

Servian Readings of Religion in the Georgics

Hunt, Ailsa

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CHAPTER 10
Servian Readings of Religion in the *Georgics*

Ailsa Hunt

Why should classicists read Servius? Cameron's recent judgement on the experience of doing so hardly encourages the Servian-novice to dive in.

'When we read Servius, we are reading the very words a well-known grammaticus wrote for his students in an early fifth-century Roman schoolroom. On the whole it is a dispiriting read.'¹

Nor is it hard to see how Servius earned his 'dispiriting' from Cameron. For Servius' commentaries on the *Eclogues*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid* are replete with tedious grammatical explanations, far-fetched etymologies and nitpicking observations which leave many a reader cold, and add little to nothing to their reading of Virgil. Yet these texts have had plenty of readers – within the academy at least – long after they ceased to have a role within the late antique schoolroom. It is an irony of Servian reception that he now rarely attracts readers with a primary interest in Virgil's texts; rather he attracts them because he is *useful*. For in and among the dispiriting mass of observations there will be a detail which, for a particular scholar's purposes, is just what is needed. Thus Servius gets framed as a kind of a treasure store from which we can help ourselves to nuggets of information, whether on an unusual linguistic form, an obscure variant of a myth, or a matter of sacrificial practice.

'For the classicist their sole value is for the jewels of ancient knowledge that lie imbedded in them.'²

'Servius' commentary on Virgil is widely used by classical scholarship as a source book for antiquarian information of all sorts – mythology, religion, law, social and political history, geography, philosophy, and so on; and it is invaluable for its citations of ancient authors and authorities which we would not otherwise have.'³

¹ Cameron 2011: 571.

² Daintree 1990:65.

³ Williams 1966-67: 50.

Scholars who dip in and out of Servius for its ‘jewels of ancient knowledge’ do not, as you would expect, stop to ask questions about the kind of text they are dealing with: information is simply extracted as though Servius offered some kind of neutral encyclopedia of facts. Indeed, questions about the nature of Servius’ texts have been taken up and explored by only a handful of scholars, notably Kaster and Cameron, who put pressure on the nature of the text for what it tells us about intellectual culture at the turn of the fifth century CE.⁴

In this chapter I aim to bring these two distinct approaches into dialogue: it is only by asking what *kind* of text Servius’ commentaries are, I argue, that we can confidently and meaningfully *use* them. Kaster and Cameron approach Servius with obtaining a richer understanding of the culture of late antiquity as their intellectual priority, but my own concern is to better understand the nature of Servius’ text – within the context of the late-fourth and early-fifth century CE – in order that we as classicists might make better use of it. My focus, naturally for this volume, is on Servius’ response to the *Georgics*; in particular, I home in on what Servius has to say about religion as he works through Virgil’s text.

I begin by painting a picture of Virgil’s *Georgics* as an insistently religious text, before turning attention to Servius’ response to this text. Broad reflection on the way Servius ‘reads’ the *Georgics* then leads into a focused exploration of what Roman religion looks like in Servius’ eyes, within the pages of the *Georgics* commentary. In particular, I emphasise how his construction of religion within the commentary maps onto the thinking about religion which is present in Virgil’s text: a close look at Servius’ note on *Georgics* 1.21 will allow us to get our teeth into this rarely discussed material. My first major aim, then, is to better understand the nature of Servius’ response to the *Georgics*, vis-à-vis his interest in religion. From here, I turn to face the fact that Servius’ intense interest in religion has made him temptingly *useful* to scholars of Roman religion, who love to pick out nuggets of religious information from his encyclopedic treasure chest. Expanding the case study of *G.* 1.21 to examine how recent classicists have made use of this one Servian note, I reveal ways in which scholars of Roman religion have unwittingly become Servian readers of Roman religion. Overlooking Servius’ idiosyncracies in his approach to Roman religion, and often his date as well, these scholars have allowed Servius to mould their own portraits of ‘classical’ Roman religion, presumably thanks to a comforting (but flawed) assumption that in Servius we have a neutral commentary on an Augustan author who is as ‘centrally Roman’ as they come.

⁴ Kaster 1980 & Cameron 2011.

As such, this chapter tells a story about the *seeming* influence of one line of the *Georgics*, via Servius, on a particular branch of classical scholarship, namely the study of Roman religion. For, I argue, the influence that *G.* 1.21 has had on scholarship of Roman religion owes far more to Servius than it does to Virgil, and a history of failure to realise this has done much intellectual damage. We need, my argument continues, to take a step back from Servius before we can meaningfully use him.⁵ For by separating out Servius' thinking about Roman religion from Virgil's, we can hold it up to the light and see it in its own terms; and only then will we start to see how Servian our own readings of Roman religion have become. An immediate aim of this chapter, in short, is to become wary and self-aware readers of Servius, as he reads religion in the *Georgics*: but it also stands as a cautionary tale for all academic use of Servius.⁶

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Before we begin in earnest, however, I must deal with a question of terminology, clarifying what I mean when I talk about Servius, and his commentary on the *Georgics*. For the textual transmission of these commentaries is notoriously complex, and they are not straightforwardly the work of a single author. What we do know can be summarised as follows.⁷ Some time around the turn of the fifth century, Servius wrote commentaries on the *Aeneid*, *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, in which he drew on a variety of sources, including an earlier fourth-century commentary by Aelius Donatus, now lost. We also possess an expanded version of Servius' commentary, believed to be the work of a seventh-century scholar, possibly from Ireland. This text is known either as Servius Danielis, because it was first brought to light by Pierre Danielis in 1600, or alternatively as Servius Auctus.⁸ The nature of the additional material in Servius Auctus has been a matter of debate, but it is now commonly accepted that Donatus' commentary provided most of it. This has been the dominant opinion since an influential article by Rand, published in 1916. Of the scholars who have tackled the question in the last fifty years, Goold, Kaster, Cameron and Stok all essentially agree with the Donatan hypothesis, with only Daintree going out on a limb in objecting to it. For the

⁵ A similar moral can be extracted from Thomas 2009:93-121, who explores the suppression of anti-Augustan voices in Servius, further illustrating how this has 'succeeded in influencing the lexicographical tradition' (97).

