

John MCDONALD

Orpheus and the *Bougonia* in *Georgic* 4: Cow Slaughter as a Source of Poetic Inspiration  
The epyllion of *Georgic* 4 culminates in Aristaeus' execution of a *bougonia*, the ritual pulverization of a bovine carcass which miraculously results in the generation of bees. Aristaeus performs the *bougonia* at Orpheus' behest as a funerary rite for Euridike. The juxtaposition of the Orpheus myth with the *bougonia* is usually considered to be a Vergilian invention. However, comparative evidence from both elsewhere in Greek myth and other genetically related mythological traditions suggests that this combination, far from innovative, is rather native to Orpheus' mythological dossier.

The probable etymological equivalence of Orpheus and the Rbhus, the three divine craftsmen of the Indic pantheon, has long been acknowledged. In addition, Orpheus' and the Rbhus' mythological profiles demonstrate correspondences. One overlooked parallel is that both Orpheus and the Rbhus are associated with a nexus of a dead bovine and a miraculous revival. While Orpheus demands that Aristaeus execute a *bougonia*, the Rbhus perform a series of miracles involving the revivification of a cow, one of them being the extraction of a new bovine out of an old hide. The *bougonia*, in which bees emerge from the carcass, also consists of the extraction of new life out of a dead bovine. This correspondence suggests that both Orpheus' *bougonia* and the Rbhus' bovine miracles have a common source in a ritual inherited from the Indo-European mythological tradition. Thus, in juxtaposing the Orpheus myth with the *bougonia*, Vergil retains an inherited collocation.

Orpheus' original connection with the *bougonia* may also shed some light on the symbolism of this ritual. Just as Orpheus is a poet, the Rbhus are not only carpenters of material goods, but also crafters of poetry. Given that the cow is often a symbol for poetic inspiration in the densely layered polysemy of the *Rig Veda*, the new cow that the Rbhus generate from the dead one may allude to their poetic talent. Likewise, the generation of bees from the carcass in the *bougonia* may function as a symbol of poetic inspiration.

The mythological dossier of the Irish cow goddess Boand further points the *bougonia*'s poetic component. Boand is killed by a geyser of water. Her death results in the generation of numerous rivers, including the Boyne, named after the goddess responsible for its genesis. The production of rivers from Boand's slaughter demonstrates a sequence similar to the production of bees from the slaughtered bovine in the *bougonia*. The Boyne then becomes a source of inspiration for poets who come to its banks. Perhaps the bees produced by the *bougonia* also index the ritual's poetic aspect. Bees and their honey are associated with poetry throughout Classical mythology. More to the point, while the *bougonia* involves a bovine and bees, cows and honey occur in conjunction in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Here Apollo gives Hermes his herd of cattle and the so-called Bee-Maidens, a triad of prophetic sisters who feed on honey, in exchange for the lyre and tutelage in the composition of lyric poetry. The dyad of cows and honey in the hymn occurs in an overt context of poetic inspiration, further suggesting that the bees in the *bougonia* reflect the same semiotic tradition.

Most references to the *bougonia* focus on the practical outcome of its execution. By conserving the *bougonia*'s traditional association with Orpheus, however, Vergil reminds his audience that the bees generated by the ritual also reflect its poetic symbolism.