

PROPPIAN LIGHT ON THE ARISTAEUS EPISODE  
IN VERGIL'S *FOURTH GEORGIC*

The last few decades have seen more and more studies devoted to the Aristaeus episode at the end of Vergil's *Fourth Georgic*<sup>1</sup>. And the same period has also witnessed an increasing realisation that Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* can be used to cast light upon several stories that have come down to us from the ancient Mediterranean world<sup>2</sup>. But to the best of my knowledge the two processes have never coalesced: no-one, so far as I am aware, has brought Proppian principles of analysis to bear upon Vergil's tale of Aristaeus. In the following pages this is precisely what I attempt. And I think the results are rewarding and teach us something new even about this much studied masterpiece of Latin literature.

Propp's approach, it will be remembered, emphasises the tendency of many folktales to begin with an absence or lack of some person or entity. A hero is dispatched upon a quest to remedy this initial deficiency and the story ends when, to borrow Alan Dundes' terminology, the relevant lack is 'liquidated'<sup>3</sup>. It will at once be observed how beautifully this schema fits the story of Aristaeus as presented by Vergil. The lack at the beginning involves, of course, Aristaeus' own bees, which have died. He sets off on a quest to remedy this state of affairs and finally achieves his goal thanks to the device of *bougonia*. The lack is not liquidated in the more predictable way by the bringing back of the desiderated object, as when Jason recovers the Golden Fleece, Heracles the cattle of Geryon or the Greeks Helen, to cite but three instances of the scheme from Greek mythology to which we shall return later. But Aristaeus certainly returns with the solution that entails the restoration of the bees.

It has been pointed out that it is idiomatic within such quest stories for the

<sup>1</sup> A bibliography of studies of the Aristaeus episode up to 1975 may be found in W. Suerbaum's contribution to H. Temporini and W. Haase (edd.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der röm. Welt* 2.31.1 (1980), 476 ff. J. Griffin, "G&R" 26, 1979, 61 ff. = "G&R Studies" 1, 1990, 94 ff. = *Latin Poets and Roman Life* p. 163 f. handily provides a 'whirlwind doxography' with a few more entries. A recent study of the *Georgics* (with bibliography pp. 236 ff.): L. Morgan, *Patterns of Redemption in Vergil's Georgics* (Cambridge 1999). The most recent commentary on *Georgic* 4: that (in Italian) by A. Biotti (Bologna 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Propp's work first appeared (in Russian) in 1928. English translation (second edition with introduction by Alan Dundes, 1968). For reasons of economy I confine bibliographical references here to a pair of articles of my own which name other classical scholars who have exploited Propp's monograph: "CQ" 38, 1988, 277 ff. and "ZPE" 133, 2000, 7 ff.

<sup>3</sup> See Dundes as cited in previous note, p. xvi.

hero to experience a 'preliminary adventure' with a demon or other ambivalent helper figure who has to be compelled to supply crucial information about the route to be taken for the quest<sup>4</sup>. Phineus in the story of the Argonauts<sup>5</sup> and Telephus in that of the Trojan expedition<sup>6</sup> originally fulfilled such a role, but a still closer analogue to what we find in the Aristaeus episode is provided by Nereus, Old Man of the Sea, in two of Heracles' labours. In that involving the Cattle of Geryon he is compelled, in spite of his characteristic resort to metamorphoses, to supply information about the route to Geryon's remote western island of Erytheia<sup>7</sup>, and in the labour that concerns the Apples of the Hesperides, he has a similar role to play<sup>8</sup>. This role seems to have influenced the function of Proteus in the Odyssean episode which is generally regarded as the source<sup>9</sup> of Vergil's equivalent passage: Menelaus' encounter with Proteus on the island of Pharos (*Od.* 4.360 ff.). I have shown elsewhere<sup>10</sup> how this passage exploits (but transforms) motifs originating in the quest's 'preliminary adventure' with the knowledgeable demon.

Aristaeus' encounter with Proteus at *Georgic* 4.415 ff. likewise exploits and transforms the function of the hero's encounter with the ambivalent helper. 'Transforms' because, in the first place, the adventure is not literally 'preliminary' in the sense of occurring at a very early stage of the hero's quest. Still, given the intervening narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice, which Vergil sets in Proteus' mouth, it might be argued that the encounter with the Old Man of the Sea has a *structurally* early position within the tale. Secondly, Proteus is not the only helper figure in the story. Aristaeus is guided by his mother Cyrene to the Old Man of the Sea. One might simply infer that Vergil has taken over the idea of an initial female helper figure from the role of Eidothea in *Od.* 4.360 ff.<sup>11</sup>. But in fact the truth is rather more complex.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of a 'preliminary adventure' ("Vorabenteuer") goes back to Karl Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika* (Berlin 1921) pp. 101 ff. = *Ges. Schr.* 2.664 ff. See further the articles of mine cited in n. 2, p. 282 f. and p. 9 f. respectively.

