What Good Work Has Anthemion Done?
Aelian’s Fourth *Rustic Epistle*

*Dominik Berrens*
Institut für Klassische Philologie und Neulateinische Studien
Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck, Austria
dominik.berrens@uibk.ac.at

Received June 2021 | Accepted October 2021

**Abstract**

The fourth letter is the shortest and arguably the least studied of Aelian's *20 Rustic Epistles*. A closer examination of this letter reveals, however, that it has some interesting aspects in terms of both language and content. In *Ep. 4*, Aelian presents himself as a capable Atticist author who has specialist vocabulary at his command. Furthermore, this article argues that *Ep. 4* should be read together with the following letter and thus tells *in nuce* the story of how and why Anthemion took Baeton's bees.

**Keywords**


Aelian’s so-called *Rustic Epistles* are a collection of 20 short letters purportedly written by various people. The style of writing and the vocabulary suggest a setting in rural Attica in the fifth or fourth century BCE, which is—in the case of the location—corroborated by the metaliterary passage in *Ep. 20* where it is said that the letters were written by Athenian farmers (*Ἀθηναῖοι γεωργοί*).\(^1\) Because of its transmitted title ἐκ τῶν Ἀιλιάνου ἀγροικικῶν ἐπιστολῶν (*From

\(^1\) See, e.g., Drago 2016 for Aelian’s depiction of the rustic world and Drago 2018 for Alciphron’s letters of farmers with some cross-references to Aelian’s letters.
Aelian’s *Rustic Epistles*) it is not entirely clear if this collection is complete, but there is good reason to assume that the collection we have forms a whole.\(^2\) For a long time, these letters were regarded as being of poor literary quality,\(^3\) but this picture has begun to change in recent decades.\(^4\)

The following article considers *Ep. 4*, which has hardly been studied to date. However, it is a good example of the way Aelian made use of Attic comedy to present himself as a capable Atticist author, as will be demonstrated in the first part of this article. In the second part, the subsequent *Ep. 5* will also be taken into account in order to analyse how Aelian formed his collection of letters as an artistic whole through subtle connections. Finally, Aelian’s textual borrowings from Attic comedy will be reassessed in the light of this new interpretation. The article aims to contribute to a better understanding of Aelian’s artful design of his individual letters and the entire collection.

**Focus on Epistle 4**

The fourth letter is the shortest in the collection. Its content is rather trivial at first sight, which might account for the scant attention it has received in previous scholarship. The text is as follows:

Ἀνθεμίων Δράκητι
Τί σοι καλὸν εἴργασται καὶ τί σοι πεπόνηται χρηστόν; ἐγὼ γὰρ ἀμπελίδος ὄρχον ἐλάσας, εἶτα μοσχίδια συκιδίων παραφυτεύσας ἁπαλά, καὶ ἐν κύκλῳ περὶ τὸ αὔλιον κατέπηξα ἐλαίας. εἶτα μοι δεῖπνον ἦν πίσινον ἔτνος καὶ τρεῖς ἁδρὰς ἐξεκάναξα κύλικας καὶ ἀσμένως κατέδαρθον.\(^5\)

Anthemion to Draces

What good work have you done and what noble deed have you achieved by toil? For my part I set a row of young vines, then beside them I planted tender layers of fig-cuttings, and moreover I set out olive trees all around the place. Then I had a dinner of pea soup, drained three stout mugs, and was glad to fall asleep.

---


\(^3\) E.g., von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 1900, 24; 1905, 170; Bonner 1909, 44; Benner and Fobes 1949, 345; Kindstrand 1998, 2978.

\(^4\) Bowie 1985, 381 is already more sympathetic towards the *Epistles*. See also, e.g., Rosenmeyer 2001, 308-321; Hodkinson 2013; Smith 2014, 29-45.

Even this short letter is not entirely from Aelian’s pen alone, so to speak, and it has already often been remarked that the description of Anthemion’s doings is an almost literal quotation from Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*:6

πρῶτα μὲν ἂν ἀμπελίδος ὀρχὸν ἐλάσαι μακρόν,
eῖτα παρὰ τόνδε νέα μοσχίδια συκίδων,
καὶ τό τρίτον ἡμερίδος ὀρχὸν, ὁ γέρων ὅδι,
καὶ περὶ τὸ χωρίον ἐλάδας ἄπαν ἐν κύκλῳ.7

First of all, I’d shove in a long row of young vines, then beside that young shoots of fig-slips, and thirdly a row of cultivated vine—yes, aged me!—and also olive-trees right round the whole enclosure.

In the comedy, these words are spoken by the chorus-leader to woo Διαλλαγή, the personified Reconciliation, and to recommend himself through deeds which he is still capable of in his old age. It is hard to find any link between the content of the comedy and the situation in the letter. Anthemion is surely not wooing Draces in the same way as the chorus-leader is wooing Διαλλαγή. It is also not clear how this letter alone could gain additional meaning or an interesting and funny twist by alluding to the Aristophanic hypotext. Nor did the quoted passage provide Aelian with an interesting plot or character as is the case with other letters (see below). Most notably, verse 997, which contains the self-characterisation of the chorus-leader as an old man, was left out by Aelian altogether.

