Vergil’s Geographic References in *Georgics* 3.1-48

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The proem to Book 3 of Vergil’s *Georgics* (3.1-48) stands apart from the rest of the didactic work in that it avoids the topics of farming and rural life that are the focus of the rest of the poem. Instead, Vergil here outlines the temple—which scholars often read as a forthcoming epic\(^1\)—he intends to build in Mantua in honor of Caesar Augustus. This brief passage is incredibly important, especially for the larger metapoetic purpose it serves. Indeed, Vergil strives both here and throughout the *Georgics* to not only blur the line between epic and didactic poetry, but also to find his true place within ancient poetry. The latter task represents a greater challenge for Vergil, as he struggles to balance the strong influence of his predecessors, the Alexandrian poets, with his desire to pave his own path. In the proem to Book 3, Vergil sketches a synthesized, metaphorical version of his immense internal struggle. In such, he prominently displays his connection to the Alexandrian poets, his desire to break away from them, and his realization that he is currently unable to do so. Crucial to Vergil’s effort to condense and express this struggle is a variety of geographical references: allusion, literal reference, and personification.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Vergil Encyclopedia, Jones

\(^2\) By literal here, I mean that these references do not allude to any particular myth or story, nor are they personified or otherwise enhanced. i.e. when Vergil says “Mantua” he literally means Mantua.
“You also, great Pales, and we will sing you, shepherd from the Amphryssus, worthy of remembrance, and you, woods and rivers of Lycaeus” (te quoque, magna Pales, et te memorande canemus/pastor ab Amphryso, vos, silvae amnesque Lycaei, 3.1-2). Thus, Vergil opens Book 3 much as he does each of the other books of the Georgics: with a series of invocations. This is where the similarities end, however. In the other proems, Vergil invokes each deity by name. Here, though, he invokes only Pales by name; the deities Apollo and Pan he invokes through geographical allusions to Greek myth. As Richard Thomas notes in his commentary on Books 3 and 4 of the Georgics, this style of allusion is distinctly Alexandrian.³ In addition to their style, the content of these geographical allusions also demonstrates Vergil’s connection to the Alexandrian poets. In the first of these allusions, Vergil refers to Apollo as “pastor ab Amphyros” or “shepherd from the Amphryssus” (3.2). This is, in fact, an allusion to the Greek myth in which Apollo serves as shepherd to the flocks of King Admetus at the Amphryssus River, which flows through Thessaly.⁴ What is more important, however, is that the only other time this river appears in connection to Apollo is in Hymn 2. 47-49 of Callimachus, a prominent Alexandrian poet.⁵

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³ Thomas (1988), 37
⁴ Barrington Atlas, Map 1a
⁵ Thomas (1983), 93
The allusion to Pan, seen in the phrase “the woods and rivers of Lycaeus” (*silvae amnesque Lycaei* 3.2), is more oblique though no less important. Indeed, Mt. Lycaeus is a mountain in Greece and “one of Pan’s traditional haunts” in Greek myth. Moreover, Helen Peraki-Kyriakidou notes, “Greek Arcadia and the Greek god Pan…are connected with speech and discourse in general and with poetry in particular, they also stand as a metonymy for all the strata of Greek literature.” Given their prominent place in “the strata of Greek literature,” this allusion, too, serves as a connection between Vergil and his Alexandrian predecessors. That Vergil uses geographical allusions in a deliberate attempt to invoke these deities in an Alexandrian manner is significant, but that he does so at the outset of *this* passage—one representative of his search for poetic identity—only further indicates the strong influence that the Alexandrian poets, especially Callimachus, had on his career.

In spite of this, Vergil already appears desirous of pulling away, and, as the proem progresses, Vergil’s attitude begins to shift in response. In the lines that follow, Vergil moves away from demonstrating a connection to his predecessors and instead focuses on his future works, works through which he hopes to distinguish himself from the Alexandrian poets.

In order to extend the notion that he desires to pave his own poetic path, Vergil again turns to geographical references.