⁶ Heyworth's discussion in this volume also reveals commentators and textual critics to be guilty of a tendency to *use* Servius by extracting salient observations from his text, rather than *reading* him – a phenomenon which I set out and explore with particular reference to historians of Roman religion.

⁷ Maltby 2005:207-210 provides a succinct and useful overview of the text's history.

⁸ It is now standard editorial practice to print the expanded version of Servius' commentary, with passages found only in Servius Auctus in italics.

purposes of this chapter I do not take a strong stance on the origin of the additional material in Servius Auctus, but will refer loosely to the composite text as Servius, remembering that even the ‘purer’ non-expanded version of Servius is itself a conglomeration of source material; Servius will stand as shorthand for the various commentary traditions which have been synthesised into the text we now have.

Of course, using ‘Servius’ in this way is not without conceptual difficulties. For one aim of this chapter is to explore a ‘Servian approach’ to Roman religion, and this is complicated by our positing many different authorial strands to the Servian text, as well as periods of composition. The individual notes which make up the Servian text may have been produced within a grammatical tradition, but in different cultural contexts, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the notes on religious matters. Scholars have observed that Servius’ notes on cult practice from the turn-of-the-fifth-century text tend to be in the imperfect tense, whilst those preserved only in Servius Auctus are in the present, reflecting - it is argued - unaltered extracts from Donatus’ fourth-century commentary, written at a time when it seems it would have been natural to refer to these cult practices in the present tense.⁹ By the time of Servius, it seems, it was not, and this has given scholars a hook on which to hang arguments about the huge changes in religious culture taking place at this time in the Roman empire.¹⁰ In this chapter the text I engage with is that of Servius Auctus, the expanded version, and in so doing I stay alert to potential differences in the characterisation of Roman religion in those notes attributed by Servius to different commentators, or believed – on arguments based on tense – to belong to separate commentary strands. Yet whilst the work and observations of many different commentators have been pooled, and presumably modified and adapted, to form the text known as Servius Auctus, there is also considerable consistency in the thinking about Roman religion which emerges from it, enabling us to engage with this as an ‘approach’ to Roman religion. This may not be the religious worldview of one man alone, but it is the worldview of a particular academic tradition, which has happened to have its impact under the name of one man, Servius.

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It is commonplace to say of Virgil that he was treated like a ‘pagan bible’ in late antiquity, but this reflects more on his cultural authority than the content matter of his poems.¹¹ Certainly the *Georgics* is not the most obvious port of call for those interested in

⁹ E.g. Stok 2012:472.

¹⁰ E.g. Jones 1961:224 and Fowler 1997:77-78.

¹¹ Cameron 2011:567 terms this a ‘modern doctrine’, albeit one with which he is uneasy.

Roman religion, but this idiosyncratic work does offer some rich reflections on human relationships with the divine, especially as mediated through the natural environment. Gods in the *Georgics* tend to make brief appearances: an oak may be called an oak of Jupiter (3.333); literary favour is succinctly requested from the Muses (4.315, 2.475). Individual deities also represent particular georgic topics, and thus enjoy topic-appropriate appearances: book two begins, with an exuberant shout, that now it is time to sing of Bacchus, signalling that this is the book on the cultivation of vines; a shift of topic to sheep and goats half-way through book three likewise prompts Virgil to state that now he must sing of Pales (3.294).¹² These topic-appropriate invocations also shade into treatments of the divine which are more overtly allegorical: thus savage Mars is let loose to rage throughout the world at the end of book one (1.511), whilst later we learn that close-packed soil is better for Ceres, and the lightest type of soil for Lyaeus (2.229). The brevity of references may also leave open whether a deity is present in an allegorical, or more personified, way: thus the phrase *Cereale papaver* (poppy of Ceres) may be meant to conjure up a cornfield poppy, or remind us of the myth that Ceres took comfort in the poppy when grieving for Proserpina; or, of course, both (1.212). In a similar way, Jupiter takes on ‘weather roles’ which we might describe as, to varying degrees, ‘more personal’ or ‘more allegorical’; he ranges from being responsible for the weather, to being the weather. Thus we watch Jupiter as impressive father figure hurl thunderbolts from the clouds (1.328-329), but not many lines later he is described as ‘wet with south winds’ (*uvidus Austris*; 1.418), taking on himself some qualities of the weather. And on another occasion Jupiter is strikingly described as *metuendus* (‘to be feared’) by mature grapes, in a move which has him fully stand in for the rain (2.419).

