

## **Livestock in Virgil's *Eclogues* as Commentary on Forced Land Redistributions**

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Pastoral poets often used various themes, symbols, and motifs that embodied subjects of rural living. However, under the jovial guise of pastoral poetry, there is a subtext of something starkly more ominous. Pastoral poets regularly use this latent meaning to convey concerns, using the polarity between blatant and underlying themes to emphasize the dichotomy of good and evil, right and wrong. Virgil's *Eclogues* are highly bucolic, encompassing various pastoral themes, including shepherds, farmers, and livestock. In *Eclogues* 1, 4, 6, and 9, Virgil creates a subtext of political commentary by using the symbolism of livestock to portray his dissatisfaction with Augustus' forced land redistributions, which were to aid soldiers during the Roman Civil War.

Roman political institutions often promised Roman soldiers land as a reward for achieving accomplishments while serving in the military. Other times, Roman administrators and rulers used the reallocation of lands as a means to quarter troops.<sup>1</sup> To better comprehend Virgil's attitude towards the forced land redistributions, one might examine Augustus' relationship with Virgil. The *Aeneid* is a key representation of this relationship, as Augustus encouraged Virgil to finish it to justify Augustus' reign over Rome, by fabricating an origin of

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<sup>1</sup> Leendert Weeda, *Virgil's Political Commentary in the Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015).

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deific lineage.<sup>2</sup> Virgil constructed the *Aeneid* with various clues to suggest that Augustus had divine ancestry and was therefore entitled to rule Rome.<sup>3</sup> Examples such as the one in footnote three illustrate the importance of subtexts within Virgil's works and suggests that he is no stranger to subliminality as a means of safely expressing political ideas in an era where powers-that-be could persecute writers for sharing controversial opinions about political figures. While this does not wholly illustrate Virgil's true opinion of "Augustus," it shows that there is a history between both individuals involving Virgil's compliance and, on Augustus' end, trust in Virgil's poetic competency. As we will see in the following discussion, there is a theme of political contention, threaded within the subtext of the *Eclogues*.

The daily observations that the herdsmen make throughout the *Eclogues* show that livestock can depict an individual's state of prosperity or hardship. Indeed, this seemingly simply feature in the pastoral world shows an indirect correlation with Virgil's resentment of the status quo versus the idealism and nostalgia he emphasizes — the pastoral theme of the "Golden Age." This change in wealth and prosperity is what Virgil uses to outline his disagreement with forced land confiscations in contrast to perceived better times. This series of symbols and latent opinion signifies his acknowledgement of a disagreeable decline, yet Virgil has embedded them within the

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<sup>2</sup> Virgil. "The *Aeneid* Book VI." The Internet Classics Archive. Accessed May 29, 2019. <http://classics.mit.edu/Virgil/aeneid.6.vi.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.792-795. "Thy race ... shall spread the conquests of imperial...Rome, whose ascending tow'rs shall heav'n invade ... Augustus, promis'd oft, and long foretold, sent to the realm that Saturn rul'd of old; born to restore a better age of gold." Translation by John Dryden.

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subtexts of literary symbolism, granting him a sort of political security from his own, potentially dangerous opinion.

*Eclogue 1* is about two herdsmen with contrasting situations, Tityrus and Meliboeus, and their particular attitudes towards the division and reallocation of lands to or from them, under Augustan order. *Eclogue 1* is the most forward in its political standpoint, and relies much less on subliminal hints to convey its message. However, symbolism still holds key in its conveyance of Virgil's disapproval. Symbolism is partially indirect, and thus it is inherently comprised of subliminality. In addition, *Eclogue 1*, regardless of its politically forward theme, possesses many forms of symbolism.

Meliboeus and Tityrus express contrasting perspectives of their opposing circumstances. Meliboeus, aggrieved that he must leave his home, speaks with Tityrus, who is rejoicing because Augustus has granted prosperity under the same order that has affected Meliboeus so negatively. Scholars generally view this blatant disparity to be Virgil voicing his thanks to Augustus through the voice of Tityrus, considering the influence politics had upon the *Eclogues*, and the historical context in which Virgil wrote the *Eclogues*.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, both attitudes are demonstrated and expressed. Virgil's bold attempt even to risk explaining the unfairness of Augustus' mandate to redistribute farmlands, strongly suggests that Virgil did indeed hold contempt for this process.

