

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

P. VERGILI MARONIS

B U C O L I C O N

LIBER.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

THE history of Pastoral Poetry shows us how easily the most natural species of composition may pass into the most artificial. Whatever may have been its earliest beginnings—a question¹ which seems to belong as much to speculation as to historical inquiry—it appears not to have been recognized or cultivated as a distinct branch till the Greek mind had passed its great climacteric, and the centre of intellectual life had been transferred from Athens to Alexandria. Yet as introduced into the world by Theocritus, if modern² criticism is right in supposing him to have been its real originator, it exhibits little of that weakness and want of vitality which might have been expected to distinguish the child of old age. It is a vigorous representation of shepherd life, with its simple habits, its coarse humour, its passionate susceptibility, and its grotesque superstition. But it was not long to retain this genuine character of healthy, dramatic energy. Already in the next age at Syracuse it began to show signs of failing power: and on its transference to Rome, these were at once developed into the unmistakeable symptoms of premature constitutional decay. What it became afterwards is characteristically described in one of Johnson's sarcastic sentences. "At the revival of learning in Italy," he says in his *Life of Ambrose Philips*³, "it was soon discovered that a dialogue of imaginary swains might be composed with little difficulty: because the conversation of shepherds excludes profound or refined sentiment: and for images and descriptions, Satyrs and Fauns, and Naiads and Dryads, were always within call; and woods, and meadows, and hills, and rivers supplied variety of matter, which, having a natural power to soothe the mind, did not quickly cloy it." Arcadia, more famous among the ancients, at least before the time

¹ The theories of its origin resolve themselves into speculations like those of Lucretius (5. 1382 foll.), as Heyne remarks in his treatise "*De Carmine Bucolico*," prefixed to his edition. It is easy to see that music is a natural solace for a shepherd, and that the whistling of the wind through the reeds would suggest the use of the reed as a pipe.

² The names of the supposed pastoral poets who preceded Theocritus may be found in Heyne's treatise, or in the *Dictionary of Biography*, art. Theocritus. For a destructive criticism on their existence or claims to the title, see Näge's *Opuscula*, vol. i. pp. 161 foll.

³ *Lives of the Poets*, Cunningham's edition, vol. iii. pp. 262, 3.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

3

of Virgil⁴, for pastoral dulness than for pastoral ideality, became the poet's golden land, where imagination found a refuge from the harsh prosaic life of the present. Gradually the pastoral was treated as a sort of exercise-ground for young authors, who supposed themselves, in the words of an old commentator on Spenser⁵, to be "following the example of the best and most ancient poets, which devised this kind of writing, being both so base for the matter and homely for the manner, at the first to try their habilites: and as young birds that be newly crept out of the nest, by little first prove their tender wings, before they make a greater flight." It was indeed little more than the form, in which the poet made himself known to the world, the pseudonym under which it was thought decorous to veil his real style and title. His shepherds might preserve their costume, but their conversation turned on any thing which might be uppermost in his own mind, or in that of the public, the controversies of the Church⁶, or the death of a royal personage. It was not to be expected that a thing so purely artificial could outlive that general questioning of the grounds of poetical excellence, which accompanied the far wider convulsions at the end of the last century. Whether it is now to be registered as an extinct species, at least in England, is perhaps a question of language rather than of fact. The poetry of external nature has been awakened into new and intenser life, and the habits of the country are represented to us in poems, reminding us of the earliest and best days of the Idyl: but the names of Eclogue and Pastoral are heard no longer, nor is it easy to conceive of a time when the associations connected with them are likely again to find favour with Englishmen.

For this corruption probably no writer is so heavily chargeable as Virgil. Changes of the kind, it is true, are attributable as much to the general condition of the intellectual atmosphere as to any individual source of infection; the evil too had begun, as has been already remarked, before pastoral poetry had migrated from Syracuse. But in Virgil it at once attained a height which left comparatively little to be done by subsequent writers, though their inferiority in the graces of expression was sure to render the untruthfulness of the conception more conspicuous. They might make their poetical Arcadia, or borrow again the words of Johnson⁷, still more "remote from known reality and speculative possibility:" but it was scarcely in their power to confound worse the confusion which blended Sicily and the Mantuan district into

⁴ See Keightley's note on Virg. Ecl. 7. 4.

⁵ Prefatory Epistle to Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar," addressed to Gabriel Harvey.

