The Classical Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CAR>

Additional services for *The Classical Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

Was the Fourth Eclogue Written to Celebrate the Marriage of Octavia to Mark Antony?—A Literary Parallel

D. A. Slater

The Classical Review / Volume 26 / Issue 04 / June 2012, pp 114 - 119
DOI: 10.1017/S0009840X00199871, Published online: 27 October 2009

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0009840X00199871

How to cite this article:

D. A. Slater (2012). Was the Fourth Eclogue Written to Celebrate the Marriage of Octavia to Mark Antony?—A Literary Parallel. The Classical Review, 26, pp 114-119 doi:10.1017/S0009840X00199871

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

every thing that he sendeth wth the name of the master of the Shipp; he must as often as he can send l^{tres} [letters] of what things he hath

gathered and what he hath sent and of all other occurrants belonging to this business.' (Endorsed in another hand—*Statua's and antiquities.*)

WAS THE FOURTH ECLOGUE WRITTEN TO CELEBRATE THE MARRIAGE OF OCTAVIA TO MARK ANTONY?— A LITERARY PARALLEL.

What is this
That rises like the issue of a king
And wears upon his baby-brow the round
And top of sovereignty?

THE following notes are submitted in support of a theory which seems to have been unduly neglected. The 'occasion' of the poem is, after all, a mere detail; but it is a detail of some importance; for if an agreement could be reached upon this point, the mind of the reader would be set free to appreciate more fully the larger questions so admirably dealt with in *Virgil's Messianic Eclogue*—a book for which, in common with many other lovers of Virgil, the present writer feels profoundly grateful.

And yet the authors hardly give Catullus his due. There can, of course, be no doubt that Virgil in his early period was strongly influenced by Catullus; and nowhere more so than here. If, however, this Eclogue can fairly be regarded as akin to an Epithalamion, a 'sequela' to the *Song of the Fates* in Catullus, we must, it would seem, go on to draw the inferences which are drawn below. And it is strange how well the key fits the wards of the lock, and how old familiar difficulties yield, one after another, to its gentle pressure. At the very least, the poem gains considerably by being studied in connexion with its prototype. In an Anthology the two should be set side by side.

I. The hypothesis has this initial advantage. It answers, once for all, the urgent question—why Pollio should have been singled out for the striking compliment of the strongly-worded dedication (lines 11-14), in which line 11 is, from my point of view, less important than line 13. The phrase 'Te consule' fixes the date; the phrase 'Te duce' assigns the credit. For the

marriage of Octavia sealed the compact of Brundisium; and it was Pollio who, in conjunction with Maecenas, negotiated that treaty,—a treaty which was regarded at the time as a permanent settlement, and on which the highest hopes were accordingly founded.

But Pollio was also a friend of Mark Antony, the bridegroom, and he was one of the consuls for the year. In this triple character of consul, plenipotentiary, and friend, he may therefore be said to have stood in a somewhat special and intimate relation to the child, or the parents of the child; and, viewed in this light, the dedication is seen to be both natural and appropriate.

II. On this hypothesis the date of the poem will be the date of the festivities at Rome with which the peace of Brundisium was celebrated.

The feeling uppermost in men's minds at the time—the feeling which the poet was called upon to interpret—was one of joy at the union by which the two great factions had been brought together, and hope that a child would be born of that union, to be at once an embodiment of the alliance and a pledge of lasting concord. The Eclogue is a poet's rhapsody, not a historical document. Take a modern parallel,—the knitting up of Yorkists and Lancastrians in the marriage of Richmond and Elizabeth, at the beginning of a new era, after a similar period of civil war in England. Shakespeare touches the theme rather lightly, but he, too, expresses in effect much the same hopes as Virgil:

We will unite the white rose and the red :—
Smile, heaven, upon this fair conjunction,
That long hath frown'd upon their enmity!—
O, now, let Richmond and Elizabeth,
The true succeeders of each royal house,
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together!

And let their heirs (God, if Thy will be so)
 Enrich the time to come with smooth-fac'd
 peace,
 With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous
 days!

It would surely be a mistake to dissent from the theory on the ground that Octavia was already a (mother and a) widow. So was Violentilla, for whose second marriage Statius wrote the beautiful Epithalamion referred to below. Virgil's theme was not a love story, but a political alliance. The romance was to be sought, not in the parents, but in the child, and the unity and the hope which the child was to symbolise.

