

ASINIUS POLLIO IN VERGIL *ECLOGUE* 8

In 1971, G. W. Bowersock reopened the question of Vergil's addressee in *Eclogue* 8, contending that the unnamed honorand is not Asinius Pollio, as most modern scholars have always assumed, but Octavian.<sup>1</sup> His contention has inspired or provoked a good deal of further discussion in favor of one or the other candidate.<sup>2</sup> It has also given rise to a down-dating, not only of *Eclogue* 8, but of the entire collection.<sup>3</sup> The questions of identification and date may never be finally resolved. Nevertheless, some important arguments in favor of the traditional view have been overlooked, and a few of the weaker ones advanced by the revisionists

1. "A Date in the Eighth Eclogue," *HSCP* 75 (1971): 73-80; see also "The Addressee of the Eighth Eclogue: A Response," *HSCP* 82 (1978): 201-2.

2. For the history of the question before Bowersock, see J. Van Sickle, "Commentaria in Maronem Commenticia: A Case History of 'Bucolics' Misread," *Arethusa* 14 (1981): 17-34. For a very complete and detailed guide to the recent debate, see also D. Mankin, "The Addressee of Virgil's Eighth Eclogue: A Reconsideration," *Hermes* 116 (1988): 63-76.

3. See W. Clausen, "On the Date of the *First Eclogue*," *HSCP* 76 (1972): 201-5; E. A. Schmidt, *Zur Chronologie der "Eklogen" Vergils*, Sitz. der Heidelberger Akad. der Wiss. (Heidelberg, 1974), p. 6.

still await rebuttal. In this paper I will briefly review the evidence and add to the case for Pollio and against Octavian.

Mankin's recent discussion sets out the facts with admirable clarity, establishing four separate issues that bear on the identity of the unnamed addressee:

- I. The reference to an Illyrican campaign and triumph (6–10; 13),
- II. An allusion to tragic poetry (9–10),
- III. The "formula" *a te principium, tibi desinam* (11), and
- IV. Vergil's description of the *Eclogues* as "songs begun" with his addressee's "commands" (11–12).<sup>4</sup>

It will be expedient to address each of these points in order.

### I. ILLYRICUM

Vergil's vague reference to his addressee's activities in this province combined with our incomplete knowledge of Pollio's and Octavian's experiences there render certain identification impossible on this count alone. I will therefore summarize this issue briefly and pass on to less ambiguous matters.

If Pollio governed Illyricum, as was once generally thought, then there is no problem. Ronald Syme, however, argued that Pollio's province was actually Macedonia.<sup>5</sup> Bowersock then pointed out that Vergil's addressee in *Eclogue* 8 returns to Italy by a route that would be very unusual if his starting point were Macedonia, and concluded that therefore Pollio could not be the addressee.<sup>6</sup> But A. B. Bosworth soon afterwards argued that Pollio's province was, in fact, Illyricum, which would remove Bowersock's objection.<sup>7</sup> The evidence, unfortunately, does not admit of certainty, and today there is no clear scholarly consensus on the question of Pollio's province in 39.

In the case of Octavian, we know that he was active in the appropriate area in 35 B.C.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Vergil speaks of his addressee as a *triumphator*, which Pollio was in 39,<sup>9</sup> but Octavian not until 29,<sup>10</sup> an impossibly late date for this poem. Octavian's supporters are thus driven to argue that the poem celebrates, not the triumph itself, but the *decree* of a triumph by the senate at an earlier date.<sup>11</sup> Here, too, there are problems, because our sources appear to conflict on whether the decree was made early enough to accommodate the theory that *Eclogue* 8 is addressed to Octavian.<sup>12</sup> Now, however, Mankin has shown that nothing in our sources specifically requires a date later than 35, eliminating at least this difficulty.<sup>13</sup>

4. "A Reconsideration," p. 65.

5. "Pollio, Saloninus, and Salona," *CQ* 31 (1937): 39–48.

6. "Eighth *Eclogue*," pp. 77–78.

7. "Asinius Pollio and Augustus," *Historia* 21 (1972): 441–73.