Such allegorical colouring of deities in the *Georgics* is one way in which the poem dwells on a potential overlap between the divine and the natural worlds, but only one. For the *Georgics* display a varied and deep-seated interest in how the natural world might communicate the divine to a human audience, and itself be influenced and shaped by the divine. A whole host of portents on the death of Julius Caesar provide one extreme example of divine powers expressing themselves through the natural world: Etna kept erupting, there were earthquakes in the Alps, flocks started talking and rivers stopped flowing (1.469-488). Virgil’s interest in the predictive power of the natural world can also be felt when he takes pains to explain that rooks, whilst appearing to be able to predict forthcoming sunny periods

¹² This model is established by the poem’s opening role call of deities and fabled humans who have either invented, or have care for, a particular topic covered in the *Georgics* (1.1-23).

with joyous cries, do not have knowledge of fate, nor do they have *divinitus ... ingenium* ('wisdom from above'); rather it is the change in atmosphere which rouses different movements in their chests (1.410-423). Other reflections on relationships of causation and influence between the divine and natural worlds are much less dramatic than these, and occur frequently enough that they become part of the texture and tone of the poem. Thus, whilst listing the oak as an example of a tree which springs up naturally from fallen seed, Virgil alludes to the well-known relationship between Jupiter and oaks by briefly, and imaginatively, painting this oak as going to extra special efforts with its foliage for Jupiter (2.15-16). His famous section on the nature of bees, and the functioning of their miniature society, is also prefaced by a brief mythological digression which presents Jupiter almost as author of this particular form of insect life: now it is time to explain the 'qualities' (*naturae*) which Jupiter has given to bees, in thanks for their feeding him whilst an infant hidden in a cave on Mt Dicte (4.149-152). The incredible behaviour of these bees also prompts further reflection from Virgil on their relationship with the divine as he notes – without himself committing on the matter – that some people believe bees to have a share of 'divine intelligence' (*divina mens*) and enjoy 'drinks of aether' (*haustus aetherios*; 4.219-221).¹³ In addition, Virgil's penchant for depicting 'Golden-Age-style' environments – the gulf between contemporary agriculture and Golden-Age spontaneous abundance is an ever-present undercurrent in the poem – extends this interest in ways in which the divine influences the natural environment and the place of humans within it (1.121f; 2.490f). Finally, on a rather different note, the *Georgics* is also interested in forging a path towards ruler cult. Here we see attempts to establish ways of talking about Augustus' divine status, just as Augustus himself 'attempts' (*adfectat*) a 'way' (*via*) to Olympus (4.562); a sycophantic agnosticism colours the most intense and extended of these attempts, as Virgil wonders whether Augustus will choose to be a god of the sea or take on life as a new star (1.24-35).¹⁴ By necessity brief, this discussion of the religious thinking of the *Georgics* has nevertheless established a major interest in the ways in which the divine and natural worlds intersect, and an additional interest in the divine status of Augustus.

And if ever you need a reminder that the *Georgics* is a religious poem, Servius is a good place to start, as he persistently brings its religious aspects to the fore. Indeed Servius' intense interest in religious matters has prompted Horsfall to observe that he was 'more

¹³ See Richter 1957 ad loc, Thomas 1988:187, and Mynors 1990:285 on the philosophical background of this theory about bees, with its blending of Stoic and Pythagorean elements.

¹⁴ On this, see also Mackenzie and Xinyue in this volume.

interested than the poet himself in religious detail': the *Georgics* become more religious in Servius' hands.¹⁵ But before exploring how Servius reads religion in the *Georgics*, I pose a broader question. How does Servius read the *Georgics*? Or, what kind of a text is this in his eyes? Servius gives us no easy answers here, because his commentary does not put forward a 'take' on Virgil's *Georgics*: he reads the poem, but does not offer a reading of it.¹⁶ For Servius is far more engaged with Virgil as an *author* (with all the resonances of the Latin word intended) than he is with the *Georgics* as a text. As many have pointed out before, Servius is driven by an intense concern (shared with other grammarians) to defend Virgil's authority and preserve him from error: 'Servius presupposes ... Virgil's infallibility'.¹⁷ Consequently, he focuses to such a degree on author over text that he can come across as insensitive even to the simple fact that the *Georgics* is a *poem*. We find him complaining, to give but one example, that the phrase *sidera caeli* ('stars of the sky') is pleonasm, adding with didactic condescension that 'stars can be nowhere other than in the sky'; *G.* 2.1): such a pedantic approach, to borrow Thomas' eloquent phrase, 'flattens out the poem'.¹⁸

That this is a *georgic* poem also feels largely irrelevant to Servius. Occasionally Servius comments approvingly on, or comes to the defence of, Virgil's agricultural know-how, but no more often than he does to defend him on other matters (with approving comments on his religious expertise outweighing those on agricultural matters).¹⁹ Virgil has *not* made a mistake in referring to the fibres of the endive, and in fact shows himself to be *au fait* with the terms used by genuine country bumpkins (*G.* 1.120); Virgil steers a sensible middle ground between the opinions of Cato and Catullus on the Raetican grape (*G.* 2.95); Virgil has *not* made a mistake in claiming that only India produces black ebony (*G.* 2.116). References to Pliny the Elder may be intended to reinforce an image of Virgil's knowledge and competence, if oddly executed: Virgil's seemingly innocuous reference to the savage offspring of lions is, for example, expanded by turning to Pliny's discussion of lions who are

¹⁵ Horsfall 1991:242.

¹⁶ Ironically, as this chapter argues, this is replicated in the way modern scholars of Roman religion read Servius. Cf. Cameron 2011:572 who argues that 'his commentary represents less research than a drastic and systematic reduction of the learned material assembled by his predecessors' – in other words this is not a reading of Virgil's text at all!

¹⁷ Stok 2012:477. For discussion see e.g. Stok 2012:477-480; Keeline 2013 (*passim*); Cameron 2011:590-594.

¹⁸ Thomas 2009:105.