⁶ The affairs of the Church are touched on in two of Spenser's Pastorals, those for May and September. Ambrose Philips has a Pastoral on the death of Queen Mary.

⁷ Lives of the Poets, vol. ii. p. 297. (Life of Gay.)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

one, and identified Julius Caesar with that Daphnis whom the nymphs loved, and whose death drew groans from the lions.

There is something almost unexampled in the state of feeling which at Rome, and in the Augustan age in particular, allowed palpable and avowed imitation to claim the honours of poetical originality. Pacuvius and Attius are praised not for having called out the tragedy which lies, patent rather than latent, in Roman history and Roman life, nor even for having made the legends which they derived from Greece the subject of original dramas of their own, but specifically for having applied⁸ their wit to the writings of the Greeks, as to so much raw material, and adapted to the Roman stage the entertainments which had alternately delighted and terrified the populace of Athens. Horace invites attention to himself⁹, as an independent traveller along untrodden ground, not as having discovered any measure peculiar to the Latin language, any melody to which the thoughts of his countrymen would naturally vibrate, but as having been the first to display to Latium the capabilities of the Archilochian Iambic, the Alcaic, and the Sapphic. So Propertius¹ speaks of Thyrsis and Daphnis, and the rustic presents which shepherd makes to shepherdess, names and things copied precisely from Theocritus, as if they were actually a new world to which Virgil had introduced him and his contemporaries of the great city. Striking as the phenomenon is, the circumstances of the case enable us readily to account for it. The Roman knew only of a single instance of a national literature in the world: it challenged his allegiance with an undisputed claim, and his only course seemed to be to conform to it, and endeavour, so far as he could, to reproduce it among his own people. It seems as if no parallel to such a mental condition could exist in our larger modern experience, where the very number of the models set before us corrects our admiration by distracting it, and forces us, as it were, in spite of

⁸ "Serus enim Graecis admovit acumina chartis,
Et post Punica bella quietus quaerere coepit
Quid Sophocles et Thespis et Aeschylus utile ferrent."
(Hor. 2 Ep. 1. 161.)

⁹ "Libera per vacuum posui vestigia princeps,
Non aliena meo pressi pede. Qui sibi fidit,
Dux regit examen. Parios ego primus iambos
Ostendi Latio."
(Hor. 1 Ep. 19. 21.)

¹ "Tu canis umbrosi subter pineta Galaesi
Thyrsin et attritis Daphnin arundinibus,
Utque decem possint corrumpere mala puellas
Missus et impressis haedus ab uberibus."
(Prop. 3. 26. 67.)

The coarseness of the second couplet is characteristic, showing the sort of charm which Propertius found in a poem of rural life.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

5

ourselves to interrogate that nature which underlies the many varieties of art. Yet we may realize something of the feeling if we go back to the time when the office of a translator ranked as high in English estimation as that of an original poet—when he that drew Zimri and Achitophel was thought to have added to his fame by his versions of Juvenal and Virgil, and the preparation of the English Iliad and Odyssey occupied ten of the best years of the mind which had produced the Essay on Criticism and the Rape of the Lock.

But whatever may be its susceptibility of explanation or illustration, the fact is one which requires to be borne in mind by every student of the Eclogues. Without the spirit of allowance which we are ready to entertain as soon as we perceive that a peculiarity is not individual or occasional, but general, we should hardly be able to moderate our surprise at the numberless instances of close and indeed servile imitation which an attentive perusal shows us at once. It is one thing to accept broadly the statement that Virgil is a copyist, and quite another to follow him line by line and observe how constantly he is thinking of his guide, looking to him where a simple reliance on nature would have been not only far better, but far more easy and obvious, and on many occasions deviating from the passage immediately before him only to cast a glance on some other part of his model². Tityrus, Galatea, Amaryllis, Corydon, Thestylis, Menalcas, Damoetas, Amyntas, Aegon, Daphnis, Thyrsis, Micon, Lycidas, are all names to be found in the muster-roll of Theocritus; and of those not included therein there is not one (if we except, what are really no exceptions, actual historical personages) which is not referable to a Greek, perhaps a bucolic original. Corydon addresses Alexis in the language used by Polyphemus to Galatea; boasts in the same way of his thousand sheep and his never-failing supply of milk: answers objections to his personal appearance in the same way by an appeal to the ocean mirror: paints in similar colours the pleasures of a rural life: glances similarly at the pets he is rearing for his love; and finally taxes himself for his folly, and reminds himself that there are other loves to be found in the world, in language which is as nearly as may be a translation from the eleventh Idyl. Menalcas and Damoetas rally each other in words borrowed from two neighbouring Idyls: two others supply the language in which they make their wages: while a large proportion of the materials for their amoebean display is to be found in the same or other parts of Theocritus, scattered up and down. In the friendly rivalry of Menalcas and Mopsus the depreciation of Amyntas, the grief of the wild beasts for Daphnis, the epitaph, the apotheosis in most of its circumstances, the compliments which shepherd