8. App. III. 16; J. J. Wilkes, *Dalmatia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 50; W. Schmitthenner, "Oktavians militärische Unternehmung in den Jahren 35–32 v. Chr.," *Historia* 7 (1958): 189–236.

9. The ancient evidence is assembled by T. R. S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, vol. 2 (Cleveland, 1952), pp. 387–88.

10. The famous triple triumph celebrating victories in Illyricum, at Actium, and in Egypt was held in that year, and is described by Cass. Dio 51. 21. 5–9.

11. The claim is based on a statement of Cass. Dio 49. 38. 1.

12. App. III. 28 has traditionally been taken to mean that the decree came not upon the initial victories of 35 but after the complete subjugation of Illyricum in 33; see, however, the following note.

13. "A Reconsideration," pp. 66–68.

On these grounds, then, the case for either Pollio or Octavian is about equally strong—which is to say, inconclusive. Both rest on what must be regarded as provisional solutions to objective historical problems. If Pollio did govern Illyricum in 39, then he may be the addressee. If Vergil's *victrices lauros* (*Ecl.* 8. 13) can be taken as a reference to a triumphal decree in 35 instead of an actual triumph in 29, then the addressee could be Octavian. That is the most that can be said. In this situation, we must be content to decide the matter tentatively and by other means.

## II. TRAGEDY

Few readers have ever felt comfortable with the notion that Vergil means to extol Octavian's lone and abortive effort to write tragedy, an *Ajax*,<sup>14</sup> as *sola Sophocleo tua carmina digna coturno* (10).<sup>15</sup> This is an especially nagging point for Octavian's supporters, because we know that Pollio was famous for his tragedies.<sup>16</sup> Van Sickle tried to cut this knot by resuscitating an interpretation of *tua carmina* that was known to Servius and later held by some Renaissance scholars: poems written, not *by* you, but *about* you.<sup>17</sup> But J. E. G. Zetzel stated what seem to me the decisive objections to this interpretation shortly after Van Sickle revived it:

... it must be pointed out that it is grammatically difficult—it is almost exclusively abstract nouns referring to emotions that take a possessive adjective in place of an objective genitive—and that it is unlikely to be found in an Augustan poet. Leumann–Hofmann–Szantyr, 2:66, sec. 55 b α, describe this use as “umgangssprachlich,” and all the examples from Augustan and pre-Augustan literature collected in Kühner–Stegmann 1:599, sec. 116 A 5, are from Plautus, Terence, Cicero, and Livy. The usage may have been acceptable in Servius' day, but not in Virgil's.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this persuasive argument, however, Mankin adopts Van Sickle's interpretation, answering Zetzel on three points:

- (1) the phrase *tua carmina* is “analogous [to] *laudes tuas* (*Ecl.* 6. 6–7 and elsewhere),” which “does not refer to emotions” and “is found in all periods”;
- (2) the phrase can be exactly paralleled in Greek by the expression ῥῆνον ἐμόν, “song of lamentation for me” (*Aesch. Ag.* 1322–23, *PV* 388);
- (3) “*tua* for *tui* is hardly the only grammatical anomaly in the Eclogues.”<sup>19</sup>

This rebuttal strikes me as entirely unsuccessful. In the first place, no one will argue about the meaning of *laus tua*; but the analogy that Mankin posits between

14. Suet. *Aug.* 85. 2.

15. Bowersock himself admits that “no one would wish to identify Octavian with the addressee of the poem on the basis of that reference” (“Response,” p. 201).

16. Hor. *Serm.* 1. 10. 42–43, *Carm.* 2. 1. 9–12. Apropos of the latter passage, Nisbet and Hubbard (*A Commentary on Horace: “Odes” Book II* [Oxford, 1978], p. 17) rightly point out that Horace's *Cecropio coturno* (12) echoes Vergil's *Sophocleo coturno*. The fact that Horace's poem is addressed to Pollio does not by itself mean that Vergil's is as well (cf. Prop. 2. 34. 41 *Aeschyleo coturno*, also modeled on Vergil, but addressed to Lynceus), but it is an intriguing piece of circumstantial evidence.

17. “Bucolics' Misread,” pp. 21–23, following Servius, Landino, Cerda, et al., ad loc.