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6 Vergil Encyclopedia, Fratantuono
7 Peraki-Kyriakidou (2006), 90
This time, however, Vergil places the emphasis not on their mythological importance, but rather on their actual geographical location. Vergil’s primary goal in so doing so is to mark his future works as both personal and Italian in nature. To start, Vergil claims that he “will first bring back Idumaean palms to you, Mantua, and place a temple made from marble in the green field by the water” (primus Idumaeas referam tibi, Mantua, palmas,/et viridi in campo templum de marmore ponam/ propter aquam, 3.12-14). This temple will not just be anywhere in Mantua, however. Specifically, it will be placed “where the huge Mincius wanders in slow curves and weaves the shores with a thin reed” (tardis ingens ubi flexibus errat/Mincius et tenera praetexit arundine ripas, 3.14-15). Though it would be more conventional for Vergil to construct his theoretical temple to Augustus at Rome rather than in rural Northern Italy, Vergil is deliberate in his choice. For one, Mantua and the Mincius function as a sphragis (an identifying “seal” with which an author marks his work) for Vergil. Indeed, his hometown and its river appear once in each of his works and are only referenced elsewhere in connection with him.\(^8\) Therefore, these two geographic place names serve as an indication that Vergil intends his forthcoming epic to be uniquely personal.

Additionally, Marianne Goodfellow notes, “the place names Mincius and Mantua stand out as Italian and Transpadane at the

\(^8\) Vergil Encyclopedia, Jones
beginning of a long list of foreign places and far away battles.”¹⁹

These literal geographical references, then, mark this section and the future epic as both uniquely Virgilian and distinctly Italian.

Not only does Vergil use literal geographical references in this proem to demonstrate that his forthcoming work will be personal and Italian, but also to indicate that it will be both different from and superior to the work of his Alexandrian-Greek predecessors. This is best seen in his description of the games he plans to hold in honor of his completed temple. Vergil notes that his games will be superior to the point that, “All Greece, leaving behind the Alpheos and the groves of Molorchus for me, will compete in races and with the bloody boxing glove” (cuncta mihi Alpheum linquens lucosque Molorchi/cursibus et crudo decernet Graecia caestu, 3.19-20). If “games” here is read as “poems”, Vergil is predicting that his new, epic work will stand apart from previous Alexandrian works, surpassing them completely. Consequently, he believes that all readers, including previous devotees of Alexandrian poetry, will flock to his work and forget about that of his predecessors.

Critical in setting up this notion is Vergil’s use of literal geographical references. The first of these reference is to the Alpheos River, a river that flows by Mt. Olympus in Greece (Barrington 58); the second, “the groves of Molorchus” (lucosque Molorchi, 3.19), is a “periphrasis for Nemea.”¹⁰ Both

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¹⁹ Goodfellow (1981), 17
¹⁰ Thomas (1988), 42
function here on two levels. First, they are distinct aspects of the Greek landscape, providing a sharp contrast to Vergil’s previous use of Italian geographical place names. Second, they are clear references to the Olympic games and the Nemean games, and Greek games in general. More specifically, *lucosque Molorchi* is a direct reference to the founding of the Nemean games that Callimachus describes in *Aetia* 3. This makes it clear that Vergil, as Thomas notes, intends for “his own foundation of his Italian games to eclipse the Callimachean foundations of *Aetia* 3, just as his poetry will eclipse that of Callimachus” and the other Alexandrians.  

Vergil uses geographical references to set up a contrast between both the Italian and Greek landscapes, and the Italian and Greek games. Together, this is representative of his desire to break from and surpass his Alexandrian predecessors with his forthcoming work.

