

Cunning Manipulation in *Odes* 4.12

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Abstract

- 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.
- Scholars have recently leaned more toward the side of Virgil the poet, but 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.

Tone

- 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.
- The very vagueness of Vergilius’ identity frees Horace from blame for this tonal shift.
- This tonal shift also represents the change from Vergilius the poet to Vergilius the merchant.

Comparison to *Eclogues*

- Proponents of the poet-identity point to the ode’s bucolic, *Eclogues*-like imagery.
- This imagery would doubtlessly endear the poem to Horace’s audience, given its publication after the late Virgil’s work sprung to popularity.

Horace and Virgil: a friendship exaggerated?

- There are convincing arguments that Virgil and Horace were not as close as later sources made them out to be, as shown by Byrne 2019.
- Ambiguous language allows Horace to benefit from referencing a more popular contemporary without claiming a closer friendship with that poet than he may truly have had.
- The “dark hills of Arcadia” (*nigri / colles Arcadiae* (11-12)) can therefore evoke a lovely Virgilian image even as the monikers “client of noble youths” (*iuvenum nobilium cliens* (15)) and “rich man in an opulent house” (*plena dives...in domo* (24)) insult some other, less beloved greedy merchant.



Charles François Jalabert’s *Virgil, Horace And Varius At The House Of Maecenas*.



Thomas Cole’s *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*. 1834.

“Horace mentions Arcadia nowhere else in his works. Perhaps he felt that it was reserved for Virgil” (Bowra 166).

Conclusion

- 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.
- The mention of “Vergilius” in 4.12 is neither funerary nor celebratory nor praise for a dear friend, but rather self-serving, a means to an end, a way to inoffensively create a popular and lasting poem.

Works Cited

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