There are, however, a number of expressions taken from farmers’ language such as ὀρχὸς, μοσχίδιον, or συκίς. This technical vocabulary was surely attractive to Aelian because its usage allowed him to showcase his own talent as an Atticist author and to depict his farmers as realistically as possible with respect to ἠθοποιία—‘realistic’ from the Atticists’ point of view, of course.8

That these words were indeed understood as Athenian farmers’ jargon is confirmed by the scholia to the Aristophanic verses. The scholia claim that the chorus used images of farming to metaphorically allude to sex (ἀντὶ τοῦ εἰπεῖν σχῆμα συνουσίας τούτῳ ἔφη ώς γεωργός ... ὀρχὸν ἰε ὀίνον ὀρχατον, κωμικῶς, ώς

---

8 Hodkinson 2013, 289 rightly states that “one of Aelian’s primary concerns (if not the primary concern) is evidently with suiting his style, subject matter, and genre to one another”. Schmitz 2008, 100 and Olson 2019, 305 (“showy clusters of specialized vocabulary”) demonstrate that Alciphron used technical vocabulary for the same purpose.
φιλογέωργος ἀλληγορεῖ. ὡς ἐπὶ συνουσίας ἐμφαντικῶς κατὰ γεωργίαν τὸ ‘μακρόν’; 995a vet Tr EGTh). Whether this interpretation of the chorus’ statement is correct will not be discussed here.9 In any case, allusions to sexual intercourse do not seem to be part of Aelian’s letter, at least not at first sight,10 although the potential double entendre of this passage might have added to the attractiveness for Aelian as Atticist author.

In the rest of the letter, we find further words and expressions stemming from Attic comedy.11 The expression ἁδρὰ κύλιξ can only be found in Aelian’s texts; apart from this letter, it also appears in Athenaeus’ Deipnosophistae in a passage about drinking vessels that is similar, yet not entirely the same: ... πιεῖν γέ τι | ἁδρότερον, ἢ τῶν Ροδίακών ἢ τῶν ῥυτῶν (‘drink a bit harder either from Rhodiaka or from drinking-horns’).12 Obviously, ἁδρότερον is not an attribute of a drinking cup in Diphilus case, but as Aelian uses the otherwise rare expression twice, he might have found it in a source that is now lost to us. A particularly rare word is ἐκκανάσσω meaning ‘drink off (noisily)’ and it can only be found in a fragment from Eupolis’ Φιλο (τὴν δ’ αὐτὸς ἐκκανάζει; fr. 292 K.–A.), in Aelian’s letter, and in lexicographers.13 As we would expect, the Atticist Aelian keenly used words that are rare but well-attested—that is, used by an authoritative source like an Old Comedy playwright.14 Against this background, it is surprising that we find the simplified ἐλαίας in the manuscripts instead of the rarer Aristophanic ἐλᾷδας. Perhaps Meineke’s respective emendation should be given greater consideration.

Aelian’s Rustic Epistles have been misunderstood as a plagiarising patchwork of earlier authors, especially from comedy, and only of value in so far