<sup>5</sup> See my "CQ" article (n. 2) p. 282.

<sup>6</sup> See my "ZPE" article (n. 2) p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> See my "CQ" article (n. 2) pp. 278 and 283 f.

<sup>8</sup> See the article cited in the previous note p. 278 f.

<sup>9</sup> For the fullest and most recent (1999) account of the relationship between the two passages see Morgan (as cited in n. 1) pp. 17 ff. and 219 ff.

<sup>10</sup> See "ZPE" 2004 (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> Cf., for instance, Mynors' commentary on *Georgic* 4.281-314 (Oxford 1990, p. 295). Mynors detects in the *Odyssey* "a special pattern, in which the hero who finds himself in trouble is sent to consult the seer by a nymph who cannot (or can, but will not) solve his problem herself", citing, apart from *Od.* 4, Circe's sending of the hero to Tiresias at 10.480 ff. [a special case since the sequel shows Circe to have known the relevant information all along (*Od.* 12.21 ff.) as Cyrene seems to have known all along how to resurrect Aristaeus' bees].

For one thing, Vergil obviously found congenial the pattern of an initial female helper who leads the hero to a more climactic encounter with an aged male helper: for he used the device on two other occasions, in poems both preceding and following the *Georgics*. In *Eclogue* 6.20 ff. the nymph Aegle *addit se sociam timidisque supervenit*, that is she aids Chromis and Mnasyllus in their binding of Silenus<sup>12</sup>. And in *Aeneid* 6 the hero is guided by the Sibyl in his journey through the Underworld which has as its climax his encounter with the soul of his father Anchises<sup>13</sup>.

Remaining within the sphere of story-patterns, there may be a more specific point to make about Cyrene's rôle in *Georgic* 4. At the climax of his quest, the folk-tale hero is often helped against the enemy (an enemy, as we shall shortly see, symbolising death) by a female figure who is a blood relative of that enemy. Most frequently, the blood relationship is filial: the ogre's daughter helps the prince against her father, as Medea helps Jason against Aeetes, or Ariadne Theseus against Minos<sup>14</sup>. Since the encounter with the ambivalent helper often functions as a sort of *anticipation* of this climax; and since the Old Man of the Sea, in his role as herdsman of the dead, often anticipates the climactic death-demon, is, indeed, his “Doppelgänger”<sup>15</sup>: there would be a symmetrical propriety if the hero were aided in his anticipatory mastering of the ambivalent helper by that helper's *daughter*.

Now that is precisely what we get in Vergil's ‘source’, *Odyssey* 4, where Eidothea is explicitly the daughter of Proteus (see v. 387). And it is also, though in somewhat more elliptical form, what we get in *Georgic* 4: for Cyrene is said to be, not, admittedly, the daughter of Proteus, but the offspring of Nereus [see especially 391f. *hunc* (scil. *Proteus*) *et Nymphae veneramur et ipse* / ... *Nereus*: the nymphs, sisters of Cyrene, are Nereids (vv.

But folktale frequently has one figure send the questing hero on for information to a further figure (“Old, older, oldest”: see, e.g. H. Lixfeld's article s.v. “Alten: die drei Alten” in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 1.383 ff.), which may be the ultimate inspiration for the sort of narrative complication in question.

<sup>12</sup> For instance Clausen in his commentary on *Ecl.* 6.18 rightly observes that Vergil there “imagines Silenus as a Proteus-like figure, an ancient wizard, reluctant and evasive”.

<sup>13</sup> See my “CQ” article (above, n. 2) p. 282 n. 30.

<sup>14</sup> The second most frequent form this relationship takes is that the sympathetic female figure is the *wife* of the ogre or death-demon. So Persephone helps Heracles when he comes to fetch Cerberus from her husband Hades (cf. “ZPE” 2003 forthcoming) and likewise helps Orpheus recover Eurydice (a detail alluded to in Vergil's own account: *namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem*, 4.487).

<sup>15</sup> For such heroic quests as signifying a triumph over death, and for the ambivalent helper (especially the Old Man of the Sea with his herds symbolising human souls) as an equivalent or “Doppelgänger” who anticipates the figure of Death thus triumphed over, see my “CQ” article (n. 2) pp. 278 f. and 281.

