

# THE USE OF BEES

Thomas Mouffet (1553–1604)

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Whereas the most high God did create all other creatures for our use; so especially the bees, not only that as mistresses they might hold forth to us a pattern of politic and economic virtues, and inform our understanding; but they might be able as extraordinary foretellers, to foreshow the success and event of things to come; for in the years 90, 98, 113, 208 before the birth of Christ, when as mighty huge swarms of bees did settle in the chief marketplace, and in the beast-market upon private citizens' houses, and on the temple of Mars, there were at that time stratagems of enemies against Rome, wherewith the whole state was like to be surprised and destroyed. In the reign of Severus, the bees made combs in his military ensigns, and especially in the camp of Niger. Divers wars upon this ensued between both the parties of Severus and Niger, and battles of doubtful event, while at length the Severian faction prevailed. The statues also of Antonius Pius placed here and there all over Hetruria were all covered with swarms of bees; and after that settled in the camp of Cassius; what great commotions after followed Julius Capitolinus relates in his history. At what time also through the treachery of the Germans in Germany, there was a mighty slaughter and overthrow of the Romans. P. Fabius, and Q. Elius being consuls in the camp of Drusus in the tent of Hostilius Rutilus, a swarm of bees is reported to have sat so thick that they covered the rope and the spear that held up the tent. M. Lepidus and Minut. Plancus being consuls, as also in the consulship of L. Paulus, and C. Metellus swarms of bees flying to Rome (as the augurs very well conjectured) did foretell the near approach of the enemy. Pompey likewise making war against Cæsar, when he had called his allies together, he set his army in order as he went out of Dyrrachium, bees met him and sat so thick upon his ensigns that they could not be seen what they were. Philistus and Ælian relate that while Dionysius the tyrant did in vain spur his horse that stuck in the mire, and there at length left him, the horse quitting himself by his own strength, did follow after his master the same way he went with a swarm of bees sticking on his mane. Intimating by that prodigy that tyrannical government which Dionysius affected over the country of the Galeotæ. In the Helvetian history we read that in the year 1385, when Leopoldus of Austria began to march towards Sempachum with his army, a swarm of bees flew to the town and there sat upon the tiles; whereby the common people rightly foretold that some foreign force was marching towards them. So Virgil in 7 *Æneid*

The bees flew buzzing through the liquid air;  
And pitched upon the top of the laurel tree;  
When the soothsayers saw this sight full rare,  
They did foretell the approach of the enemy.

That which Herodotus, Pausanias, Dio Cassius, Plutarch, Julius, Cæsar, Julius Capitolinus, and other historians with greater observation then reason have confirmed. Saon Acrephniensis, when he could by no means find the oracle Trophonius; Pausanias in his Boeticks faith he was led thither by a swarm of bees. Moreover, Plutarch, Pausanias, Ælian, Alexander Alexandrinus, Theocritus, and Textor are authors that Jupiter Melitæus, Hiero of Syracuse, Plato, Pindar, Apius Comatus, Xenophon, and last of all Ambrose, when their nurses were absent, had honey dropt into their mouths by bees, and so were preserved. Xenophon also in his economics calls making of honey the shop of virtue, and to it would have matrons and mothers of families go to be instructed. The poets willingly yield themselves to be compared with bees, who following nature as their only mistress, use no art at all. And so Plato affirms that poets were never able by art to finish any masterpiece. Insomuch that Pindar does vaunt himself in this to be superior, or to go beyond Bacchilides and Simonides, in that he was taught by nature, not by art. Bees unless provoked are harmless, but being vexed they will sting and that most shrewdly. Such is the condition of poets, from whence are occasioned these verses of Archilochus,

He that does move me, quickly finds my sting,  
I'll make him cry, and through the city ring.