¹⁹ An unusual note also paints Virgil as invested in his subject matter, having pondered for a long time the relative merits of a life devoted to philosophy or rural affairs (*G.* 2.475).

unable to give birth, due to internal trauma caused by their offspring's claws (*G.* 2.151).²⁰ Yet, as Hackemann argues, Servius has missed many other opportunities to paint Virgil as an agriculturalist *par excellence* by means of cross references to other authorities, such as Aristotle, Theophrastus or Columella. The reason for which, Hackemann argues, is simple: Servius 'exhibits little or no interest' in such technical writing and 'shunned the specialist writers whom Vergil himself had read and imitated'.²¹ And *occasional* attempts by Servius to amplify Virgil with his own specialist-sounding observations are not enough to counter the impression of a reader of the *Georgics* who is largely disengaged with its georgic content matter.²² Nor does he expect his audience to be otherwise. That Servius is writing for school students, and not for an audience drawn to the *Georgics* out of interest in its subject matter, is nicely illustrated by his clarification that *alnos* (alder) is a 'type of tree' (*G.* 1.136).

In fact, the closest Servius gets to a reading of the *Georgics* as a whole is in his comment on the first line of the poem. Here he emphasises that, of Virgil's three works, the *Georgics* most breaks away from its literary model, namely Hesiod's *Works and Days*. For Servius, Virgil's innovation lies in his rewriting of Hesiod as a four-book work, which gives him the opportunity to show off his skills 'in expanding narrower themes' (*angustiora dilatando*), as opposed to the contraction job which he did on Homer and Theocritus in the *Aeneid* and the *Eclogues* respectively (*G.* 1.1).²³ The bees are later set up as a prominent example of how Virgil makes 'much' (*magna*) out of 'minor topics' (*minoribus rebus*; *G.* 4.1). If Servius offers us a 'reading' of the *Georgics*, then, it is that the poem is an excellent example of literary amplification. As such Servius' response to the *Georgics* is not dissimilar to Columella's, as painted by Myers in this volume – namely that Columella is drawn to a 'more is more' quality to Virgil's poem. This appreciation of Virgil's poem rather ironically sets the tone for a commentary in which – as I will further argue – Servius often uses the text

²⁰ Pliny is also made to support Virgil's claims about fungi (*G.* 1.392) or the whiteness of animals by the river Clitumnus (*G.* 2.146), although disproves his claims about rooks (*G.* 1.414).

²¹ Hackemann 1940:15&54. Hackemann 1940:61 admits that Servius has a reasonable knowledge of viticulture, 'but even here his lack of interest made itself felt in his comments'.

²² E.g. *G.* 2.23, where he clarifies a distinction between *plantae* (shoots taken from trees) and *plantaria* (shoots grown from seed), or *G.* 3.55, where he provides additional information concerning the horns of cows.

²³ An agricultural reason for this structural decision is also added (with venerable backing from Varro), namely that the topic of agriculture falls neatly into four parts. Servius then continues, at various points throughout the commentary, to defend Virgil against criticisms of his structural choices (e.g. *G.* 2.177). For further discussion of which, as well as the focus on structure in *G.* 1.1, see Goodfellow 2015:56-60. Servius' only other claim about the whole text is that it is in 'the middle style' (e.g. *G.* 1.391), on which see Goodfellow 2015:57 and Maltby 2011:65.

as a springboard for showcasing his own learning by means of expansive comments, whilst revealing himself to be rather distant from the priorities of the text itself.

This I now aim to prove by exploring how Servius reads religion in the *Georgics*, beginning by asking: how much do Virgil and Servius' religious thinking overlap? Servius' notes do show interest in imperial cult, roughly reflecting the amount of space Virgil devotes to the debated issue of Augustus' divine status (see, for example, *G.* 1.24-34 & 3.16-27). By contrast, interest in the relationship between the divine and natural worlds is minimal. Outside of allegorical explanations of Virgil's use of some divine names – of Neptune, for example, Servius explains 'he used 'the god' for 'water'' (*deum pro aquis posuit; G.* 4.29) – at best we can point to a note which sets out two different reasons for the myrtle being consecrated to Venus (*G.* 2.64): either because this tree rejoices in shores, and Venus is said to have been born from the sea; or because, as medical authors tell us, this tree is useful for many female 'ailments' (*necessitates*). It is interesting, however, that Servius' excursus is in no way prompted by Virgil's text: Virgil mentions the 'myrtle of Venus' (*Paphiae ... myrtus*) in the context of a recommendation to graft myrtle onto oak; the question of its relationship with Venus is not his priority here.

Given this disjunct between Virgil's religious interests and Servius' comments, a second question naturally follows (especially when we remember Horsfall's observation about Servius' fixation with religion in his *Georgics* commentary). What *does* loom large in religious terms for Servius, when he reads the *Georgics*? Unsurprisingly, a number one priority is to defend Virgil against any suggestion of error in religious matters. In the note on 1.344, for example, he brands those who say that Virgil spoke 'against religion' (*contra religionem*) in having Ceres sacrificed to with wine as 'unnecessarily picky' (*superfluum*), for in fact the pontifical books do not forbid this. Again, there is precious little in Virgil's text which could be seen to prompt this note, but Servius' response is rooted not in the original Virgilian line, but in a particular aspect of the afterlife of the text, namely a lively tradition of critics and defenders of Virgil's religious expertise. (Servius places himself firmly in the camp which made Virgil such a consummate expert in pontifical law that he is labelled a quasi *pontifex maximus* in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* (1.24.16).²⁴) It is ironic, then, that whilst presenting himself as a champion of Virgil's religious thinking, Servius ends up straying far from Virgil's own religious priorities in the *Georgics*.