18. “Servius and Triumviral History in the *Eclogues*,” *CP* 79 (1984): 141, n. 6. I mention in passing that although Zetzel voices this damaging criticism of the Octavian theory, Mankin cites him as one of those “who accept Bowersock's thesis” (“A Reconsideration,” pp. 63–64, n. 5); but while Zetzel praises Bowersock's suspicion of Servius and his ilk as historical witnesses (on which see further below), he does not appear, as I read him, actually to adopt Bowersock's position.

19. “A Reconsideration,” p. 69 and n. 37.

this phrase and the one we are trying to interpret is misconceived. It is true that, in English, “praise of you” is virtually synonymous with “songs [in praise] of you”; but in Latin, *laus* and *carmen* are different kinds of nouns and take different kinds of complements. *Laus*, like most nouns that regularly take an objective genitive, is closely related to a verb, *laudo*. Thus *laus Pisonis* (e.g.) is in essence the nominal equivalent of the verbal phrase *laudare Pisonem*. The noun *carmen*, of course, is etymologically related to the verb *cano*; but by classical times, the connection between the two words was hardly felt. Thus it was much less likely to take an objective genitive.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore extremely unlikely that Vergil used *tua carmina* in place of the nonexistent *\*tui carmina* (i.e., *carmina de* or *erga te*).

In the second place, the Greek parallels that Mankin cites mean very little. They concern, not a common Greek idiom, but a phrase used twice by Aeschylus alone. Their occurrence in tragedy might be relevant if Vergil were not concerned specifically with Sophoclean dramas (10 *Sophocleo coturno*);<sup>21</sup> but there is no reason to suppose that Vergil is thinking of these Aeschylean passages. Thus we are not dealing with a borrowed Greek construction. That being the case, the peculiarities of Greek usage can hardly be adduced in support of an eccentric reading of the Latin. Indeed, if the parallelism shows anything, it is that the objective genitive construction is, as Zetzel argues, especially at home in emotional expressions in Greek as well as in Latin (θρήνον ἐμόν ~ θρηνεῖν με, a manifestation of grief; cf. *laus mea* ~ *laudare me*, a manifestation of approval; but contrast *\*carmen tuum* ~ *canere te*, not inherently emotional).

Third, while the *Eclogues* do contain examples of dubious grammar, they are not found in passages like this. The one that Mankin cites is a case in point. Menalcas' *cuium pecus* (3. 1), which inspired Numitorius' parody,<sup>22</sup> is spoken by a rustic in a dramatic context, not by a narrator standing in for the Eclogue poet. This is true of all the more marked colloquialisms and solecisms in the *Eclogues*. They would be especially out of place in the elevated context of a dedication to a *triumphator*. It will not do to argue that Vergil uses such a homely expression to contrast the studiously humble style of his present poem with the magniloquence that his addressee's exploits deserve; the fact that he adopts no such stratagems in *Eclogues* 4 or 6 indicates the stylistic register he thought appropriate for such contexts.

There is a fourth point. Let us suppose that the phrase means what Servius takes it to mean, that Vergil is looking forward to the possibility of celebrating Caesar's exploits in song worthy of the Sophoclean buskin. Does this make sense? Why would Vergil allude to tragedy here? Surely there can be no question of a *praetexta*, the most appropriate dramatic vehicle for celebrating proconsular *res gestae*; this peculiarly Roman brand of tragedy can hardly be what Vergil has in

20. *TLL* 3. 473. 59–61, s.v. *carmen*, cites only a few examples modified by a *genitivus materiae* (the titles of two archaic poems, the *carmen Priami* mentioned by Varro *DLL* 7. 28, and the *carmen Nelei* mentioned by Festus 418. 10 *et passim* Lindsay, and by Charisius *GLK* 1. 84. 6: see further Schanz–Hosius 1. 49), and no examples with the possessive adjective in the sense that Mankin's argument requires.