9 Sommerstein 1984, 205-206 follows this interpretation, Olson 2002, 317 does not.
10 Benner and Fobes 1949, 355 n. c, however, think that this is “no doubt all in malam partem” and refer to the scholia for their interpretation, which they unfortunately do not expand upon. Other letters (e.g., 1, 9, and 10) are more explicit in their sexual content, but Drago 2013 highlighted some subtle erotic connotations in the following Ep. 5.
11 See also the similia listed in the editions by Leone 1974, 6 and Domingo-Forasté 1994, 3. The πίσινον ἔτνος will be discussed below.
12 Ath. 11.496f and 497a. Translation: Olson 2009, 419 with adaptations.
13 Mostly, Poll. 10.85-86 who quotes this fragment, but also Phot. Lexicon ε 388 and Hsch. ε 1423. There is also the word ἐγκανάσσω meaning ‘pour in wine’ that is used in E. Cyc. 152; Ar. Eq. 105 and Alciphr. 2.34.3 (ἐγὼ ἐγκανάξας κύλικα). See Olson 2016, 451-452.
14 On Aelian’s use of words from Attic comedy see, e.g., Bonner 1909, 42-44; Leone 1975-1976, 57-60; Kindstrand 1998, 2979. On the reception of Attic comedy in the Imperial era see, e.g., Wilson 2014, 657; Höschele 2014; and the contributions in Marshall and Hawkins 2016, especially Marshall 2016 (on Aelian), Funke 2016 (on Alciphron), and Barbiero 2016 (on Aristaenetus).
as the letters contain fragments of these authors.\footnote{E.g., von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 1905, 170 ("Die Bauernbriefe Aelians haben eigentlich nur Wert, soweit sie in die Fragmenta Comicorum gehören."); Bonner 1909, 44 ("these Letters of Aelian are throughout little more than a stupid patchwork of material derived chiefly from the Comedy"). Kock 1886 even ‘reconstructed’ alleged ‘fragments’ from passages in letters that he thought could be based on texts of Old Comedy; a method that he justified with the following words (p. 372): “Die Epigonen einer großen klassischen Litteraturperiode werden bei dem Ausdruck von Gedanken, die bereits ihre mustergültige Prägung gefunden haben, oft unwillkürlich sich dieser erinnern, sie nachahmen oder auch übernehmen.”} While we would certainly no longer agree with this derogatory assessment, it is true that Aelian’s letters contain many expressions and sometimes also plots and characters taken from classical sources that were highly esteemed by Atticists.\footnote{E.g., \textit{Ep.} 13-16 are based on Men. \textit{Dys}. See, e.g., von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 1905, 170-171; Thyresson 1964; Steffen 1972; Rosenmeyer 2001, 315-317; Guida 2004; Smith 2014, 41-45; Marshall 2016, 211-213; Capettini 2019. \textit{Ep.} 6 is probably based on D. 55, \textit{Ep.} 3 maybe on Isaevus fr. 43 Thalheim (Πρὸς Ψαλινδή περὶ χαρίσματος). See De Stefani 1912; Leone 1975-1976, 62; Kindstrand 1998, 2979; Rosenmeyer 2001, 314. \textit{Ep.} 7-8 could be inspired by Alexis’ Ὀπώρα, but this is just assumed because of the name. See, e.g., Warnecke 1906; Arnott 1996, 498-499; Kindstrand 1998, 2979-2980; Rosenmeyer 2001, 318-320; Marshall 2016, 206-207. Guida 2007 argues that \textit{Ep.} 9 could be based on the \textit{Eunuchus}, but on Terentius’ version rather than on Menander’s. Cf. also Marshall 2016, 207. Marshall 2016, 208 argues that \textit{Ep.} 11-12 could partly draw on Xenophon’s \textit{Cynegeticus}.} Given Aelian’s topic—letters by farmers from rural Attica—he chiefly draws from comedy and forensic speech, because these are the literary genres where an author from the second and third centuries CE who has never left Italy (Philosr. \textit{VS} 2,31 625) could find suitable words and characters.\footnote{The view that Attic comedy preserved true Attic diction was held in the Imperial era, most notably by Quint. \textit{Inst.} 10.1.65 (\textit{Antiqua comoedia cum sinceram illam sermonis Attici gratiam prope sola retinet [...]}).} This appropriation of language is not unique to Aelian’s letters but seems to be a characteristic of such letter collections of the Imperial era; Olson recently came to a very similar conclusion in a detailed study of four letters from farmers in Alciphron’s collection.\footnote{Olson 2019, especially 289, 293 and 307. In contrast to Olson’s findings on Alciphron, I would not assume that Aelian is mostly drawing from lexica, as will be shown below.}

With regard to the content, Aelian’s fourth letter seems rather trivial as has already been said. Rosenmeyer takes it as an example of the “mundane details of a farmer’s life” portrayed in the \textit{Epistles}.\footnote{Rosenmeyer 2001, 309.} Smith assumes that Draces could be imagined as an urban parasite because of the introductory questions that Smith understands as provocations.\footnote{Smith 2014, 30-31.} If we take the name Δράκης
as a speaking name derived from δέρκομαι (‘see’), he could be imagined as a nosy person whom Anthemion tells these most trivial details to mock him. These interpretations might be correct, but there is an additional meaning in our letter if we take the following letter, in which Anthemion is the addressee, into account.

The Fourth Letter in the Collection

While ποικιλία is an important stylistic concept not only in the Epistles but also in Aelian’s other works, this fact does not imply that there are no connections between the letters. In fact, several direct or indirect connections between the letters provide coherence to the collection. The three exchanges of letters in the collection are obviously connected: Ep. 7 and 8 are an exchange between the farmer Dercyllus and the hetaera Opora, and Ep. 10 and 11 an exchange between Lamprias and Tryphe. The most famous and comprehensive group are the four letters 13-16 exchanged between Kallipides and Knemon, which are modelled after Menander’s Dyscolus. Moreover, there are thematic

---

21 Many Greek names carry meaning. This allows to use them as speaking names in literary texts. Aristophanic comedies, for example, make extensive use of this feature (see, e.g., Kanavou 2011). While Aristophanes newly coined many such speaking names, Aelian seems to have used mostly authentic names, which—understood as speaking names in the respective context—can give an indication of the properties of a literary character. Obvious examples are Tryphe (Ep. 10 and 11) and Opora (Ep. 7 and 8; the meaning of her name even constitutes the topic of these letters), but the names of the characters in Ep. 4 and 5 can also be adduced for interpretation. Therefore, I do not entirely follow Marshall 2016, 219 who claims that Aelian missed the opportunity to use speaking names, although Alciphron might have been more eager to use this comic device and also coined new names (see, e.g., Anderson 1997, 2210-2202; Hodkinson 2018).