² References to the various imitations from Theocritus will be found in the Commentary.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

pays to shepherd, and the exchange of presents, are all modelled more or less closely after the Doric prototype. Corydon and Thyrsis are perhaps more original: yet even they owe something to Menalcas and Daphnis, as well as to one or two other Sicilian shepherds, not only in the antecedents, but in the contents of their songs; and the eminence to which Corydon is lifted by his success is similar, though inferior, to that attained by Daphnis. The dying Damon, or rather the lover whom Damon personates, recalls in the first part of his complaint the dying Daphnis, in the last the slighted Polyphemus: the enchantress who is represented by Alpheisiboëus is the same who in the second Idyl employs even more charms to bring back Delphis, though the success which this time crowns her efforts is new. Moeris and his companion, like Meliboëus and Tityrus, talk about a subject which, being part of Virgil's personal history, could not but be his own: yet even they supply us with reminiscences from Sicily, partly in the things which they say to each other, partly in their quotations from the poet's unpublished verses. The dying Daphnis reappears once more in the dying or despairing Gallus: the complaint of the lover is indeed his own, but the circumstances which surround him are copied minutely from that song which Thyrsis, the sweet songster from Aetna, sang to the goat-herd in the hot noon under the elm. Even this enumeration must fail to give any notion of the numberless instances of incidental imitation, sometimes in a single line, sometimes in the mere turn of an expression, which fill up as it were the broader outlines of the copy. And yet there can be no doubt that Virgil ranked as an original poet in his own judgment no less than in that of his contemporaries, and that on the strength of those very appropriations which would stamp a modern author with the charge of plagiarism. His Thalia, he proudly reminds us, was the first who deigned to disport herself in the strains of Syracuse, as that was her first employment. And in the ninth Eclogue, where he grieves by anticipation, tenderly and gracefully enough, over the loss which the pastoral world would have sustained had he died prematurely, of the four fragments of his poetry which are singled out for admiration two are copies from Theocritus, and one of them, the first, so close a copy, and so slight, not to say trivial, in itself, that it can hardly have been instanced with any other view than to remind the reader of his success in borrowing and skilfully reproducing. It is, in fact, an intimation, made almost in express words, that he wished to be considered as the Roman Theocritus.

The impression left by such passages on the mind of a considerate reader is very much that which a modern author, writing without the restraint of verse, would seek to produce by a quotation or a direct reference. It is the common place of the art, used by a young artist;

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

7

the writing at the bottom of the picture for fear the picture should not be recognized: the tones of the master imitated by the pupil because he thinks that there is no other way of speaking correctly. Theocritus might talk generally of the Muses and of bucolic song: to Virgil the Muses must be the Muses of Sicily, and the song the song of Maenalus. Even Bion³ and Moschus, coming after Theocritus, had to appeal to Sicilian associations: how much more one not in possession of the links of sympathy imparted by a common country and common language, and an almost hereditary transmission of the poetical gift? And what is true of Virgil's relation to Theocritus is true to a certain extent of his relation to Greek writers generally and to the whole body of learning which he possessed. He had doubtless lived from boyhood in their world: and their world accordingly became a sort of second nature to him—a storehouse of life and truth and beauty, the standard to which he brought conceptions and images as they rose up within him, the suggestive guide that was to awaken his slumbering powers, and lead him to discover further felicities yet possible to the artist. This habit of mind perhaps strikes us most in cases where it is most slightly and, it would almost seem, unconsciously indicated. More than one writer has remarked on Virgil's practice of characterizing things by some local epithet, as a peculiarity by which he is distinguished from the earlier Latin poets. Doubtless in many instances there is some special reason for the choice of the word: it may point to some essential attribute of the thing, or some accidental connection with time and place which has a real significance in the context. But there are others where it is not easy to perceive any such relevancy. What appropriateness can there be in describing the hedge which separates Tityrus' farm from his neighbour's as having its willow-blossoms fed upon by the bees of Hybla⁴, or in the wish that the swarms which Moeris has to look after may avoid the yews of Corsica⁵? The epithet here is significant not to the reader but to the poet, or to the reader only so far as he happens to share in the poet's intellectual antecedents: it appeals not to a first-hand appreciation of the characteristics of natural objects, such as is open to all, but to information gained from reading or travel, and therefore confined to a few. And from what we know of the facts of Virgil's life we