21. I have shown elsewhere (*Vergil's "Georgics" and the Traditions of Ancient Epic: The Art of Allusion in Literary History* [New York and Oxford, 1991], p. 58) that Vergil's use of such phrases is quite specific: *Sophocleo coturno* means “tragedy in the style of Sophocles,” *Sicelides Musae* (*Ecl.* 4. 1), *Syracosio versu* (*Ecl.* 6. 1), and *pastoris Siculi* (*Ecl.* 10. 51) refer to Theocritus and Theocritean pastoral, and so on.

22. *Antibucolica frag.* 2 Morel-Büchner.

mind when he speaks of the “*Sophoclean* buskin.”<sup>23</sup> If, then, we are dealing with mythological drama, how will this be a suitable medium in which to extol Octavian’s achievements? It was more typically used at various times to level covert criticism at authority,<sup>24</sup> and it is not easy to see how it might be turned to the purposes of panegyric.<sup>25</sup>

In short, there is no reason to interpret *tua carmina* in any way other than what the Latin naturally suggests: “poems written by you.” We are thus left with the traditional choice: the poem(s) in question are either Octavian’s half-written *Ajax*, or Pollio’s respected tragic oeuvre. Here the case for Pollio and against Octavian has been stated effectively by others and needs no repetition here.<sup>26</sup>

### III and IV. FORMULA and COMMANDS

Bowersock, citing parallels in Greek literature, argued that the words *a te principium, tibi desinam* (11–12) “are appropriate for a commander-in-chief,” i.e., for Octavian, but not for Pollio. But no one has suggested dating the poem to a time when Octavian had become sole ruler of the Roman world, and the latest scholar to write in support of Bowersock’s theory admits the weakness of this argument.<sup>27</sup>

A different line of interpretation based on the literary import of the formula has proved more durable. Van Sickle sees the beginning and end of the poet’s song as a reference to the boundaries of the Eclogue book itself, and the “unnamed campaigner” as “part of the historico-mythic background and epic horizon of the book as a whole . . . like the god of the first eclogue and the child of the fourth.” He further notes that “names are reserved for secondary figures within the controlling frame, like Pollio.”<sup>28</sup> Now Mankin has taken up this argument and applied it more specifically, seeing in *Eclogue* 8. 11–12 “a precise allusion to the situations and events which are the focus of *Eclogue* 1.”<sup>29</sup> The crux of his argument is the identification of the *deus/iuvenis* of that poem. Noting that “Pollio . . . is referred to in the Eclogues as a ‘reader’ (3. 84–85), a poet (86), and a consul (4. 11), but never as a *deus*,”<sup>30</sup> and that “there is almost complete agreement” that the *iuvenis* of

23. *Praetextae* were at least occasionally written and produced during the late Republic, and they might take recent events as their theme. We know of one particularly absurd example, written (it would seem) and staged by the wayward quaestor L. Cornelius Balbus at Gades in 43. Our information is preserved, coincidentally, in a letter from Pollio to Cicero (*Fam.* 10. 32. 3, 5). But the interest of Pollio, Cicero, and Cornelius Gallus (from whom Pollio says Cicero could have a copy of the play if he wanted to read it himself) in this play as evidence of Balbus’ bad taste and outrageous behavior should not lead us to believe that Vergil would speak of undertaking such a ridiculous project even in the context of a *recusatio*. In addition, the manner of Vergil’s reference to tragedy tells strongly against this idea; see n. 21 above.

24. Most notably during the Empire, to judge by the representation of Curatius Maternus in Tacitus’ *Dialogus de oratoribus*.

25. R. J. Tarrant’s hypothesis (“The Addressee of Virgil’s Eighth Eclogue,” *HSCP* 82 [1978]: 199, n. 11) about Antenor might provide a conceptual model for mythological tragedy in praise of a contemporary. Such a poem would, of course, be a signal anticipation of the *Aeneid*. There is, however, no evidence that such works were composed.

26. E.g., R. Coleman, *Vergil: “Eclogues”* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 228, ad *Ecl.* 8. 6; Tarrant, “Addressee,” pp. 197–98; R. Mayer, “Missing Persons in the Eclogues,” *BICS* 30 (1983): 23.

27. Mankin, “A Reconsideration,” p. 73.

28. “‘Bucolics’ Misread,” pp. 24–25.