Though Vergil’s desire to break from Alexandrian precedent is clearly stated just a few lines prior, the closing lines of the proem to Book 3 indicate that he is not yet able do so. Indeed, the proem’s final lines convey the burden Vergil feels to remain loyal to the very Alexandrian poets he desires to break away from. To convey this burden, Vergil relies again on geographical features, this time through their personification. When he urges himself to, “Come on, break slow delay!” (*en age segnis/rumpe moras*, 3.42-43), Vergil demonstrates the realization that his discussion of a future work is an unnecessary

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11 Thomas (1988), 42
distraction from the task at hand. Vergil is not the only one calling for him to return to his present task, however. He claims that “Cithaeron calls with a huge voice, and the dogs of Taygetos, and Epidaurus, mistress of horses,” each urging him to return to his didactic work (\textit{vocat ingenti clamore Cithaeron/Taygetique canes domitrixque Epidaurus equorum,} 3.43-44).

Once again, geography is a key player. Cithaeron, Taygetos and Epidaurus are neither historical nor mythological figures, but rather features of Greek geography: Cithaeron and Taygetos are mountains while Epidaurus is a city (Barrington, 55, 58). Thomas notes that these “Greek localities are appropriate to the pastoral subject of the third book,” especially in that Cithaeron and Taygetos are places well suited for hunting and recall deities including the huntress Diana. Meanwhile, Epidaurus (or perhaps Epirus or Epidamnus\textsuperscript{12}) is associated with horses. Through the personification of these places, Vergil gives the impression that the subject matter of his didactic poem itself is encouraging him to return his attention to it.

More significant, however, are the connections to Greek and even Alexandrian literature that each of these geographical features possesses. As R.A.B Mynors indicates in his commentary, each of these locales is detailed by various Greek authors. He notes that Mt. Cithaeron is described as a scene of

\textsuperscript{12} For a discussion of the possibility of Epidaurus being incorrect, see Hendry (1999)
Bacchic revelry and summer pasture in the works of Sophocles and is featured in the works of Xenophon. Additionally, Mt. Taygetos is described as a favorite haunt of Diana in the works of Homer, and, more importantly here, in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Diana*. Epidaurus is much less prominent, which perhaps gives credence to one of Hendry’s alternative readings cited above. Here, then, Vergil personifies geographical features prominent in Greek literature to stand for the literature and its authors.

What is more, Vergil casts these personified geographical features in a negative light. First, he describes the voice with which Cithaeron calls him to remain on task as “huge” (*ingenti* 3.43), giving the sense that Cithaeron is not asking Vergil to return, but rather exhorting him to. Furthermore, *Taygetosque canes* (“and the dogs of Tayetos” 3.44) indicates that it is not simply Taygetos that urges him on, but specifically his dogs. This, Mynors indicates, is in fact a reference to Spartan hunting dogs. The presence of these terrifying and fierce hunting dogs adds an extra sense of urgency for Vergil to remain on task.

That these places—and the literature they stand for—are depicted as angry and terrifying indicates that Vergil now sees his connection to the Alexandrian poets as a burden, a significant challenge for him to break away from completely.

In many ways, the proem to Book 3 serves as a microcosm for the *Georgics*. Phillip Hardie describes the

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13 Mynors (1990), 187
14 Ibid.
as marked by “an awareness of a range of poetic choices available to the poet,” and “a sense of being in transition, of going on a poetic journey.”¹⁵ Both sentiments ring true in this short proem. Indeed, Vergil’s poetic journey, especially his tenuous relationship with the Alexandrian poets, is played out in these lines. A major part of this story is told through his use geographical references. Vergil’s use of geographical allusions to Greek myth, contrasting literal place references, and personification each demonstrate a unique step on Vergil’s poetic journey. He moves from demonstrating the influence of Callimachus and other Alexandrian poets on his early works to desiring to distance himself from his predecessors, then finally to realizing that he is not yet able to break away. Clearly then, as Thomas notes, “The first 48 lines of the third Georgic constitute Virgil’s most extensive statement of literary purpose.”¹⁶ The importance of geographical references here cannot be understated. Indeed, these geographical references stand out for their uniqueness and undeniable associations. Each locale and individual reference has its own unique connotations and connections, a fact which Vergil expertly employs over the course of this proem as he seeks to outline his own poetic path.

¹⁵ Hardie (1998), 40
¹⁶ Thomas (1983), 92
Bibliography

Barrington Atlas, Maps 1a, 55, 58


