

## Cicero, Vergil, and Canon Formation from Greece to Rome (and Back Again)

In his commentary on the *Eclogues*, Servius includes a curious story about the first performance of Vergil's work, which, he claims, occurred in a theater at Rome. Cicero was among those in attendance, and having recognized Vergil's genius, he proclaimed him "the other hope of great Rome" (*In G.* 6.11: *magnae spes altera Romae*), "as if," as the *Donatus auctus* explains, "he himself had been the first hope of the Latin language and Maro the second" (248 Ziolkowski & Putnam: *quasi ipse linguae Latinae spes prima fuisset et Maro secunda*). As a token of his agreement with this sentiment, Vergil memorialized Cicero's compliment by inserting it into the *Aeneid* (12.168).

Servius' account is, of course, impossible: Cicero was dead by the time Vergil's poetry became known at Rome. Nonetheless, as I will show in this paper, the story reflects a real phenomenon: the frequency with which Roman authors conjoined Cicero and Vergil. For Macrobius, for example, Cicero and Vergil are the two "fathers of Roman eloquence" (*In Somn.* 2.5.7: *Romanae facundiae parentum*), and Pliny the Elder approvingly links their adaptations of Greek models (*HN* pr. 22). Cicero and Vergil were the two authors that Augustine learned by heart (*Nat. et orig.* 4.7.9), and the two whose autograph copies Pliny and Quintilian bragged about having seen (*HN* 13.83, *Inst.* 1.7.20). The pervasiveness of their popularity even inspired similar attacks against each man: Martial warns a schoolboy to "have nothing to do with the books of Cicero or Maro" (5.56.5: *nihil sit illi cum libris Ciceronis aut Maronis*), and Asconius Pedianus penned responses to detractors of both men (*In Cic. Orat.* 94.1-3, *Sat.* 5.3.16).

This linkage clearly stemmed from Cicero and Vergil's positions as Rome's most popular prose author and poet: together they metonymically represented all that was best in Latin

literature and constituted a complete Roman canon in miniature. Each embodied excellence in his respective genre, but both were required for Roman literature to be complete; as Seneca the Elder puts it, “Cicero’s eloquence failed him in poetry; the fertility of Vergil’s genius abandoned him in prose” (*Controv.* 3.pr.8: *Ciceronem eloquentia sua in carminibus destituit; Vergilium illa felicitas ingenii in oratione soluta reliquit*). But the significance of their pairing can also be taken further, and I will also show how it can be used as a window onto a broader topic: namely, the close relationship between Greek and Roman intellectual life, and the effects this closeness had on each culture’s canon formation and reading habits.

As I will demonstrate, the Roman joining of Cicero and Vergil was likely inspired by Greek literary criticism, in which Homer and Demosthenes—sometimes with the addition of Plato—served a similar function (note, for example, the syncrisis of Homer and Demosthenes by Ps-Lucian; Diodorus Siculus 26.1.1; [Dion. Hal.] *Rhet.* 10.19.7-9; *Subl.* 14.2, 36.4; and Pausanias 2.33.3). For the Romans, Cicero and Vergil—the one of whom had imitated both Plato and Demosthenes, the other of whom had followed Homer—made natural substitutes for this Greek practice. And indeed, if Roman literary critics were imitating Greek literary critics in their treatment of Cicero and Vergil, it is equally likely that Cicero and Vergil themselves chose their Greek models in the hope for this result. As Casali 2004 and Farrell 2008 have shown, this sort of tight nexus between author and scholar was common in the Roman literary tradition.

This type of cultural exchange, in which the Romans borrowed extensively from the Greeks in multiple fields, is well known to us. But the case of Cicero and Vergil can also be used to show that the borrowing from one culture to the other was not one sided. Many Greeks had reason to familiarize themselves with the Latin language (Dickey 2016), and sometimes with Latin literature as well (Rochette 1997), and these Greeks notably accepted the linkage of Cicero

and Vergil: evidence from Greek literary authors and from papyri shows that they were the two Roman authors most frequently read by Greek speakers. The pairing of Cicero and Vergil, I conclude, thus illustrates a remarkable fact: literary criticism and canon formation were fields whose tenets moved from Greece to Rome and then from Rome back to Greece in turn, creating a literary and intellectual culture that was tightly intertwined.

### Bibliography

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