29. “A Reconsideration,” p. 74.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 75. There may, however, be a suggestion of Pollio’s divinity in the mention of sacrificial victims at *Ecl.* 3. 84–87 (on which see further below).

*Eclogue* 1 is Octavian,<sup>31</sup> Mankin sees in the phrase *a te principium* a reference to Octavian as the *praesens deus* who makes possible the writing of bucolic poetry, and in *tibi desinam* a "promise of future *carmina* in a higher mode."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, the revisionists have also tried to support their case by exposing circularity in the argument for Pollio. The text, they observe, speaks of songs written at the addressee's behest (11–12 *accipe iussis/carmina coepta tuis*), and the scholiasts tell us that Pollio was one of Vergil's earliest patrons—indeed, that he gave Vergil the idea of writing pastoral.<sup>33</sup> But the scholiasts' assertions are mere inferences from texts like this, and so, along with all modern arguments based on them, are worthless.<sup>34</sup> Further, they ask, why would Vergil attempt to honor Pollio by suppressing his name?<sup>35</sup>

Fair enough. But what is odd about this line of argument is that it applies equally to Pollio or Octavian; and yet some have tried to take it as disqualifying the former and supporting the latter. In particular, the idea that behind the *iuvenis* of *Eclogue* 1 stands Octavian is nothing but a scholiastic inference.<sup>36</sup> It has of course been widely accepted by modern scholars—another parallelism with the identification of Pollio as the addressee of *Eclogue* 8.<sup>37</sup> The pronounced tendency of critics ancient and modern to read Caesarian references into the *Eclogues* is completely understandable, of course; but it is anachronistic. We must bear in mind that, even if we accept a late date for the collection, we cannot place it at a time so late that Octavian is the only obvious candidate for the honorific references made in poems 1 and 8. Furthermore, it must remain obscure why Vergil would forebear to name either Octavian or Pollio in poem 8.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the phrases *a te principium*, *tibi desinam* and *iussis/carmina coepta tuis* might refer to Pollio as well as to Octavian, and the effort to find support for either view in biographical criticism is ill-founded. On the other hand, Van Sickle's idea of looking for a literary referent within the *Eclogue* book is much more promising. Several possibilities present themselves.<sup>39</sup> But our search for the closest parallel to *a te principium* leads inevitably to *Eclogue* 3. 60 *ab love principium, Musae*. It is, I suggest, no accident that the same poem, if not formally addressed to Pollio, mentions him prominently (84–87).<sup>40</sup> What is more, the

31. *Ibid.*, quoting E. A. Fredricksmeier, "Octavian and the Unity of the First *Eclogue*," *Hermes* 94 (1966): 208.

32. "A Reconsideration," pp. 75–76.

33. Servius *praef. in Aen.* = C. Hardie, *Vitae Vergilianae Antiquae*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford, 1966), p. 22.

34. Bowersock, "Eighth *Eclogue*," pp. 75–76; Mankin, "A Reconsideration," pp. 70–72.

35. Mankin, "A Reconsideration," p. 72.

36. E.g., Servius ad *Ecl.* 1. 7, 42.

37. The remarks of Mayer, "Missing Persons," pp. 20 and 26, are quite to the point.

38. Clausen, "First *Eclogue*," pp. 204–5, argues cogently that a reason for evasiveness did exist in the case of *Eclogue* 1, because the notion of explicitly worshipping a named benefactor as a *praesens deus* in the turbulent political climate of triumviral Rome would have "offended Roman sensibility." It does not, of course, follow, simply because Octavian eventually did receive such honors, that he is necessarily the *iuvenis* of the poem; and Clausen's argument for redating the poem is predicated on this supposition (p. 203). In any case, since the addressee of *Eclogue* 8 is not spoken of as a divinity, this cannot be a reason for withholding his name.

39. Perhaps the greatest number of parallels (a formal dedicatory proemium; the motif of composition to order; the *recusatio* topos) involve *Eclogue* 6; see also the motifs listed by Van Sickle, "'Bucolics' Misread," p. 24.