³ *λῆς νύ τί μοι, Λυκίδα, Σικελὸν μέλος ἀπὸ λυγαίνων,
ἱμερόεν, γλυκύθυμον, ἐρωτικόν, οἶον ὁ κύκλωψ
ἄεισεν Πολύφαμος ἐπ' ἄβνι τῆ Γαλατεία;*

(Bion, 2. 1.)

ἄρχετε, Σικελικαί, τῷ πένθεος, ἄρχετε, μοῖσαι.

(Moschus, 3. 8.)

Moschus, however, was himself a Syracusan.

⁴ Ecl. 1. 55.⁵ Ecl. 9. 30.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

may safely conclude that, at the time of the composition of the Eclogues at any rate, his associations were those of a student, not those of a tourist. Nor would it be just to stigmatize the predilection which this indicates as merely conventional. It may be narrow, but within its limits it is genuine. There are some minds which are better calculated, at least in youth, to be impressed by the inexhaustibleness of Art than by the infinity of Nature. They may lack the genial susceptibility which in others is awakened immediately by the sight of the world without, and they may not have had time to educate their imperfect sympathies into a fuller appreciation; but they respond without difficulty to the invitations of natural beauty as conveyed to them through an intervening medium, adapted by its own perfection for the transmission of the perfection which exists beyond. They see with the eyes of others, not with their own; but their soul nevertheless receives the vision. Over such minds the recollection of a word in a book has the same power which others find in a remembered sight or sound. It recalls not only its own image, but the images which were seen in company with it: nay, it may touch yet longer trains of association, and come back upon the memory with something like the force of the entire body of impressions originally excited by the work which happens to contain it. Even those who have held more direct intercourse with nature are not insensible to the operation of this secondary charm. Can any one who reads Milton doubt that the mere sound of the stately names of classic history and mythology exercised a real influence on the poet's fancy? And Mr. Tennyson has lately given us a testimony⁶ to the constraining magic of Virgil's own language, where he speaks of himself as haunted during his journey from Como not by the thought of the overflowing lake, but by the 'ballad-burthen music' of *Lari Maxime*.

It is not, however, the existence of imitation alone, considered merely as imitation, that makes us speak of the Eclogues as unreal. Imitation involves the absence of reality, just as translation does, simply because the thing produced is not original: but it need not imply its destruction. But with the Eclogues the case is different. It is not merely that Virgil formed his conception of pastoral poetry from Greek models, but that he sought to apply it to Roman life. In the vocabulary of poetry, as he understood it, a shepherd was a Sicilian, or perhaps an Arcadian; therefore an Italian shepherd must be spoken of as an Italian Sicilian, and pastoral Italy as Sicilian Italy. Instances of this historical and geographical confusion meet us in every page of the Eclogues. The very fact that the names of the shepherds are invariably Greek would naturally be sufficient to warn us what we are to expect. The introduc-

⁶ In his poem "The Daisy."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION.

