

Cunning Manipulation in *Odes* 4.12

In line 13 of *Odes* 4.12, Horace names “Vergili” as the vocative addressee of the work. However, scholarly reception has long been split concerning the identity of this “Vergilius,” a name argued to represent either the legendary poet or a character of Horace’s own creation. As scholars have recently leaned more toward the side of Virgil the poet, one question seems to have been lost: why did Horace employ such ambiguity in the first place? I propose that Horace aimed explicitly to make the identity of “Vergilius” unclear, using themes from the *Eclogues* to implant the poet in his readers’ minds while including uncharacteristically mercantile language to keep the identity just out of reach.

Critics of the poet-identity note that 4.12’s tone changes after Vergilius is named, enthusiastically celebrating life – a shift that would disrespect the already-deceased poet Virgil. However, the very vagueness of Vergilius’ identity frees Horace from blame for this tonal shift. Furthermore, proponents of the poet-identity point to the ode’s bucolic, *Eclogues*-like imagery – which would doubtlessly endear the poem to Horace’s audience, given its publication after the late Virgil’s work sprung to popularity. Thus, the “dark hills of Arcadia” (*nigri / colles Arcadiae* (11-12)) can evoke a lovely Virgilian image even as “client of noble youths” (*iuvenum nobilium cliens* (15)) insults some other greedy merchant. By his refusal to affirm one identity, Horace gets the best of both worlds in his final result: all of the popular themes and none of the blame for irreverence.

Bibliography

Garrison, Daniel H. *Horace: Epodes and Odes*. Univ Of Oklahoma Press, 1998.