

Two Ways of Assessing Vergil: The Tensions of *Catalepton* 15

Understanding Vergil was something of a shared cultural project in later antiquity. His work was critiqued, criticized, imitated, parodied, pastiched, disparaged and venerated. Authors such as Donatus, Servius, and Macrobius reveal only some of the ways later writers tried to understand the poet's achievement. Vergilian apocrypha—the *Appendix Vergiliana*, and the *Catalepton* in particular—are best understood as commentary of this type: poems that grapple with the issues of the Vergilian corpus.

Catalepton 15 is unique in the *Appendix* in that it does not present itself as a piece of Vergil's juvenilia but rather as the editor's *sphragis*, or seal, for the work. He vouches for the authenticity of the *Catalepton* and encourages the reader to find in it the seeds of future genius. In doing so he wrestles with two distinct and long-standing ways of assessing Vergil. One was to compare Vergil to his models, traditionally Theocritus (*Eclogues*), Hesiod (*Georgics*), and Homer (*Aeneid*). By scholarly consensus Vergil had equaled Theocritus, far outstripped Hesiod, and come a close second to Homer. The second method was to compare Vergil's works to each other. This resulted in a progression that was seen as natural—and later considered canonical—in genre, style, size, and significance; highlighting the *Aeneid* as Vergil's unquestioned masterpiece.

The editor of *Catalepton* 15 awkwardly tries to fit both methods of assessment into his poem. He lists the works chronologically to emphasize Vergil's progression towards the *Aeneid*, but he also includes the traditional comparisons of Vergil to his models, thereby undercutting it as Vergil's least successful emulation. Nonetheless this tension serves the editor's purpose. The apprehension and understatement it creates help to convince the reader of the authenticity of the *Catalepton*, the editor's ultimate goal.