22 Δράκης was also a real name. In Attica (see LGPN II), the name is only attested in two comedies of Aristophanes (Lys. 254; Ec. 293), in which it belongs to a fictitious member of the chorus. However, we can assume that this name was chosen because it was common at the time. See, e.g., Henderson 1987, 98, 101; Sommerstein 1998, 167-168; Ussher 1973, 117. The name is also attested in Iasus (Caria) in the Imperial era (see LGPN VB) and elsewhere in the variant Δράκας (see LGPN IIIA; IV).

23 See, e.g., Hodkinson 2013, especially 269-274; Hindermann 2016.

24 Bowie 1985, 681; Rosenmeyer 2001, 309-310; Smith 2014, 31; Marshall 2016, 205-211; Schoess 2018, 91-92 (with a focus on Alciphron). Hodkinson 2018, 189 (also with a focus on Alciphron’s similar collection) maintains that, sometimes, names of the correspondents are not only mentioned in the heading but also in the body of the text, which ensured that these letters were not separated if the collection was re-organised or anthologised.

25 On these letter exchanges, see n. 16 and Rosenmeyer 2001, 317-318; Drago 2014 for Lamprias and Tryphe.
groups, and several names are mentioned in more than one letter. Apart from Chremes, who writes to Parmenon in Ep. 9 and is the addressee of Ep. 19, two people appear in letters that immediately follow: Mania is mentioned in the first two letters and Anthemion, the writer of our Ep. 4, is the addressee of Ep. 5. In the case of Mania, Rosenmeyer rightly demonstrated how her appearance in Ep. 2 sheds light on some unsolved questions arising from Ep. 1. In the first letter, Euthycimides tells Blepaes under the pledge of secrecy (ταὐτά σοι, πρὸς τοῦ Πανός, μυστήρια τά μεγάλα ἔστω) of his sexual encounter with Mania. Why this must be kept secret becomes clear in the next letter from Comarchides to Dropides in which the former asks the latter to give his best greetings to Mania who could thus be Dropides’ wife or at least belong to his household.

Given the fact that Aelian obviously invited his readership to make such connections and speculate about the missing parts of the story, it would be rather odd not to look for a possible connection between Ep. 4 and 5 in which Anthemion appears as writer and addressee. At first glance, the combination of plants at Anthemion’s farm does not seem to be remarkable, as similar catalogues can be found throughout Greek literature, most notably in Alcinous’ orchard in Odyssey 7.112-131, where different fruit trees including figs, olives, and vines grow. However, in light of the events narrated in the fifth letter, Anthemion’s plants get an additional meaning. In order to understand it, we first need to take a look at Ep. 5:

Βαίτων Ἀνθεμίωνι
Τὰ σμήνη μοι τῶν μελιττῶν κενά, καὶ ἀπεφοίτησαν τῆς ἑστίας οὐκ οὖσαι τέως δραπέτεις, ἀλλὰ γὰρ καὶ πισταὶ διέμενον καὶ έξηκον ὡς οἴκους τούς αὐτῶν σίμβλους, καὶ εἰχόν λειμῶνα εὐδροσον καὶ δή καὶ ἀνθών εὔφορον, καὶ εἰστίωμεν αὐτάς πανδαισίᾳ· αἳ δὲ ὑπὸ τῆς φιλεργίας τῆς ἄγαν ἀνθειστίων ἡμᾶς πολλῷ