Meliboeus expresses his newfound hardships by stating he must hand over his livestock to a barbarian and soldier.<sup>5</sup> He then describes the state of his goats. He explains that despite

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<sup>4</sup> Leendert Weeda, *Virgil's Political Commentary*.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Saunders, *Bucolic Ecology: Virgil's Eclogues and the Environmental Literary Tradition* (Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2008).

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one of his goats birthing twins, an auspicious sign of fertility, she is too unwell to care for them, and thus must abandon them upon a nearby rock.<sup>6</sup> This transforms an originally favorable omen of fertility and wealth to one of defeat, abandonment, and sterility. Virgil contrasts this image with Tityrus' herd, described as fortunate enough to roam freely at its own will, "It's by his grace, you see, that my cattle browse and I can play whatever tunes I like on this country reed pipe."<sup>7</sup> This is the first example in Virgil's *Eclogues* of livestock used as a means to depict symbolically the disproportionate state of wellbeing between two individuals, which directly results from the Augustan mandate.

Meliboeus further curses the loss of his home and his land, as to farmers and shepherds alike, their land is a means to their livelihood, as the place where they cultivate either food or livestock, and ultimately, profit. In his bitterness, Meliboeus shouts at his "once happy flock"<sup>8</sup> of goats to leave, as he must abandon his home and cannot easily take the animals with him across such a great distance: "Move onward, little she-goats, onward, once happy flock."<sup>9</sup> In this statement, Meliboeus is not only bidding farewell to his livestock, but also symbolically to his home, his assets, and his former state of prosperity. This notion

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<sup>6</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues* 1.14-16: "Hic inter densas corylos modo namque gemellos, spem gregis, silice in nuda conixa reliquit. Saepe malum hoc nobis ...". All translations of the *Eclogues* are by C. Day Lewis, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues* 1.9-10: "ille meas errare boves, ut cernis, et ipsum ludere quae vellem calamo permisit agresti." For more commentary on this passage see, Robert Coleman, *Virgil: Eclogues*, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues* 1.75: "felix quondam pecus."

<sup>9</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues*, 1.74-76: "ite meae, felix quondam pecus, ite capellae. non ego vos posthac viridi proiectus in antro dumosa pendere procul de rupe videbo."

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appeals to the "Golden Age" aspect of pastoral poetry, and suggests that the unfavorable state of affairs faced by him and many other Roman shepherds would not be, had Augustus not ordered them to abandon their homes. It is important to note that goats, in this instance, are a symbol to convey the grief and hardships held by the affected Romans at-large, maintaining a refugee like status due to their forced displacement and the resulting inability of many to maintain their livelihoods.

Meliboeus continues this farewell, saying that he will no longer take them to browse the bitter willow and clovers: "No more taking you to browse, my little goats, on bitter willow and clover flower."<sup>10</sup> This statement reflects a different sentiment than the former half of his farewell. Here there is a hint of reminiscence and sentimentality. Not only is Meliboeus losing his assets and his home, he is also losing his career, pastimes, and the routines of his daily life. By having Meliboeus reference his goats in two independent halves of a farewell, Virgil is able to express multiple facets of the grievances by the affected shepherds, and indirectly illustrates the uncertainty of their future. Each mention of livestock in this *Eclogue* is a means of political expression, as they accompany Meliboeus's grief with Augustus, and depicts imagery of an ideal era. Virgil is indirectly suggesting his own disapproval.

*Eclogue* 4 is heavily political because it describes the return of the Golden Age, an era of prosperity and idealism, with the birth of a child who will usher in said era. The identity of the boy is widely argued among critics and scholars. Some people have taken this as a prophecy of Jesus Christ; however, the

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<sup>10</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues*, 77-78: "carmina nulla canam; non me pascente, capellae, florentem cytisum et salices carpetis amaras."

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leading consensus is that Virgil is referencing Pollio, who had just had a baby boy.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of this debate, the overall theme of this poem is ultimately a symbol of hope. Hope is thematically more positive than the loss of material prosperity, which was Virgil's initial method of conveying his disapproval of obligatory land redistributions. By taking this alternative approach, Virgil is building his reproach strategically from multiple angles, strengthening his standpoint. However, he does so while still under the safety of subliminalities, to avoid offending Augustus with his outright criticisms.

