

Mercibus ut vernis dives Vertumnus abundet: Vertumnus in Columella's Garden

In *Res Rustica*, 10, when Columella encourages the rustics to pluck bunches of garden flowers and take them to market, he likens them to Vertumnus laden with fruits of the harvest. He lists the variety of flowers picked and packed for sale and concludes: *pressaue flammeola rumpatur fiscina caltha / mercibus ut vernis dives Vertumnus abundet* (and let the basket stuffed with the flame-colored marigold burst / so that rich Vertumnus may abound in springtime wares; Col. 10. 307-308). Columella thus for the first and only time explicitly introduces into his garden Vertumnus, an Italic god with both horticultural and mercantile associations.

Vertumnus is probably of Etruscan origin (cf. Varro, *Ling. Lat.* 5. 46; Propertius 4. 2. 3-4, 49-50), as, mostly likely, is his name (Marquis 1974, 496-497). However, his name was popularly assumed to be connected with Latin *vertere*, “turn,” a meaning appropriate to a god both of commerce and of changing seasons (Ernout 1951, 1285; cf. Prop. 4. 2. 47-48), and thus particularly fit for a god of gardens (cf. Prop. 4. 2. 41-42), which are cultivated by the cycle of the seasons and also serve as a source of revenue. There is also a possible association with *ver*, “spring” (Bolderer 1996, 296). Vertumnus is perhaps best known from Ovid's story of how he enters Pomona's garden to woo her (*Met.* 14. 642ff.).

“A garden is a three-dimensional space within a clearly-defined boundary (Pagán 2006, 6). Just as Columella had instructed the gardener to begin by enclosing the plot (*claudatur*, Col. 10. 28), Pomona shuts herself in her garden (*claudit*, *Met.* 14. 635). Vertumnus succeeds in entering Pomona's garden by changing (*vertere*) his shape and thus transgresses its boundaries, real and metaphorical. Vertumnus is therefore, in his way, also a god of boundaries, both the physical boundaries of the garden, the temporal boundaries between the seasons, and the boundary between buyer and seller across which commerce occurs.

Ovid has deliberately placed the Pomona and Vertumnus story—the last erotic, amatory story in his poem—to function in a “programmatically way by introducing themes which are important in the remainder of the poem” (Myers 1994, 225). Similarly, Columella places Vertumnus at a hinge point between two sections. Like Ovid, he puts Vertumnus squarely in the second half of his poem. Columella’s Vertumnus, like Ovid’s marks the ends of the amatory section of the poem: Columella’s references to fertility and springtime are past, and as the gardening poem—following the gardening year—moves past Midsummer, the focus shifts from planting to harvest.

In addition, by including Vertumnus, Columella deliberately places himself in the Roman poetic tradition. Columella wrote *Res Rustica* 10 in verse—the only poetic book in an otherwise prose treatise—in deliberate homage to, and attempt to continue, Virgil’s *Georgics*. Ovid’s story of Pomona and Vertumnus “follows a section of the poem heavily indebted to the model of Vergil’s *Aeneid*” (Myers 1994, 227). In turn, Columella’s placement of Vertumnus in his poem, and in his garden, deliberately recalls Ovid’s Vertumnus; this ultimately creates another link in the chain binding Columella and Virgil. Moreover, the fact that Ovid’s tale of Pomona and Vertumnus is set in a garden further underscores the poetic nature of Columella’s garden: Pomona’s garden is set off within Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* just as Columella’s garden poem is set off within the *Res Rustica*.

Vertumnus is the last of a series of suitors for Pomona and the only one who succeeds in entering the garden, by changing his shape (Johnson 1997, 368). Columella’s mention of Vertumnus calls to mind Ovid’s story and is thus Columella’s second allusion to a divine seduction (cf. Proserpina, Col. 10. 274). By including Vertumnus, Columella is declaring that he has finally succeeding in creating a garden in verse, where others have failed or—like Virgil—

given up the attempt. Vertumnus thus also serves as a kind of stand-in for Columella himself: he highlights Columella's transformation (*vertere*) from the writer of a technical prose treatise on agriculture to a poet of gardens. Like Vertumnus, Columella could enter the garden only by—metaphorically and poetically—changing his shape.

Bibliography

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