²⁴ Cameron 2011:590-594 discusses Roman academic debates over Virgil's ritual correctness, which start as early as C. Iulius Hyginus, a freedman of Augustus.

Another favoured kind of note for Servius is the detailed recounting of myths in response to Virgilian lines, which can at best be said to have alluded to those myths. Here I give but one example. In the grand invocation which opens book one we find Virgil invoking Silvanus (1.20), alongside several others whom he is calling to the aid of his poetic task: Silvanus is said to be carrying an uprooted cypress, an act of seeming arboreal violence we might find surprising for this god called Woody. But those who expect Servius to make sense of this for his audience of schoolboys, will find his note *ad loc* a disappointment.²⁵ Silvanus, he tells us, used to love a boy called Cyparissus, but the affair ended in tragedy: for one day Silvanus killed Cyparissus' pet stag by mistake and the boy died from grief. Also grief stricken, Silvanus had him turned into a cypress, which he now carries around with him. Servius' explanation arguably only enhances the oddity of Virgil's image of Silvanus and his portable cypress, taking this into the realm of the disturbingly surreal. Indeed Servius' amplificatory tendency when it comes to myth rarely seems to be sensitive to the content and context of Virgil's original line; rather the simple mention of Silvanus prompts in him a kind of reflex instinct to advertise his mythological expertise.

Besides this mythologising reflex, throughout the Servian commentary there also runs a persistent interest in the nature of the gods. The banality of some of these comments is a salutary reminder that this was a text designed to help children get through their Virgil: of Silvanus, for example, Servius helpfully observes, 'he is a god of woods' (*deus est silvarum*; *G.* 1.20). On other occasions, explanations of the nature of various deities is less run-of-the-mill. At *G.* 1.315 a simple reference to milky grain reminds Servius that Varro mentions a god called Lactans ('Milky') who pours himself into crops. A dating reference to the cold star of Saturn also leads to the striking observation that Saturn is the god of rain, for which reason he is imagined as an old man, because we know that old men are always icy cold (*G.* 1.336). A particularly strong vein within Servius' wide interest in the nature of the gods is a concern with the meaning of divine names. Etymologising notes are common here – Faunus is so called from *fando* ('speaking'; *G.* 1.10) – but he is also interested in alternative divine names: thus an invocation to Pales at the beginning of the third book leads Servius, without prompt from the Virgilian text, to observe that some want her to be known as Vesta, some Mater Deum (*G.* 3.1). On another occasion when Virgil actually does invoke Vesta, Servius observes that Virgil is here speaking 'poetically' (*poetice*), because it is prohibited by sacred law to know the true name of the *numen* who protects Rome (*G.* 1.498). It is hard to see why

²⁵ Dorcey 1992:15-16, characteristically uncritical of his source material, simply notes of this passage that Servius provides our 'longest mythological account of Silvanus' (15).

Virgil's depiction of Vesta having oversight of Rome really needed explaining away in this fashion; once again it seems that Servius' own interests, here in divine names, override the content and purposes of the Virgilian text. Moreover, Servius' instinct to call Vesta a *numen* introduces another Servian obsession: whilst *numen* occurs in the *Georgics* a mere five times, it is omnipresent in Servius' commentary. *Numen* is a slippery word – and one whose multivalency gets overlooked by a current scholarly tendency to translate it as 'spirit' or 'power' – but for Servius this favoured word takes on a handful of meanings.²⁶ It can be used as an apparent synonym for *deus* ('god'; e.g. *G.* 1.344, where *numina* is used of Liber and Ceres), and of other 'divine figures' whom we might be tempted to put somewhere on a spectrum between god and mortal, such as Glaucus; Servius calls him a 'marine *numen*' (*numen marinum*; 1.437). It is also used to capture the qualities of particular deities: the *numen* of Neptune, for example, is 'swift' (*velox*) and 'on the move' (*mobile*).

Servius' penchant for *numina* also comes to the fore in his note at *G.* 1.21, on which I now focus attention. Virgil, drawing to a close a grand invocation of deities whom he wants to favour his poem, calls upon 'all gods and goddesses whose interest is the protection of fields' (*dique deaque omnes studium quibus arva tueri*; 1.21). Predictably enough, given his predilection for amplifying Virgil's text, Servius cannot resist providing the names of these gods (or in his terms, *numina*); these, he claims, are to be found in the pontifical books. I print the text below, with my own translation.

DIQUE DEAEQUE OMNES post specialem invocationem transit ad generalitatem, ne quod numen praetereat, *more pontificum*, (*per*) quos ritu veteri in omnibus sacris post speciales deos, quos ad ipsum sacrum, quod fiebat, necesse erat invocari, generaliter omnia numina invocabantur. quod autem dicit 'studium quibus arva tueri', nomina haec numinum in indigitamentis inveniuntur, id est in libris pontificalibus, qui et nomina deorum et rationes ipsorum nominum continent, quae etiam Varro dicit. nam, ut supra diximus, nomina numinibus ex officii constat inposita, verbi causa ut ab occatione deus Occator dicatur, a sarritione Sarritor, a stercoreatione Sterculinius, a satione Sator. *Fabius Pictor hos deos enumerat, quos invocat flamen sacrum Cereale faciens Telluri et Cereri: Vervactorem, Reparatorem, Inporcitorum, Insitorem, Obaratorem, Occatorem, Sarritorem, Subbruncinatorem, Messorum, Convectorem, Conditorem, Promitorem.* (Serv. *G.* 1.21)

²⁶ Indeed, whilst the word *numen* once generated much scholarly controversy – arguments hinged on whether it referred to a primitive impersonal spirit, or a more anthropomorphic deity – today the word commands little notice: my arguments as to why this is a mistake are formulated in part at Hunt 2016:177-190, and are to be expanded in a future article.