In *Eclogue 4*, goats frequently illustrate imagery of fertility and abundance. The speaker sings of "Golden Age" imagery. He says that goats "shall walk home, their udders taut with milk, and nobody herding them".<sup>12</sup> Using hope as a primary theme, *Eclogue 6* implies things not being as ideal as described. Their udders, "taut with milk," is thematic of fertility and fecundity. This imagery of a bountiful world is vastly different from the one previously portrayed in *Eclogue 6*, which instead mirrors the real life circumstances of Virgil and shepherds displaced by civil strife and controversial ordinances.

Virgil then intimates that success would come easily, and their livelihoods would go unthreatened in a "Golden Age" setting, describing the perfect oxen to have no fear of lions. He thus implies that in an ideal world, animals would live harmoniously and shepherds would not worry for the health of

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<sup>11</sup> See Francis Cairns, "C. Asinius Pollio & the 'Eclogues'," *Cambridge Classical Journal* 54: 49-79 and Eleanor Windsor Leach, "Eclogue 4: Symbolism and Sources," *Arethusa* 4, no. 2: 167-184 for two attempts to understand the identity of the boy.

<sup>12</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.21-23: "ipsae lacte domum referent distenta capellae ubera nec magnos metuent armenta leones; ipsa tibi blandos fundent cunabula flores."

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their flock, "the goats return home with their udders distended by milk, and herds shall not fear the great lion."<sup>13</sup> He further describes grazing lambs, which in the forthcoming days of the prophesied "Golden Age" could change the colors of their wool at their own will. No effort would be necessary to dye sheep's wool into unnatural colors. The absence of required effort is another indication of idealism, for an era of safety and abundance is an era of leisure, as characterized by their needlessness of effort in dyeing the wool. As leisure is an exemplification of prosperity, Virgil describes plowmen who, in a world of perfection, may unyoke their oxen, deeming it unnecessary as their oxen, like the aforementioned goats, would effortlessly herd themselves, "The tough plowman may at last unyoke his oxen."<sup>14</sup>

Virgil also seems to appeal here for the improvement of the political climate and living standards of Roman men—*Eclogue* 6 references various mythological stories that depict degeneracy and perversities of humankind. One of the mythological stories is of Pasiphae and the bull, describing Pasiphae as possessing "lust for a white bull," and questions the origin of her perverse inclination towards such a heinous act, for she "desired so bestial a mating." Immediately following this allusion, Virgil references the daughters of Proetus, who believed themselves to be cows, due to a punishment dealt by either Hera or Dionysus, depending on the source.<sup>15</sup> They roamed the fields, hallucinating that they were part of a herd of

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<sup>13</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.21-22.

<sup>14</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.41: "robustus quoque iam tauris iuga solvet arator  
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<sup>15</sup> "Proetus." *Encyclopedia Mythica*. May 18, 1999. Accessed May 28, 2019. <https://pantheon.org/articles/p/proetus.html>.

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cattle. Both allusions share themes of degeneracy, as demonstrated by Pasiphae's licentious behaviors, and by the Proetides' animalistic behaviors. These correlate to the ideals of the Golden Age, in their stark contrast from idealism. Rather than focusing *Eclogue* 6 solely on the theme of hope, Virgil takes the opposite approach, and outlines specific aspects of humanity's greater faults. This is critical to understanding Virgil's political approach in the *Eclogues*, for it implies a notable decline of Romans' living standards, of humanity's greater faults. He continually ties the decline to the controversial reallocation of rural communities.

Virgil repeatedly voices his political stance towards Augustus' mandate, often demonstrating frustration through literary symbols and motifs. Livestock embodies themes of fertility, which is inherently characteristic of pastoral themes. This repeated use of livestock as symbolism enables Virgil to express subliminally his disdain with Augustus' controversial decision, and its adverse effects on shepherds and other agrarian workers.

By repeatedly using symbolism, not only does he convey indirectly the war's inadvertent effects on Roman citizens, but he is also shifting away any culpability of offending political figures. Not wishing to offend Augustus outrightly, Virgil displays his criticisms of this mandate through the subtexts of symbolism, and uses livestock as an aid to convey them. Without this symbolism, Virgil likely would have relied on discourse among characters in the *Eclogues* to mask his disagreements as not his own, but of his characters'. However, such discourse still possesses far more forwardness than the subliminalities of symbolism, as general discourse still requires the speakers to state their criticisms. Indirect discourse, as



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symbols generally should be viewed, however, is no exception to this, for the opinion is still outrightly stated, but with the liability placed away from the speaking character. Yet, with symbolism, Virgil's opinion is intelligible — he can openly criticize Augustus while displacing liability of his criticisms, to avoid reprimand via Roman law.

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