351 and 354)] and Nereus, as we have seen, functions as ambivalent helper in two labours of Heracles.

It might further be argued that the preliminary female helper is actually idiomatic and at home in the world of the heroic quest. If we return for a moment to Heracles' search for the Apples of the Hesperides, we find that the hero, according to Pherecydes *F Gr Hist* 3 F16, is guided to the Old Man of the Sea by nymphs living near the river Eridanus<sup>16</sup>. I have suggested elsewhere<sup>17</sup> that another poem, Bacchylides 17, employs motifs from the quest's 'preliminary adventure', and that both Minos, and Theseus' protectress Amphitrite in that composition, display some of the features to be found in folktale's helper figures. If this be so, we have there too the function of helper distributed between two characters, though the sequence is different, with the female appearing later than the male.

Now, the visit of Theseus to Amphitrite's realm beneath the waves in Bacchylides' poem has been compared<sup>18</sup> to that which Aristaeus makes in *Georgic* 4.363 ff. to his mother Cyrene's underwater regions. And on my interpretation<sup>19</sup>, Theseus' re-emergence from the briney depths represents an *anticipation* of his later conquest of death when he overcomes the Minotaur within his labyrinth. I mentioned above that many tales of heroic quests symbolise a triumph over death: consider, for instance, Heracles' purloining of the cattle of Geryon or his gaining of the Apples of the Hesperides; Jason's recovery of the Golden Fleece<sup>20</sup>; and even the Greek expedition's winning back of Helen<sup>21</sup>. Aristaeus' re-emergence from the waves may have a similarly anticipatory function. One would guess this even without the further hint Vergil provides in his account of Cyrene's anointing of her son: *haec ait et liquidum ambrosiae diffundit odorem, / quo totum nati corpus perduxit: at illi / dulcis compositis spiravit crinibus aura / atque habilis membris venit vigor* (vv. 415 ff.). Compare the beautification of Theseus by Amphitrite at Bacch. 17.110 ff. symbolising his rejuvenation or rebirth.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Los Angeles 1959) p. 331 f. Pherecydes is quoted by e.g. Mynors' commentary (above, n. 11). Observe that Aristaeus' mother Cyrene is presented as one of a number of nymphs (= Nereids) at v. 334 and that the river Eridanus is mentioned at v. 372.

<sup>17</sup> See "ZPE" 2003 forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Norden, "Sitzb. Berl. Akad." 1934, 638 = *Kl. Schr.* p. 482; B. London, "Journal of Indo-European Studies" 27, 1999, 57 ff.

<sup>19</sup> See the article cited in n. 17 above. Since the figure of the Old Man of the Sea has associations with the Herdsman of the dead (see my "CQ" article p. 284) Aristaeus' mastering of him likewise anticipates his final overcoming of death with the device of *bougonia*.

<sup>20</sup> See "WS" 115, 2002, 8.

<sup>21</sup> See the article cited in n. 20, p. 13.

Theseus' heroic quest has further relevance for the *Fourth Georgic*. It has been pointed out<sup>22</sup> that Catullus 64, with its inset story of this hero's abandonment of Ariadne, proved profoundly influential upon Vergil's Aristaeus episode. For instance, even in its description of Proteus at vv. 387ff., the latter "owes little to Homer" in *Odyssey* 4.360 ff. "and a great deal to Catullus" (vv. 11 ff.), so that although "it is impossible to say whether Vergil started thinking of Catullus because he already had a Proteus episode in his mind or chose Proteus because he was already thinking of working with material from Catullus", nevertheless "we can... signal the probability of a connection at some level"<sup>23</sup>. If Vergil was aware that the tale of Theseus and Ariadne – and, indeed, that of Jason and the Argonauts in the Catullan lines, just referred to – ultimately represented heroic conquests of death<sup>24</sup>, this might be a more specific reason for his choice of a helper figure so much at home in such tales<sup>25</sup>.

However, it is Vergil's inset story of Orpheus and Eurydice which has been especially coloured by Catullus 64. In particular, "when Theseus leaves the labyrinth, Catullus writes [v. 112]:

*inde pedem sospes multa cum laude reflexit.*

Vergil speaks of Orpheus thus [v. 485]:

*iamque pedem referens casus evaserat omnis.*

The association of ideas is less surprising when we remember that Theseus himself traditionally descended to the Underworld to carry off Persephone, and that the myths of Eurydice and of Persephone are not without their connections<sup>26</sup>. Even more to the point, perhaps, is that, as we have seen above, Theseus' escape from the labyrinth and then Crete, in the company of Ariadne, can be read as the rescuing of a soul from the Underworld<sup>27</sup>. Again, if Vergil were aware of this likelihood (and why should he not have been?) one can well understand how it is that in the *Fourth Georgic*

<sup>22</sup> See Anna Crabbe, "CQ" 27, 1977, 342 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Crabbe as cited in the last note, p. 349.