ALL GODS AND GODDESSES. He moves from a specific invocation to a general one, so that he doesn't miss out any *numen*, in the manner of the *pontifices*, who, in the old-fashioned manner, in all sacrifices made a general invocation of all *numina*, after the specific gods, whom it was necessary to call to the sacrifice which was taking place. As to him saying 'those whose interest is the care of fields', the names of these *numina* are found in the *indigitamenta*, that is in the pontifical books, which contain both the names of the gods and the reasons for those names, as Varro also tells us. For, as I explained above, it is well known that names are imposed on *numina* from their functions, with the result that the god Occator is so-called because of the word, from *occatio*, Sarritor from *sarritio*, Sterculinius from *stercoratio*, Sator from *satio*. Fabius Pictor lists these gods, whom the *flamen Cerealis* invokes when sacrificing to Tellus and Ceres: Vervactor, Reparator, Inporcitor, Insitor, Obarator, Occator, Sarritor, Subruncinator, Messor, Convector, Conditior, Promitor.

With a reminder that *nomina* ('names') are given to *numina* 'from their functions' (*ex officiis*), Servius mentions four deities who exemplify this statement: Occator, so called from *occatio* ('harrowing'), Sarritor from *sarritio* ('hoeing'), Sterculinius from *stercoratio* ('manuring') and Sator from *satio* ('planting'). By juxtaposing *numina* and *nomina* Servius visually reinforces his point that the names and characters of these deities are intimately connected, indeed interdependent. An additional line from Servius Auctus then provides a more comprehensive list of twelve similar-sounding deities, including Vervactor ('First Plougher'), Subruncinator ('Weeder') and Messor ('Harvester'), with the third century BCE scholar Fabius Pictor cited as the source of this information.²⁷

What does Servius – and here I use 'Servius' as the shorthand I outlined earlier – gain from this note? Servius begins his note by explaining that Virgil uses a general, all encompassing invocation (*all gods and goddesses who care for fields ...*) in order not to ignore any *numen* by mistake. In this context, it is hard not to suspect that Servius' note has a tone of academic one-upmanship to it, showing that he knows in intimate detail who these *numina* are, and going beyond Virgil in diligence by listing them. Nor is it only Virgil whom it seems Servius is angling to upstage here. Varro is a very strong presence at this early point in Virgil's text: famously beginning his *De Re Rustica* with an invocation of twelve agriculturally minded deities, Varro provides a model for Virgil's own opening invocation of

²⁷ Presumably the similarity in agriculturally-specific divine names prompted Servius Auctus to include this additional list which, he claims, draws not on the pontifical books, but the prayers of the *flamen Cerealis*.

twelve gods, with Caesar making his impact as the ‘surprise’ thirteenth. In adding his own twelve-god list of agricultural deities into the mix, Servius invites us to put him, and his antiquarian expertise, on a par with that of Varro.²⁸ Little in Virgil’s line *dique deaeque omnes studium quibus arva tueri* would prompt the reader to start thinking about specific agricultural tasks such as weeding and harvesting, but Servius’ note manages to make this line a launchpad for a display of his expertise in divine names and antiquarian knowledge of little-known gods.

Indeed, throughout this sketch of the religious interests which loom large in Servius’ commentary on the *Georgics* we have seen how Servius’ observations can feel extremely distant from the content and priorities of Virgil’s text. Servius imposes on the text very much his own interests and agenda. Nor am I the only one to feel the idiosyncracies of Servius: for Kaster we see in Servius ‘an individual and often decidedly quirky turn of mind’ at work, whilst Cameron insists that Servian mythological notes are ‘peculiar’.²⁹ This kind of vocabulary, as well as the glaring gap I have identified between Virgil’s text and the comments it prompts from Servius, should make us deeply wary of using Servius as some kind of ‘sourcebook’ which can illuminate our understanding of Roman religion in Virgil’s day, or indeed other periods of Roman history. Yet no such wariness has made itself felt in modern scholarship on Roman religion. Rather, to the contrary, we have developed a tendency not only to pillage Servius’ commentaries for nuggets of religious information, but also to frame Roman religion through Servian-centric eyes.³⁰ This I will now illustrate by examining the use five scholars have made of the note on 1.21.

Gods were presumed as and when the need for them arose, but the multiplication of functional deities could be carried to ridiculous and quite unreal lengths, especially by professional priests with an urge for systematisation and a liking for lists. Fabius Pictor, historian of the late third century B.C., recorded a list of the gods that the *flamen* of Ceres invoked when he performed a sacrifice to Earth and Ceres: ‘First Plougher, Second Plougher, Harrower, Sower, Top-dresser, Hoer,

²⁸ My thanks go to Stephen Harrison for pointing out this connection with Varro’s twelve-god list. Varro’s presence is further reinforced by the fact that Servius has already gestured to him in this passage as supporting authority for his claims about the pontifical books.

²⁹ Kaster 1988:171, Cameron 2011:571.

³⁰ See also Heyworth in this volume for presentation of Servius as a reader of the *Georgics* who is out of touch with Virgil’s real intent (producing readings which at their worst can be described as ‘nonsense’ (10)), but one who strongly influences modern commentators on Virgil’s text. As such both chapters work together to highlight the intellectual dangers of ignoring Servius’ eccentricities.