---

26 E.g., Ep. 5 and 6 on problems with neighbours; Epp. 7-9 deal with courtesans and Ep. 10 is on a wanton young man. See Smith 2014, 39-40 with n. 31 and also Rosenmeyer 2001, 319-320; Hodkinson 2013, 302-303; Marshall 2016, 204-210.
28 Whether this encounter was voluntary on Mania’s side is difficult to decide and depends not least on the acceptance of Meineke’s conjecture (σμένης). Euthycimides presents her as being interested herself (ἡ Μανία προσελθοῦσα ἐθρύπτετο καὶ ὡραϊζομένη πολλοῖς ἐβάλε τοῖς σκώμμασι). See also Leone 1975/1976, 61; Rosenmeyer 2001, 311.
29 Ep. 5 has already been discussed independently from the preceding letter by, e.g., Costa 2001, 125-126; Drago 2013, 311-325; Smith 2014, 38-39; Berrens, 2020, 166-169. Marshall 2016, 206 highlights the contrast of the abundance of Anthemion’s farm and Baeton’s loss of the bees.
30 See Olson 2002, 317 for further examples.
καὶ καλῶ τῷ μέλιτι, κοὐδέποτε τῆς ὠδῖνος τῆς γλυκείας ἦσαν ἄγονοι. νῦν δὲ ὥρχοντα ἀπιοῦσαι λυπηθεῖσαι πρὸς ἡμῶν οὐδέν, οὐ μὰ τὸν Ἀρισταῖον καὶ τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα τῶν. καὶ αἱ μὲν εἰς φυγάδες, ὁ δὲ οἶκος αὐτῶν χήρος ἐστι, καὶ τὰ ἀνθέ ἐν τῷ λειμῶνι περίλυτα31 γηρᾷ. ἐγὼ δὲ αὐτῶν ἔταν ὑπομνησθὼ τῆς πτήσεως καὶ τῆς εὔχαριτού χορείας, οὐδὲν άλλο ἢ νομίζω θυγατέρας ἀφῃρῆσαι. ὀργίζομαι μὲν αὐταὶ τί γὰρ ἀπέλιπον τροφέα αὐτῶν καὶ ἀτεχνῶς πατέρα καὶ φρουρὸν καὶ μελεδωνὸν οὐκ ἀχάριστον; δεῖ δὲ με ἀνιχνεύσαι τὴν πλάνην αὐτῶν καὶ ὅποι ποτὲ ἀποδρᾶσαι κάθηνται, καὶ τίς αὐτῶς ὑπεδέξατο καὶ τοῦτο· ἔχει γάρ τοι τὰς μηδὲν προσηκούσας. εἶτα εὐφράν ὀνειδιῶ πολλὰ τὰς ἀγνώμονας καὶ ἀπίστους.32

Baeton to Anthemion

My hives are abandoned, and the bees have left their home, although they were not flyaways before; on the contrary, they used to be faithful and clung to the hives as to their proper homes. And they had a dewy meadow, yes, a meadow abounding in flowers, and we used to treat them to regular banquets; and they, in the excess of their zeal for work, would feed us in return with an abundance of excellent honey, nor were they ever barren of that sweet issue of their wombs. But now they have gone flying off, although we had done nothing to annoy them—I take my oath by Aristaeus and Apollo himself. And so they are fugitives, and their home is widowed, and the flowers in the meadow are growing old, unmated once again. As for me, whenever their fluttering and their graceful dance come to my mind, I truly believe that I have been bereft of daughters. Nay, I am angry at them; why, pray, did they desert one who was their foster-father—yes indeed, their father, their guardian, their keeper who was not ungrateful to them? But I must track their wandering flight and see where they have gone off to and settled, and likewise who it is that took them in—yes, that too; for the bees don't belong to him at all and he's keeping them. Then when I have found them, I shall chide them severely for their ingratitude and faithlessness.

Baeton mourns the loss of his bees that have left him, although he claims to have always treated them well. He describes his relation to the bees as that of a

31 In the manuscript we find περὶ αὐτά, and that is surely corrupt. Leone 1974, 6 has it in obeloi. See also Leone 1975, 56. Benner and Fobes 1949, 356 and Domingo-Forasté 1994, 3 use Post’s conjecture περίλυπα. Costa 2001, 125 also considers περίλυπα (‘grief-stricken’). See also Drago 2013, 319-323 for a discussion and her own conjecture πεπαυμένα based on a possible parallel in Aristaenetus.

caring father to his daughters (τροφέα αὐτῶν καὶ ἀτεχνῶς πατέρα καὶ φρουρόν καὶ μελεδωνόν οὕκ ἀχάριστον) or like a ξενία from which both sides profited (εἰστιώμεν; ἀνθειστίων), but he also refers to his bees as runaway slaves (δραπέτιδες; φυγάδες) that he plans to punish. It is telling that δραπέτιδες is the first word from the human sphere with which Baeton refers to his bees and φυγάδες is used after an emotional outburst with an oath to Apollo and Aristaeus. We might thus conclude that this is how he actually sees his relationship with his bees (slave owner and slaves), and the more positive ways of describing their connection (father and daughters, ξενία) are rather how he wants others to see this connection. Baeton is only blaming the bees, but we might see in his words about the new possessor (καὶ τίς αὐτ ὰς ὑπεδέξατο καὶ τοῦτο· ἔχει γάρ τοι τὰς μηδὲν προσηκούσας) an indirect and cautious charge against his addressee Anthemion—literally the man of flowers—whom he suspects of abducting or luring away his bees.

Anthemion’s planting of vines, figs, and olives could prove this assumption to be correct and, moreover, explain the otherwise puzzlingly mundane content of Ep. 4. Figs and grapes were used by beekeepers as a remedy for starving swarms, especially if too much honey had been taken out of the beehive by either beekeepers or drones. Ashes from fig-wood could also be used to revive seemingly dead bees; wine and defrutum (a boiled-down grape juice or syrup) were an additional remedy. If we assume that Aelian wanted his readers to make a connection between these two letters, Anthemion’s report of planting these fruit trees is suddenly not just mere bragging or trivial communication but part of a long-running scheme to take over Baeton’s bees. In contrast to his own words, Baeton has apparently not treated his bees well but let them starve. This is surely the reason why all his bees have left him. While it is natural behaviour that a part of the swarm leaves with the old queen bee