<sup>24</sup> See n. 20 above.

<sup>25</sup> Crabbe further suggests that "there may be a connection between Vergil's choice of a shape-shifting sea deity and Thetis' attempts to elude Peleus by metamorphosis, a version conspicuously avoided by Catullus, but the one which was canonical". In the context of my present argument it is also relevant to observe that the shape-shifting Thetis may originally have served as helper figure herself within the story of Peleus, being later replaced in that capacity by Chiron: see my "CQ" article (n. 2) p. 282 and n. 31. The correspondences between the four pairings that are Peleus/Thetis, Jason/Medea, Theseus/Ariadne and Orpheus/Eurydice, and the motif of the female helper later abandoned (or, as Thetis, abandoning) would repay investigation.

<sup>26</sup> Crabbe (as cited above n. 22) p. 346.

<sup>27</sup> See the article cited above n. 15.

“the descent to the underworld to rescue Eurydice and Orpheus' escape with her bear at least formal comparison with the passage of Theseus through the labyrinth and his escape with Ariadne from Crete”<sup>28</sup>. Theseus abandons his rescued soul, so to speak, shortly after his triumph over death: the similarity with the tragic ending of Vergil's story of Orpheus cannot be overlooked. But it brings us to another related topic.

It has long been recognised that Aristaeus' *bougonia* is in itself a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation<sup>29</sup>, so that here too a heroic quest functions as a metaphor for a triumph over death. The fascinating complication here is that, as we have just seen, Orpheus' *katabasis* to win back Eurydice bears all those features that suggest a like origin, with Eurydice's decease representing the loss which must be liquidated<sup>30</sup>. That the story did originally end with such a conquest of death has often been argued<sup>31</sup>, and it may well be that Vergil imported the tragic ending in order to disguise the basic similarity of story-pattern behind Aristaeus' and Orpheus' achievements as well as to obtain a contrast between the two narratives. It is striking that, in order to link the twin stories, Vergil has so ingeniously associated the initial ‘lacks’ that precipitate the respective narratives: the death of Eurydice brings about the death of Aristaeus' bees. Once more Propp's approach provides valuable illumination of a well-known narrative.

A final point will take us slightly beyond the scope of Propp's perceptions but has as its starting point the very Proppian function<sup>32</sup> of the ‘donor figure’

<sup>28</sup> Crabbe (above n. 22) p. 346.

<sup>29</sup> So, e.g., Brooks Otis, *Vergil: A Study in Civilised Poetry* (Oxford 1964) p. 212: “the successful resurrection of the bees”. A. Parry, “Arethusa” 5, 1972, 52 = *The Language of Achilles and other Papers* p. 285: “the recreation of life”. This interpretation may be strengthened by a further consideration: Menelaus' encounter with Proteus in *Od.* 4, is a significant ‘source’ (see n. 9 above) for the start of the Aristaeus episode, and Menelaus' consequent escape from Egypt can be read as a rebirth or escape from death: see the article of mine cited above n. 10 and (a like conclusion by a very different route) J. Farrell, *Vergil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic* (Oxford 1991) p. 265. As we saw at the start of this article, Aristaeus ‘liquidates’ his particular ‘lack’ not by the more predictable rescue of the deserted object, but through appeasement (by sacrifice) of angry shades. This propitiatory sacrifice derives from Odysseus' sacrificial appeasement of Poseidon (as advocated by Tiresias in *Od.* 11) after he has (more literally than Menelaus quoted above) triumphed over death by returning from the Underworld.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. my “CQ” article (n. 2) p. 282.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Bowra, “CQ” 2, 1952, 117 ff. = *On Greek Margins* pp. 219 ff. and the commentary of Biotti (above, n. 1) pp. 340 ff.