Raker, Harvester, Gatherer, Storer, Distributor (Vervactor, Reparator, Imporcitor, Insitor, Obarator, Occator, Sarritor, Subruncinator, Messor, Convector, Conditor, Promitor: Servius, *On the Georgics of Virgil* I, 21). (Ogilvie 1969:12)

Roman religion had a rare proliferation of spirits or *numina*. German scholars called them Sondergötter, or, more picturesquely, Augenblickgötter, gods of the twinkling of an eye. They are powers, involved in or presiding over a limited but necessary operation, and having no existence apart from that operation. ... For the agricultural *numina*, Fabius Pictor tells us that the *flamen*, in sacrificing to Tellus and Ceres, invoked the following powers: Vervactor for the first ploughing, Redarator for the second, Imporcitor for the harrowing, Insitor for the sowing, Obarator for the top-dressing, Occator, Sarritor, Subrincator, Messor, Convector, Conditor, Promitor for the later operations. We can add to the list Spiniensis for uprooting thorn-bushes, Sterculius for manuring, Puta for pruning, Nodutus for grain-stalks, Mellonia for bees. (Ferguson 1970:68-69)

Roman religion was especially rich in agrarian spirits ... The fourth-century AD grammarian Servius, in his commentary on Virgil's *Georgics*, preserves (on 1.21) a plausibly authentic list of a dozen such spirits from the early third-century BC annalist Fabius Pictor; it includes Vervactor (first ploughing), and Promitor (corn distribution). (Phillips 1997:132)

The Roman sense of operational realism made use of the *indigitamenta*; one therefore had to pray to Sterculinius for animal manure, Vervactor for tuning over fallow land, Redarator for the second ploughing, Imporcitor for the third, Obarator for a new turning of the soil, Occator for harrowing, Sarritor for weeding, Seia for the germination of seed, Segetia for the corn to grow, Nodutus for the stem to have nodes, Volutina for the sheath of the corn-ear, Patellana for it to open, Hostilina for the corn to be of the same height (to make harvesting easier), Lacturnus for the ears to be milky, Runcina for killing the weeds, Matuta for the ripening, Messia for the harvesting, Convector for the loading, Noduterensis for threshing, Condito for garnering, even Promitor for taking the grain from the granary, but chiefly Tutilina for preserving it (Aug., *CG.*, 4.8; Serv., *G* 1.21). Even this list is by no means exhaustive. (Turcan 2000:38)

Prayers containing unusually detailed lists of gods survive for some rituals. The best example is provided by the Fabius Pictor whom I mentioned earlier, the writer on pontifical law; the passage happens to be quoted by Servius, the late-antique commentator on Vergil. During the *sacrum cereale*, a ritual held on December 13th each year for the goddesses Tellus (Earth) and Ceres, who was especially concerned with grain-farming (her gifts are *cerealia*, cereals, as in corn-flakes), the priest who conducted the ritual (the *flamen Cerealis*) invoked the following twelve divinities: Vervactor, Redarator, Imporcitor, Insitor, Obarator, Occator, Sarritor, Subruncinator, Messor, Convector, Conditor, Promitor. In

translation the names mean: First Spring-Plougher, Second-Plougher, Ridge-Maker, Broadcaster, Seed-Coverer (or Clod-Smasher), Harrower, Manual Hoer, Manual Weed-Root-Remover, Reaper, Grain-Transporter, Granary Protector, Bringer-Forth for Use. This sounds like a pretty thorough list of grain-farming procedures but it could have been much longer ... (Rüpke 2007:78-79)

Servius' penchant for lists and amplificatory detail has definitely rubbed off on these scholars, who seem to find the most effective way to engage with his note is to repeat, and amplify, his list of gods. Just as Servius' list works, on one level, to upstage Virgil's list, so these scholars try to better Servius'. Not content with citing the whole list given in Servius Auctus, Turcan interpolates other deities mentioned by Augustine (as though introducing details from a polemical mockery of such gods were unproblematic!), before concluding that even this list is not exhaustive. Ferguson too wants to add to Servius Auctus' list, with Spiniensis, Sterculius, Puta, Nodutus and Mellonia; unlike Turcan, he does not even acknowledge that we only know of the existence of these deities, bar Sterculius, thanks to Augustine and Arnobius.³¹ For Rüpke too this list, whilst 'pretty thorough', could have been longer ... A strong impression emerges that being able to list as many obscure divine names as possible is how we are fully to understand Roman religion, a way of thinking immediately recognisable from Servius. Indeed, aping Servius in this particular context prompts scholars to slip into a Servian mindset when it comes to characterising Roman religion more generally: thus Ogilvie imposes on Roman priests 'an urge for systematisation and a liking for lists', which does indeed come across strongly in Servius' commentary; Rüpke's Roman priests also share an unusually strong liking for lists.

I have referred above to Servius Auctus' list, but in fact several of these scholars treat the list not as Servian, but as unproblematically that of Fabius Pictor. Servius' role in preserving the list goes largely unnoticed and it is treated independently of its textual context; Ferguson, for example, adds Sterculius to (what he calls) Pictor's list, apparently oblivious to the fact that Servius had already mentioned his close counterpart Sterculinius earlier in the note. Rüpke, by contrast, does note that Pictor's list 'happens to be' preserved in Servius, but does not stop to question *why* this list might end up in Servius. Yet from our brief look at Servius' obsession with divine names we might think the inclusion is hardly surprising.

³¹ Spiniensis (Augustine *CD*. 4.21), Puta (Arnobius *ad Nat.* 4.7), Nodutus (Augustine *CD*. 4.8 and Arnobius *ad Nat.* 4.7), Mellonia (Augustine *CD*. 4.34 and Arnobius *ad Nat.* 4.7). For Sterculius see Macrobius *Sat.* 1.7.25, Servius *ad Aen.* 9.4 (here called Sterculinius) and Augustine *CD*. 18.15 (here called Stercutus).