9

tion of men called Meliboeus and Tityrus talking about Rome leaves us no room to wonder at any further mixture of incongruities. Yet, so far as I am aware, the lengths to which this confusion is pushed have not been perceived or explained by the scholars of the continent. It has been reserved for the practical good sense and independent judgment of Mr. Keightley⁷, assisted by a personal knowledge of Italian scenery, to set the matter in its true light. When Castelvetro, in the sixteenth century, asserted that the favourite trees of the *Eclogues*, the beech, the ilex, the chestnut, and the pine, do not grow about Mantua, subsequent critics were ready to reply⁸ that the features of the country may have changed in the lapse of centuries, and that surely Virgil must know best. But such reasoning will hardly avail against the absence of the green caves in which the shepherd lies, or the briary crags from which his goats hang, or the lofty mountains whose lengthening shadows remind him of evening. These are the unmistakeable features of Sicily, and no illusion of historical criticism will persuade us that they have changed their places, strange as it is to meet them in conjunction with real Mantuan scenery, with the flinty soil of Andes, and the broad lazy current of the Mincio. The actual Mantua is surrounded by a lake: its pastoral counterpart, like Shakspeare's Bohemia, seems to be on the sea, the stillness of whose waters enables the shepherds to sing undisturbed, as in Theocritus it forms a contrast with the unresting sorrow of the lovesick enchantress. The same rule, if rule it can be called, is observed in the manners and institutions of the shepherds: there is the Italian element, and there is the Sicilian, added as it were, to make it bucolic. The Pales of the Italians and the Apollo Nomios of the Greeks, as Mr. Keightley again points out, retire together from the country, which the death of Daphnis has left desolate: the two high-days of the shepherds' calendar are the Greek festival of the Nymphs and the Roman Ambarvalia. It seems not improbable that a similar account is to be given of the social position of the shepherds themselves, who, though living on terms of Arcadian equality, appear to be sometimes slaves or hirelings, sometimes independent proprietors: but the status of their brethren in Theocritus is itself a point which is apparently involved in some uncertainty.

Such a systematic confusion of time, place, and circumstance, it will be readily admitted, goes far to justify the way in which Virgil has been

⁷ Notes, p. 15.

⁸ "Fagum dicit pro natura loci: prope Mantuam et in agris Virgilio erant veteres fagi. Cf. *Ecl.* 2. 3., 9. 9. Haeserunt nonnulli, quod hodie nullae sunt prope Mantuam, ut Holdsworth et alii. Sed non meminerunt xviii saecula interjecta esse. In Libano hodie cedrorum exigua silva: olim omnis iis abundabat." Spohn, quoted by Wagner on *Ecl.* 1. 1.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01195-2 - P. Vergili Maronis Opera, Volume 1

Edited by John Conington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

spoken of in the opening of this essay as the great corruptor of pastoral poetry, if by pastoral poetry is meant a truthful dramatic representation of one of the simplest forms of life. How far it vitiates the character of the Eclogues as pure poetry, irrespective of the class to which they profess to belong, is a further question, and one which ought not to be decided till we have seen how much it may involve. If the Eclogues are to be condemned on this ground, it is hard to see how we are to excuse a work like *Cymbeline*. If the somewhat broad shield of the romantic drama is sufficient to cover the latter, room may perhaps be found under it for the former. No incongruity of which Virgil has been guilty can be so glaring or so fatal to those notions of reality in which the very form of historical knowledge suggests as that produced by the juxtaposition of the modern Italian, not only with the legendary Briton, but with the Roman of the earlier empire. It is not that the laws of time and circumstance are simply violated, but that they are violated in such a way that the result appears to us inconceivable as well as false, two types belonging to different periods of the same nation, and as such forming the subjects of an obvious historical contrast being imagined for the moment to co-exist, not in the other world, as in the various Dialogues of the Dead, where this incongruity enters into the very idea of the composition, but in a world which, if not our own, resembles it in all its essential features as a theatre for human action and passion. Yet criticism seems now to be agreed that the very glaringness of such incongruities, though doubtless attributable as much to ignorance or recklessness as to any profound design, ought only to teach us to divest ourselves of all extraneous prepossessions, and examine the piece as a representation of human nature apart from the conditions of time, just as when we look at some of the early paintings our sense of beauty need not be ultimately disturbed by our consciousness that the actions portrayed in the two parts of the picture are obviously not simultaneous but successive. Virgil, of course, according to our ordinary nomenclature, is a classical, not a romantic poet; but the fact will hardly be held to exclude him from the benefit of a similar plea, if indeed it should not suggest fresh matter for consideration with regard to the laws generally, and probably with justice, supposed to distinguish the two great schools of Ancient and Modern Art.

This, however, is not the only kind of confusion by which the pastoral reality of the Eclogues is disturbed or destroyed. Not only is the Sicilian mixed up with the Italian, but the shepherd is mixed up with the poet. The danger was one to have been apprehended from the first. So soon as pastoral poetry came to be recognized as a distinct species, the men of letters who cultivated it, perhaps themselves grammarians or professional critics, were likely to yield to the temptation of painting