of action suggested by Cyrene. In the Weather Signs, the storm of the previous section can never be far from the reader's mind, especially because lines 1.351-392, signs of bad weather, open the section. With the quick transfer to the section on portents of civil war in the middle of line 1.463, Vergil has completed his transition, and resumes his second disaster-themed section, which, like *Georgics* 4, ends by referencing Julius Caesar.

In the opening paragraphs of the paper I described the Weather Signs as masquerading both as more didactic and optimistic than they may actually be. I have already discussed at length how the Vergilian adaptation of Aratus was

²¹ *Georgics* 2.226-258.

distinctly less complete and less strictly didactic than the original. This is not to say that the *Phaenomena* was the foremost source for astronomical or meteorological knowledge in fourth and third century BCE Greece. Certainly Aratus' hexameters were not strictly written for reference, nor was the *Phaenomena* meant to be the best tome one could take with him for a night of stargazing or cloud watching.²² Kidd writes that "Aratus' higher purpose is literary rather than philosophical."²³ Aratus portrays Zeus as a benevolent god who provides definite, clear signs for the benefit of man (clear not in the Vergilian sense of the word).²⁴ This suggests that the author's purpose was to provide material in a didactic vein that he believed in. Philosophy was secondary to Aratus, and so we can understand his hexameters as a poetic rendering of widely accepted material, and imagine Aratus standing behind the material he wrote.

That cannot be said with the same degree of certainty for Vergil, whose *Georgics* are simultaneously full of didactic material and unapologetic disasters which could in an instant uproot the products of that diligent labor. Vergil's intentions are clearly literary, but unlike Aratus, his work is meant to have philosophical implications. The reader is educated on the importance of hard work but also prompted to debate its place in a world in which it can be negated by the gods or his own hands, as is the case with the plague and the death of bees – events which can be traced back to the human exploitation of nature. But is this exploitation performed out of

²² Thanks to Professor Bryce Walker for this suggestion and inspiring this train of thought.

²³ Kidd, "Introduction," 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

avarice or out of the need for survival? Are the two one in the same? These are the questions Vergil seeks to pose—questions that have no place in the *Phaenomena*, and thus make his material far less didactic and more philosophical in nature. The poem's closing lines leave the reader with the pastoral image of *Eclogue* 1, perhaps to wonder if a pastoral life has more merit than the traditional life of the hard-working farmer:

*illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis
alebat
Parthenope studiis florentem
ignobilis oti,
carmina qui lusi pastorum
audaxque iuventa
Tityre, te patulae cecini sub
tegmine fagi.*²⁵

The Weather Signs, then, is an interesting passage to examine. Beyond being a thematic connection for the end of *Georgics* 1, it is, by its proximity to the storm episode, far from a truly didactic episode. But it stands out from the other “didactic sections” in the implications the negation of the didaxis has—the impersonal nature of the disaster makes the Weather Signs and the storm preceding it especially pessimistic. In the world of *Georgics* 3 and 4, the great disasters, the plague and death of the bees, respectively, can be indirectly traced back to human activity.²⁶ Sheep wouldn't be so vulnerable to the plague if man didn't require their wool, bees

would be healthier if man didn't constantly collect their honey. But no such argument can be made for the disaster in *Georgics* 1. Jupiter brings the storm; this same Jupiter took the Golden Age away from man and forced him into the endless toil and diligent observation that Vergil's didaxis suggests is necessary for survival.²⁷ Man is completely removed from the equation, and no matter how he tries, he can do nothing to escape the devastation of Jupiter's deluge. If a solution exists to the problems of *Georgics* 3 and 4, then in *Georgics* 1 man is hopeless and defenseless—solely at the mercy of the gods. To what status does that relegate the didaxis of the Weather Signs then? If Aratus created a poetic interpretation of the truth, then Vergil produced a philosophical discourse on man's best guess of what the gods have in store for him next: a psychological justification for the suffering he endures.

Far more than a mere translation, the Vergilian adaptation of Aratus' Weather Signs demonstrates the author's facility for intertextual reference in his ability to adapt the passage to thematically link the sections surrounding it and also to reflect the themes of the overall work in general. The Weather Signs have many veneers, but underneath the surface exists rather pessimistic poetry artfully woven into the fabric of the first *Georgic* and the poem as a whole

²⁵ *Georgics* 4.563-566. “At that time Parthenope was nourishing me, Vergil, flourishing in the pursuits of my idle freetime, who without a care sang the youthful songs of shepherds. Of you, Tityrus, under the cover of a shady beech, I sang.”

²⁶ Again, thanks to Professor Bryce Walker for the discussions that inspired this section.

²⁷ See *Georgics* 1.328-330 and 1.120-146 for Jupiter's involvement in the storm and in the advent of work.

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