Wherefore Plato in his Minos gives it as a rule to those that desire peace and quiet that they be very well-advised how they intermeddle with poets and bees. To conclude, so many are their virtues worthy our imitation that the Egyptians, Greeks, and Chaldæans took divers hieroglyphics from them, as when they would express subjects obedient to their prince, they set it forth in figure of a bee very singular in that virtue; when a king loving to his subjects, they portray it likewise and set it forth by a swarm of bees. Other the like emblems are to be found in Pierius Hieroglyphicks worth the labor of searching for. From them the country people learned their skill of prognostication of the weather. For they perceive wind or rain before it comes, and foretell storms and showers that are at hand; when they are ready to come, they are sure not to fly far from their hives, but will feed themselves with their own moisture. All those things being as they are, 'tis no wonder that Aristæus, Philistrius, Aristomachus,

Solensis, Menus Samnites, and six hundred others that have wrote of bees have left the pleasures and delights of the city, and for 58 years to have lived in the woods, that they might be the more perfectly acquainted with their conditions and manner of life, and be the better enabled to commend them for an example to posterity. Neither was Virgil 'ere the worse for being so well seen in their history, the which he has most elegantly set down in the fourth of his *Georgics*.

But what their bodies and their labours do work upon our bodies, it is now worth the pains to relate; whereby we may assuredly know, that there is nothing in bees but what does serve for our health and welfare.

First of all, their bodies as soon as they are taken out of the hive and pounded and drank with some diuretic, or wine and milk, do strongly cure the dropsy, dissolve the stone or gravel, open all the passages of the urine, cure the stopping of the bladder. Bees that die in the honey cure impostumes, and help the dullness of sight or hearing. Also being pounded together they cure the griping or wringing of the belly or guts, being applied to them. If poisoned honey be drank, they themselves being drank down after it, do expel it. They soften hard ulcers in the lips; being bound to a carbuncle or running sore, they heal it; they cure the bloody flux. Honey being strained with them helps the crudities of the stomach, or specks or red pimples in the face, as you may see in Hollerius, Alexander Benedict, and especially in Pliny. Take bees dead in the combs and when they are through dry make them into powder, as Galen in *Euporist*. writes, mingle them with the honey in which they died, and anoint the parts of the head that are bald and thin haired, and you shall see them grow again. Pliny in like manner teaches to burn a great company of bees together, and mingle the ashes with oil, and anoint the part; only with this caution, that the adjacent parts be not touched therewith; yea, honey scraped of bees that are dead, he affirms to be very sovereign in all diseases, and very useful. Erotis in his 61 chapter de *Morb. mulieb.* tells us that their ashes bearing with oil is good to make the hair white.

Moreover, bees are very profitable and useful in regard they serve for food to other creatures; as to the bear, lizard, frog, serpents, spiders, wasps, swallows, houp, robin-red-breast, titmouse, or muskin; as Bellonius has observed.

Palladius says that some men are wont to take great delight in hunting after them; and he tells you how you shall find them out in these words. In the month of April, in sunny places, if the bees do frequently resort thither, either for food or water, then certain it is that their nest or honey-shop is not far off, but if there come thither but a few in a company, then 'tis a sign that they harbour farther off. But when they come very thick, by this trick you shall find out their swarms, take a little wet oaker and mark them on the back, and there remain, while those that were marked return back thither again, if they make a speedy return, then they make their abode not far off; but if they tarry more than ordinary, then they reside farther off. Now by this means those that are hard by may easily be found out; but to come at them that are more remote and farther off, do thus; take a piece of a cane and cut it off at either end at the joint, and make a hole in the midst of it; there put in a little honey, or sweet wine boiled half away, and lay it by the side of the fountain or water where they resort: when the bees come thither, and are drawn in by the scent of the honey, hold your thumb close upon the hole, and suffer but one bee to go out at once, follow that as far as you can well discern him, when that is out of sight let go another, and by this conduct at length you will easily find the place where the swarm is. If it be in some hole or cavern of the earth; make but a smoke upon the mouth of it, and all the swarm will hurry out, and when they come forth, being a little scared with the tinkling of a bras pan, they will hang themselves upon a little bough as it were a bunch of grapes, from whence having a vessel to put them in, you may take them away. If they chance to make their nest in the arm of a tree, then take a sharp saw and saw off the bough above and below them, and cover the middle part where they are, with a clean cover, then carry them where you please, and put them in a hive.