40. I mention in passing that the two poems occupy the central position in their respective halves of the *Eclogue* book (1:6, 2:7, 3:8, 4:9, 5:10).

structure of this carefully balanced composition tactfully suggests a parallelism between Pollio and Jupiter. The poem contains a pastoral mime followed by a stylized singing contest. The mime occupies the first half of the poem (1–54); the second half is bracketed by two speeches of Palaemon (55–59 and 108–11), the umpire of a contest between Damoetas and Menalcas (60–107). It is Damoetas who begins the contest with the couplet “ab Iove principium, Musae, Iovis omnia plena; / ille colit terras, illi mea carmina curae” (60–61). There follows a typical amoebaeon singing match; but, at its midpoint, the regular alternation is punctuated by a new beginning: “Pollio amat nostram, quamvis est rustica, Musam; / Pierides, vitulam lectori pascite vestro” (84–85). To this Menalcas responds: “Pollio et ipse facit nova carmina; pascite taurum, / iam cornu petit et pedibus qui spargat harenam” (86–87). The structure of the match suggests a correspondence between Jupiter and Pollio in his capacity as reader (i.e., honored addressee) or as fellow poet. Perhaps both—the Aratean allusion in lines 60–61 may allude both to Pollio’s social and political stature and to his interest in Aratus’ poetry, possibly even as an imitator or translator. The poem may further hint at Pollio’s divinity by ordering sacrifices to him. Thus Vergil’s subsequent use of the *a te principium* conceit in *Eclogue* 8 should be read as a cross reference to *Eclogue* 3, and so as a clue to the identity of his unnamed addressee.

In fine, the arguments for Pollio are much stronger than those for Octavian, just as those against Octavian outweigh those against Pollio. It remains only to comment on the implications of all this for the chronology of the *Eclogues*. Bowersock advocates ignoring the scholiastic tradition, which states that the poems were composed between 42 and 39 B.C., on the grounds that their evidence in such matters is generally unreliable.<sup>41</sup> Zetzel takes the general principle of scholiastic confusion as the starting point for an investigation of precisely when Servius thought the *Eclogues* were written. He notes that “in explaining historical allusions in the poems, [Servius] constantly ignores his own chronology, in both directions.”<sup>42</sup> In general, he shows that the bulk of these chronological errors compel us to assume that “Servius believed that the dramatic date of the *Eclogues* was during the war of Actium, in 31 B.C.”<sup>43</sup> More particularly, he demonstrates how this belief led Servius to read the reference to Illyricum in *Eclogue* 8 as a reference to Actium, and thus to identify the unnamed addressee as Octavian.<sup>44</sup>

Does this finding support the down-dating of the *Eclogues* proposed by Bowersock and accepted by several others? I think not. In general, Servius believes that the dramatic date of the poems is 31. On the other hand, he tells a story concerning Cicero’s reaction to hearing them performed, although Cicero died in 43.<sup>45</sup> Finally, he tells us that the poems were composed between 42 and 39.<sup>46</sup> How to explain the confusion? We may assume that he included the anecdote about Cicero—against

41. “Eighth Eclogue,” pp. 74–76.

42. “Triumviral History,” p. 141.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 141–42.

45. Servius ad *Ecl.* 6. 11.

46. Asconius Pedianus apud [Probus] *In Verg. Buc. et Georg. praef.*, pp. 323. 13, 329. 5–7; Servius *praef. in Aen.*, p. 2. 8–9 Thilo = p. 2. 25–27 ed. Harv.

his better judgment, perhaps<sup>47</sup>—because it was simply too good a story to exclude. As for the dates 42–39, since they actually conflict with Servius' general opinion as to when the *Eclogues* were written, they can hardly be his invention. They are not obviously derived from anything in the poems themselves, nor are they attractive for external reasons. On these grounds, they probably stand a good chance of being right. In the case of such an evidentiary muddle, certainty remains impossible; but unless we can show that the traditional view is wrong—and the theory about Octavian in *Eclogue* 8 is very far from proof—our most reasonable assumption is that 42–39 B.C. are correct dates established by an early scholar and dutifully, if uncritically, handed on by generations of his successors along with the other, conflicting and more obviously unreliable, information.

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47. Zetzel, "Triumviral History," p. 141.