Rüpke, who is hardly alone in this, does not think about the note on 1.21 in the wider context of the Servian commentary; rather the assumption at work seems to be that it is simply good fortune that our disinterested commentator picked out this factual jewel from Pictor to preserve for posterity. And it is surely the allure of a passage from the early Pictor which has helped to make this passage so irresistible to scholars of Roman religion, the unacknowledged implication being that a source as early as Pictor must give us an insight into ‘bona fide’ Roman religion.³² Pictor may be early, but nobody chooses to acknowledge that this list attributed to him is only present in Servius Auctus, namely a text dated to the 7th century CE; and so nobody worries – or at least not openly – that the quotation from the 3rd century BCE Pictor does not turn up in our surviving sources for approximately a thousand years. Nor is anyone openly worried that Pictor, who wrote in Greek, is here quoted in Latin, suggesting at least one basic level of interference with any ‘original’ text we might want to attribute to Pictor.

Servius’ presentation of these gods as *numina* also strongly influences scholarly enthusiasm for this passage, as well as colouring the way these scholars approach them: that is, they are treated not so much as gods, but as spirits or powers. This way of thinking is overt in Ferguson’s introduction to this Servian passage – ‘Roman religion had a rare proliferation of spirits or *numina*’ – and also in Phillips’ idea of ‘agrarian spirits’. In so doing, they are not in fact taking their cue from Servius, who gives no indication in this passage that he views *numina* and *dei* as substantially different phenomena: indeed, Servius uses *deus* (‘god’) of Occator, whilst Pictor is also made to call Vervactor and friends *dei* (‘gods’). Rather they are responding to an engrained scholarly tendency to understand *numina* as spirits or powers, thanks to a long history of thinking about this particular term which stretches back to the nineteenth century. Nor is this passage of Servius likely to prompt scholars to reassess this way of thinking: in fact, as I will now argue, it had a great deal of influence in creating this particular pattern of thought.

Roman religion emerged as a discipline in its own right towards the end of the nineteenth century, and grew out of scholarship on comparative religion, for which a major aim was the discovering of the earliest strata of religious experience. These early religious experiences, the orthodox position insisted, were made up of animistic responses to the natural world, or in other words the perception of spirits in your natural surroundings. This was an orthodoxy taken to heart by the first scholars of Roman religion, who held up the

³² See Davies 2004:4 on the instinct among scholars of Roman religion to view early Roman religion as ‘genuine’ Roman religion.

word *numen* as quintessential proof that early Roman religion was also primitive and deeply animistic.³³ In addition, gods like Occator and Vervactor – made famous in Usener’s *Götternamen* of 1896, and known as Sondergötter (specialist deities) or Augenblicksgötter (blink of the eye deities) – were valued as evidence of a crucial first stage of development by which Roman thinkers managed to emerge from an animistic stage of thought towards an anthropomorphic and polytheistic system; and Servius’ list provided the classic examples.³⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, this early animistic scholarship still has an influence on the way we think about Roman religion, especially religious responses to the natural world.³⁵ And Servius’ note on *G.* 1.21 has been so attractive, I argue here, because of the way it seems to confirm long cherished narratives about the nature and development of early Roman religion: the combined emphasis on *numina*, specialist gods named after nature-focused ‘functions’ (*officia*) and the testimony of the early Pictor makes this passage too good to ignore. Yet the thinking here is disturbingly circular, for Servius is being used to give a stamp of approval to scholarly narratives about early Roman religion, without anyone questioning how reliant the scholars who first crafted those narratives were on Servius. Certainly we would not know about Subruncinator and co if it were not for this Servian passage! Or to put it another way, nobody stops to question whether the focus of *G.* 1.21 – with its emphasis on *numina* and lists of obscure divine names – tells us more about Servius and his intellectual interests and priorities than it does about anything else. In taking this passage so much to heart, scholars of Roman religion have unwittingly become Servian-minded readers of Roman religion.

This chapter has focused attention on one purple passage from Servius’ commentary on the *Georgics*, but there are many more beloved of scholars of Roman religion, be it his note on the consecration of oaks to Jupiter (*G.* 3.332) or the secret name of Rome (*G.* 1.498): and this is to pick passages from the *Georgics* commentary alone. The moral of our focused engagement with *G.* 1.21 is that, if we want to use Servius to inform our thinking about Roman religion, we cannot assume either that he gives us a fleshed-out version of Virgil’s religious thinking, or that he offers a useful sourcebook of information with which to supplement our understanding of Roman religion in the centuries prior to Servius. Instead, we need to explore the priorities and intellectual obsessions which Servius brings to his reading

³³ See Hunt 2016:43-49 & 177-190 on the animist orthodoxy in early scholarship on Roman religion and the popularity of the word *numen*.

³⁴ See, for example, Warde-Fowler 1911:160-164 & Bailey 1932:52-56 who explains that ‘it is one of the marks of the Roman religion as a ‘higher animism’ that it was able to conceive of spirits not merely attached to a particular object or spot, but in a wider sense as concerned with a definite function’ (52).

³⁵ Hunt 2016: 17-19 & 62-70.

of Virgil's text, to be aware of the pet topics and approaches we can expect from this idiosyncratic scholar. In addition, we need to be alert to ways in which our own constructions of Roman religion may already have been shaped by Servian thinking. And crucially, if we want to use Servius' commentaries in a sensitive and productive way we need – dispiriting as it may be – to read them cover to cover.

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