By this art you may find their swarms where they use in woods, dens, or hollow places, stony or craggy rocks, or any place whatsoever: only see that you begin your sport betime in the morning, lest the night overtake you, and you lose your game. Neither only are they delightful sport to them that hunt them in the daytime; but also (if Fabritius and Artemidorus do not deceive us) if a man light upon them in his dream when he is a sleep; if he be a poor man, it foretells he shall be rich; if a king or a great man, that his subjects, or those that are under him will be loving and obedient. But he that dreams he had a stock of bees, but in present has them not, 'tis a sign of a decaying estate, and of some imminent approaching disaster to befall. Of so great use are bees: and so variously has dame Nature, the contriver of all things, sported herself, or rather taken great pains indeed in furnishing them with such rare qualities of all sorts, as wherewith you have heard them to be endowed.

But to what purpose is (will you say) that sting, against whose poison and venom Pliny himself knew no remedy? I confess, and experience teaches as much, that bees stings are sometimes venomous; but it is only of those bees which are raving mad, or burning with some fever, anger, or hunger. Otherwise they do little or no harm at all: and

therefore Dioscorides did not deign so much as to mention the symptoms of the stinging of bees; supposing it a childish simple thing for any man so much as to complain of the sting of a poor little bee. Later writers observe that the sting is accompanied with redness and tumor, especially if the sting do yet stick fast in the flesh, which if it go in very deep sometimes proves mortal, as Nicander writes in his *Theriaca*. The ancients (that we may prove the sting of bees to be converted to some good use) as Suidas reports, were wont to punish cheaters with them on this manner; They strip the malefactor stark naked, and besmeared his body all over with honey, which done, and his hands and feet being bound, they exposed him to the heat of the scorching sun, that what with the piercing rays beating upon his body, what with the stinging of the bees and flies, and their often stabbing and wounding him, he did at length suffer a death answerable to his life. But if you would indeed resolve to go sting-free, or at least heal yourself being stung; expel out of your mind idleness, impiety, theft, malice; for those that are defiled with those vices, they set upon to choose as it were, and out of natural instinct. Beware also in especial manner, you wear not red garments, which might represent you to them to be a murderer or man of blood; as also that you be not taken by them for an unchaste or unclean person which it seems they naturally know and abominate (as has been said before) They which carry the bill of a woodpecker in their hands when they come near them, although they do somewhat disturb their swarms, yet (as Pliny says) the bees will not hurt them. Nonnius reports that if you rub and beat to powder the herb called balm-mint, or balm-gentle, their stings will not be able to hurt you. Florentius gives in charge that he that is to gather the honey should anoint himself with the oil or juice of marshmallows, whereby he may take away the combs without danger. But the juice of any mallows whatsoever will do the like; and the better if they be rubbed with oil; for it does both preserve from stinging, and is a remedy to those that are stung. But be it granted that diseases be contracted by their stings; yet 'tis but taking a few of these bees that are found dead in the honey, and let them be carefully applied, and they presently cure them; and take away all the venom and aching of them.

What shall I say? God never created a creature less chargeable, and more profitable. They are bought for a very little money, they will live in all places whatsoever, even in woody and mountainous countries. The poor as well as the rich gain a great return or revenue by keeping of them, and yet need they not put more in the pot, or keep a servant the more for them. Merula reports that Varro rented out his stocks of bees for £5.000 of honey; and in Spain out of a little village containing not above an acre at most, that he gained of the honey there gathered 10.000 sesterces, i.e. £50 of our English money in one year. Besides all this, we have from their shops or store-houses wax, bee-bread, bee-glue, rosin, honeycombs such as no commonwealth can well be without; not to repeat their virtues,, which are no less wholesome for the mind than those are profitable for the body and maintenance of life. And first of all we will treat of honey, that immortal, nectareal, pleasant, wholesome juice, and principal of all works and operations.

Thomas Mouffet, *The Theater of Insects: Or, Lesser Living Creatures* (1658):905–907.