33  Smith 2014, 38.
34  Smith 2014, 38-39. The interpretation of the name Ἀνθεμίων as derived from ἄνθος can also be found in Drago 2013, 311 n. 1 and Marshall 2016, 206. The name Ἀνθεμίων is a real name and well attested not only in Attica (see LGPN II) but also in other parts of the Greek world (see LGPN I; II; IIIA; IIIB).
35  Arist. HA 9.40, 626b7 (παραβάλλουσι σύκα καὶ τὰ γλυκέα αὐτάς); Var. R. 3.16.28 (ficorum pinguium circiter decem pondo decoquunt in aquae congris sex, quas coctas in offas prope apponunt ... Alii uuam passam et ficum cum pisierunt, affundunt sapam etc.); Col. 9.14.15-16 (vel contusam et aqua madefactam ficum aridam vel defrutum aut passum praebere ... Vuas etiam passas cum infregerimus, paulum aqua respersas probe dabimus); Plin. Nat. 21.82 (uuas passas siccasue ficos tusas ad fores earum posuisse conventit).
36  Var. R. 3.16.37 (cinere facto e fuculneis lignis); Col. 9.13.4 (fuculneo cinere). Columella refers to Hyginus for this procedure.
37  Col. 9.13.7-8.
in May or June, the whole swarm only leaves if they have had to live under dire circumstances.

This impression can be further consolidated by taking the third plant into account, the olives. Olive trees were closely connected to swarming. In a way, this is what had happened to Baeton in extremo because all of his bees had left. Aristotle mentions the theory that bees take their offspring from olive trees because most swarms appear when olives are harvested. Although Aristotle does not believe in this theory and refutes in general the assumption that bees collect their offspring from plants (GA 3.10, 759a27-b1), Aelian could be hinting at such a concept and thus suggest that Baeton’s swarm was decimated and in need of new offspring. Even if we do not assume the causal connection, the supposed temporal connection of olive trees with swarming remains. In Vergil’s Georgics (4.19-24) a *palma* and an *oleaster*, an uncultivated olive tree, are named as suitable trees to provide shade, especially when the new ‘kings’ lead out their swarms in spring. Besides, olive trees were (incorrectly) said to provide wax, a substance that is important for bees when they build new homes. Thus, it looked like Anthemion planned to lure away Baeton’s bees well in advance, and therefore planted these trees.

Anthemion does not mention any flowers that provide an important pasture for bees. This does not necessarily mean that he did not have some on offer given the fact that he is the literal man of flowers. Moreover, the omission of flowers is another marked contrast to Baeton, who prominently praises his λείμων εὔδροσος καὶ δὴ καὶ ἀνθῶν εὔφορος. In contrast to figs and grapes, flowers are not a selfless provision of food for bees, because they collect honey from flowers that hence ultimately also serve the beekeeper.

Anthemion’s meal is also of interest. He is eating a modest pea soup (πίσινον ἔτνος), while Baeton claimed to have entertained his bees with a rich banquet (πανδαισίᾳ) and to have received much good honey in return (αἳ δὲ ὑπὸ

---

38  Σημείον λέγουσιν ὅτι διὰν ἔλαιών φορά γένηται, τότε καὶ ἐσμοι ἀφιένται πλεῖστοι (HA 5.21, 553a21-23). The claim that swarming and harvesting of olives happened at the same time is also mentioned in HA 5.22, 553b23 and Plin. Nat. 11.18. However, the statement itself is puzzling, as olives are usually harvested in November while swarming happens in May and June. See also Epstein 2019, 455.

39  See Berrens 2018, 146-159 for ancient theories about the generation of bees. Despite Aristotle’s reservations, such theories are found in later texts.

40  These verses are also quoted in Col. 9.5.4 with slight changes.

41  Var. R. 3.16.24; Plin. Nat. 11.18, although he states the opposite in 21.71.

42  Ἔτνος is some kind of thicker soup made of legumes that is often mentioned as a popular simple meal in Athens, e.g., in Ar. Ach. 246; Av. 78; Ra. 63, 505-506; Callias fr. 26 K.–A. See also Olson 2002, 143; Bagordo 2014, 198 for these and other examples. The expression πίσινον ἔτνος can be found in Ar. Eq. 1171 and Antiphanes fr. 181.7 K.–A.
What Good Work Has Anthemion Done?

Anthemion thus shows modesty in his meal, whereas Baeton feasts on the better part of his bees’ products. A common topos in ancient literature, not least in Aelian’s own De natura animalium (1.58 and 5.11), is that bees allegedly prefer humans who are modest like themselves and react aggressively against any kind of luxuria, and especially against others taking away their own honey. Even the fact that it is ētnos made from peas and not from another legume, beans for instance, might not be coincidental, as bees are said to hate beans. The πίσινον ētnos is thus a meal that is less off-putting for bees.