<sup>32</sup> See my “CQ” article (above, n. 2) p. 278: “though the Old Man of the Sea does fall within the very broad Proppian category of the folk-tale ‘helper’ (more accurately ‘donor’ or ‘provider’), he really represents a special ‘antagonistic’ sub-class, as his metamorphoses... make clear”.

or ‘helper’. The paradox whereby, as Mynors puts it<sup>33</sup>, Proteus “who began by gnashing his teeth wrings our hearts with such lines as 471-80 or 506 or 511-515” is inescapable. And it has its roots surely in the frequent *ambivalence* of the folk-tale helper figure. The “ambiguous elfin character” of the wise old man who frequently features as helper within fairy stories was observed by Carl Jung in his fascinating essay *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales*<sup>34</sup>, and associated with his theory of archetypes: “as all [of these] have a positive, favourable, bright side... so... they have one... partly negative and unfavourable.... The Old Man” may be “his own opposite, a life bringer as well as a death dealer”, just as Merlin, for instance, sometimes represents “good incarnate”, sometimes “an aspect of evil”<sup>35</sup>.

Jung took the folktale figure of the knowledgeable old man to be a symbol of “the spiritual factor”, personifying and externalising the processes of “profound reflection or a lucky idea... in the psychic space outside the consciousness” of the questing hero himself<sup>36</sup>, of the individual who encounters or consults the supposed helper. Perfectly consistent with this is the fact that, as Jung says<sup>37</sup>, “often the old man in fairytales asks questions like who? why? whence? and whither? for the purpose of inducing self-reflection and mobilising the moral forces”. Idiomatic in this context, therefore, are the very first words that Proteus addresses to Aristaeus upon abandoning all attempts at metamorphosis: *nam quis te, iuvenum confidentissime, nostras / iussit adire domos? quidve hinc petis?* (v. 445 f.)<sup>38</sup>.

Even if one finds oneself unable to accept the credentials of Jung's more general argument<sup>39</sup> about archetypes and human motivation<sup>40</sup>, one must

<sup>33</sup> Commentary (see above, n. 11) on vv. 450 ff.

<sup>34</sup> *Zur Phänomenologie des Geistes im Märchen*, “Eranos Jhb.” 22, 1943 = *Symbolik des Geistes* (Zürich 1948) pp. 400 ff. = *Collected Works* 9.i (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*) pp. 217 ff.

<sup>35</sup> See Jung as cited in previous note p. 413 f. = p. 226 f. On the Old Man of the Sea's associations with death see n. 15 above.

<sup>36</sup> Jung p. 401 = p. 217.

<sup>37</sup> As cited above (n. 34) p. 402 = p. 220 with examples in n. 16. He proceeds to link this observation to his theory of archetypes by observing that to achieve the goal of “uniting the personality to the point where it acquires the extraordinary power to succeed... the objective intervention of the archetype is needed, which checks the purely affective reactions with a chain of inner confrontations and realisations. These cause the Who? Where? How? Why? to emerge clearly and in this wise bring knowledge of the immediate situation as well as of the goal”.

<sup>38</sup> There may be a vestige of this significant questioning in the first words uttered by Silenus (see above n. 12) at *Ecl.* 6.23 in a situation similar to Proteus' in *Georg.* 4: *quo vincula nectitis?*

<sup>39</sup> Colin Hardie, *The Georgics: A Transitional Poem* (3<sup>rd</sup> Jackson Knight Memorial

surely accept that he here puts his finger upon a significant aspect of patterning within folk-tale and fairy story, and one that meshes well with Propp's findings.

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Lecture, 1971) p. 28, more allusively, and M. Owen Lee, *Vergil as Orpheus: A study of the Georgics* (New York 1996) pp. 103 ff., more explicitly and fully, associate the role of Proteus with Jungian psychoanalytical theories. I quote from the latter (p. 103 f.) who cites Jung's *Psyche and Symbol* ["A Selection from the Writings of" C.G.J. (1958) in English translation]. "The hero... encounters, in some deep place that represents his unconscious, his anima – his inner feminine, a complex of mother-memories, of everything he has experienced of the opposite sex. She leads him to his 'Wise Old Man' archetype, his inner masculine, often an emblem of his father. The Wise Old Man... eventually gives the young hero the psychic information essential to his maturing. The hero then re-encounters the anima figure, who provides the practical details he needs. Finally he rises from the unconscious to the conscious world to integrate his experiences". It may be worth stressing that Jung's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales* provides the material for an interpretation of Proteus' role in *Georgic* 4 more or less independent of Jungian theories on archetype and anima.

<sup>40</sup> For some sceptical remarks on the validity of Jung's theories for the understanding of classical texts see, e.g., G. Kirk, *Myth: its meaning and functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge 1970) pp. 274 ff. and Lloyd-Jones in *Freud and the Humanities* (London 1985) p. 162 = *Academic Papers* [II] p. 290 f.