It has rightly been remarked that Baeton’s oath is not accidentally addressed to Aristaeus. The son of Apollo and Cyrene is not only said to have invented beekeeping but most famously lost his bees himself. This story is told in the second half of Book 4 in Vergil’s Georgics and it is explicitly stated why Aristaeus lost his own bees (4.318): amissis, ut fama, apibus morboque fameque (‘his bees were lost, as they say, through illness and hunger’). In the context of Ep. 5, “Baiton’s mythological allusion heightens the emotional intensity of his loss”, as Smith rightly states because Baeton claims that his bees never had to suffer from hunger. However, in the light of Ep. 4, this impression turns, and Baeton’s oath seems to be more of a Freudian slip because contrary to his own statement his bees might have suffered almost as badly as Aristaeus’.

Thus, Ep. 4 thwarts Baeton’s self-presentation as a victim to his faithless bees and of an insolent neighbour who stole his property. In addition, it is worth considering the meaning of his name. Βαίτων was a real name, most notably of Alexander the Great’s βηματιστής (someone in charge of measuring the roads). Drago derived the name of our letter writer from βαίτη (a coat of skins worn by shepherds and peasants). This would be a suitable explanation, but there might be a different solution: βαίτων and the female form βαιτάς are

43 In this respect, the bees resemble the characters and their down-to-earth rustic morality in the letters, especially in the metaliterary Ep. 20. See, e.g., Rosenmeyer 2001, 314. There is also a nice epigram by Parmenion (AP 9.43) on the modest beelike poet with food imagery. See Berrens 2018, 372.
44 This curious idea seems to be first attested to in Porph. Antr. 19, although it could be linked to the Pythagorean taboo against beans and thus be older than Porphyry. See, e.g., Alt 1998, 476-477; Dorandi 2019, 210.
45 E.g., Leone 1975-1976, 64 n. 12; Drago 2013, 314 with n. 7; Smith 2014, 38.
46 In A.R. 4.1132-1133 Aristaeus is said to have invented beekeeping and the production of olive oil, which could be yet another connection between olives and bees.
47 Smith 2014, 38.
48 He is mentioned, e.g., in Ath. 10.59, 442B. See Tuci 2018 for further testimonia and fragments.
49 Drago 2013, 31 n. 1.
said to be synonyms of μωρός and μωρά ('dull') in the lexica of the Antiatticist (p. 84.17) and Photius (β 4). The latter refers to the playwright Philemon (fr. 185 K.–A.) for the use of this word, who would be a suitable author for an Atticist like Aelian. Hence, we could also think of Baeton as a dull person who did not see how Anthemion cunningly planned to lure away his bees.

Aelian and His Hypotext

In the light of this interpretation, it is worth taking a second glance at the relation of Aelian’s Ep. 4 with its hypotext, the Acharnians, where we can now find some sophisticated and playful allusions. Although the self-identification of the chorus-leader as an old man is left out in Anthemion’s letter, Aelian could have expected his readers to speculate that Anthemion is also an elderly man because they might have recognised the Aristophanic hypotext and because the old beekeeper was a topos in the literature of the Imperial era. Instead of wooing Διαλλαγή with promises, Anthemion lures the bees to his farm with specific deeds. Moreover, Aristophanes’ text might contain sexual connotations, while bees are generally assumed to be asexual, although there are some exceptions. If we take Διαλλαγή in a literal sense of ‘interchange’, Anthemion succeeds in getting her because there is an ‘interchange’ in terms of the bees’ possessor, although it is not voluntary on Baeton’s part.

Texts like the fourth letter can be read without recognising its hypotext and without connecting it with the following letter. Still, knowledge of the hypotexts enriches the reading of Aelian’s letter collection and indicates that these letters are not as trivial as they might seem at first sight. In contrast to Olson’s findings with regard to Alciphron’s letters, Aelian’s allusions to the original context of his textual material suggest that he was drawing not only on the Atticist lexica but also on the source texts themselves and that he expected at least some of his readers to know them as well.

50 However, K.–A. prefer the conjecture βλίτων καὶ βλιτάς. Valente, the editor of the latest edition of the Antiatticist’s lexicon, marks these words as corrupt.
51 Berrens 2020.
52 Berrens 2018, 146-159. Μέλισσα was (and still is) a common female name, which might make it easy to see girls in the bees; Μέλισσα is also the name of a hetaera in Book 4 of Lucian’s Dialogues of Courtesans and perhaps also in the comedy Μέλισσα by Antiphanes, of which, however, there is only one fragment (149 PCG). See Auhagen 2009, 63 on the name for a hetaera, and Drago 2013 on erotic imagery in Ep. 5.
53 Marshall 2016, 212 came to the same conclusion in the case of Ep. 13-16 and Menander’s Dyscolus.
54 Olson 2019.
Given the fact that bees and honey are widely used to symbolise poets and poetry, we might even read this pair of letters as a metaliterary comment. In the same way that Anthemion took possession of those Attic bees and their honey, Aelian took over Attic authors and their texts. In this context, it should be noted that Atticists regarded classical Attic authors as the best; likewise, in antiquity, Attic honey was the most valued. Although both the bees with their honey and the authors with their texts remained the same, they were subsequently in a new, arguably better environment.

There is no preface or epilogue as in De natura animalium where the author says something about his literary techniques, but some passages in the Letters are open to a metaliterary reading. Ep. 20, the last letter in the collection, and the last words in particular are usually read as a metaliterary comment: εἰ δὲ σοφώτερα ταῦτα ἐπέσταλται σοι ἥ κατὰ τὴν τῶν ἀγρῶν χορηγίαν, μὴ θαυμάσῃς· οὐ γὰρ ἔσμεν οὔτε Λίβυες οὔτε Λυδοί, ἀλλ’ Ἀθηναῖοι γεωργοί (‘If these written words addressed to you are too clever for the country to supply, do not marvel; for we are not Libyan nor Lydian, but Athenian farmers’).

Another example can be found in Ep. 14, in which Knemon begins his answers to Kallipides’ previous letter with the remark that there was no need to answer at all, but since he felt forced to do so, he has at least the advantage of answering by letter, not face to face. The conversion of the Menandrian comedy into a letter exchange posed the problem that Knemon’s answer needed to be justified, but at the same time, Aelian used the literary opportunities that the genre of fictional letter collections offers. The form of the letter allows Knemon to refrain from personal contact with his neighbour, which arguably better suits his antisocial character. The letter exchange between Kallipides and Knemon based on the Menandrian Dyscolus could thus be interpreted as a

55 E.g., Waszink 1974; Berrens 2018, 363-384. Aelian mentions the bees’ love for songs (φιλῳδία) and the Muses (φιλομουσία) in NA 5.13.
56 E.g., Berrens 2018, 374.
58 Marshall 2016, 204-213 convincingly argued for a bipartite symmetrical structure of the collection, in which topics recur in each half of the collection. It might thus be no coincidence to find a metaliterary comment in Ep. 4/5 and Ep. 14/15.
59 Ἐδει μὲν μηδὲν ἀποκρίνασθαι· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐὰν περιεργος καὶ βιάζῃ με ἄκοντα σοι προδιαλέγεσθαι, τούτο γὰρ κεκερδάγκα τὸ δι’ ἀγγέλων σοι λαλεῖν, ἀλλὰ μὴ πρὸς σαυτὸν σε. (‘There was no need of my making any reply; but since you are meddlesome and force me to discuss matters with you against my will, I have at least this advantage, that I can talk to you by messengers instead of face to face.’) Translation: Benner and Fobes 1949, 369-371.
60 See Hodkinson 2007 for the ‘advantages’ of letters over other literary forms in general.
particularly fine example of taking over portions of classical texts and placing them in another, arguably better context.

Aelian demonstrates the importance of this new context in which he placed his borrowings from classical texts because the true meaning of Ep. 4 is only revealed in Ep. 5. The careful arrangement of the whole collection should prevent the reader from jumping to hasty conclusions like dismissing the Rustic Epistles as a simple patchwork from earlier texts. We could thus read Aelian’s letters 4 and 5 as an explanation and justification of textual borrowings from classical authors and their new contextualisation in the letter collection.

Conclusion

Ep. 4 serves to showcase Aelian’s ability as an Atticist author able to imitate the technical language of Attic farmers of the classical period. However, with regard to content, it is surely a poor letter at first glance. The motivation behind Anthemion’s message remains somewhat obscure which could even lead to the condemnation of its real author Aelian as a plagiarising epigone. Read in the context of the following letter, Anthemion’s planting of certain fruit trees suddenly looks like preparations carried out well in advance to attract—and subsequently take care of—Baeton’s bees. This interpretation also answers questions that remain open in Ep. 5, such as whether the bees are really with Anthemion (yes, they are), whether Baeton has treated his bees as well as he claims (apparently not), and who is ultimately to blame for the loss of the bees (neither the bees nor Anthemion, but Baeton himself). The pair of letters thus supports the coherence of the collection not only on a superficial level—that is, through the simple fact that they have a person in common—but it is only after reading the subsequent letter that the real meaning of Ep. 4 becomes evident and, in turn, gives a new perspective on Baeton’s statements. Aelian manages to acquire authentic jargon from Attic farmers and to give his textual borrowings a playful meaning in a new context, which could even be interpreted as a metaliterary reflection of his method. In other words: just like his fictitious character Anthemion, Aelian has done something χρηστόν (demonstrating how to properly use technical Attic language) and καλόν (creating an interesting and playful new meaning for his textual borrowings).62

62 This article was written during a most pleasant stay at the Fondation Hardt in Vandœuvres. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Fondation and its employees. I am thankful to my colleagues Martin Bauer, Martin Korenjak, and Simon Zuenelli for their...
helpful comments on a draft of my paper. I am also grateful for the suggestions and comments from the two anonymous referees that significantly improved the article.