III. The Eclogue bears so strong a resemblance to the *Song of the Fates* at the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, in Catullus LXIV., that we are driven to assume a close and even vital connexion between the two poems. So far as I am aware the full significance of this connexion has never been properly appreciated. There is certainly no hint of what appears to be the truth of the matter either in Page or in Conington.

IV. The Eclogue is prophetic. Catullus had put his Epithalamion on the lips of the Fates, and had introduced it with a special solemnity—'veridicum oraculum (326); veridicos Parcae coeperunt edere cantus (306).' In tone and versification (and it might be added also in length) the resemblance is very marked. And at the conclusion of the Epithalamion there follows an Epilogue in the same strain as the song, bemoaning the iniquity of the present, and regretting the 'auspicious time' (22), in which the gods mixed freely with men. Compare, for instance, lines 15-18 of the Eclogue, with lines 384-6 of the *Peleus and Thetis*; Virgil's

Ille deum vitam accipiet divisque videbit
 Permixtos heroas et ipse videbitur illis

is his answer to Catullus'

Praesentes namque ante domos invisere castas
 Heroum et sese mortali ostendere coetu
 Caelicolae nondum spreta pietate solebant.

The child of the future is to revive the golden age of the past:

Old writers push'd the happy season back,—
 The more fools they, —we forward.

Only fourteen years intervened between the appearance of the two poems. The *Peleus and Thetis* was finished in 54 B.C.¹ The Eclogue belongs to the year 40. We shall hardly be going too far if we say that the later poem was expressly meant to be read as a sequel to the earlier one—a reply as explicit, if we may borrow an illustration from English literature, as Raleigh's reply to Marlowe's *Passionate Shepherd*. The optimism of the Eclogue is intended to correct or to supersede the pessimism of Catullus.² Catullus closes with regrets for the lost age of gold and the departure of Astraea, the Virgo Iustitia, from the world;

Iustitiamque omnes tota de mente fugarunt.

Virgil opens with the announcement of Astraea's return, and preaches a Saturnian Revival:

Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna.

There may also be special point in the suggestion which immediately follows, that Apollo and Diana-Lucina, who alone of the Immortals did not come to the wedding-feast of Peleus and Thetis, will both be present to bless the Roman child at its birth.

V. Virgil, by adopting, or rather adapting, the refrain of Catullus, acknowledges his debt, and draws attention to the resemblance.

VI. This acknowledgment invites, and is meant to invite, a closer comparison. It is tantamount to calling Antony, the bridegroom, a second Peleus; and it invests Octavia, the bride, with the divine attributes of Thetis. This closer comparison also explains and enriches the meaning of the vexed phrase in line 49, 'magnum Iovis incrementum,' by recalling the legend of Jupiter's passion for Thetis, and the omnipotence which had been

¹ See Munro, *Lucretius*, iii. 57.

² Virgil, I take it, wishes the reader to picture to himself at least the Epilogue of Catullus LXIV. as the background of his song. Thus we have a suggestion that the worst has been reached—and passed:

'The night is darkest before the morn;
 When the pain is fiercest the child is born;
 And the day of the Lord is at hand.'

foretold for the offspring of their union.¹ The lustre of this prophecy must necessarily be reflected on any son born of such a mother, and on the child of the second Thetis (Octavia) no less than on the child of the first.

VII. Incidentally the (otherwise) rather perplexing and conventional allusion to the Argo² gains immediate point, for Peleus was an Argonaut; while the last line of the poem—the diction of which recalls the close of the *Peleus and Thetis*,

Quare nec talis dignantur visere coetus,
Nec se contingi patiuntur lumine claro—

is also a distinct reference to Peleus (Simpson, *ad loc.*).

All that Virgil means to say is, 'If you do not smile on your mother, you will never be the man your father was.' He says this allusively, *more suo*; but that this is his meaning there can be no doubt, when once it is recognised that the parents are—'Peleus and Thetis.'

αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλεύς ἐστι θεᾶς γόνος, ἦν
ἐγὼ αὐτῇ
θρέψα τε καὶ ἀτίτηλα καὶ ἀνδρὶ
πόρον παράκοιτιν
Πηλεῖ, δς περὶ κῆρι φίλος γένητ'
ἀθανάτοισι,
πάντες δ' ἀντιᾶσθε θεοὶ γάμου
κ.τ.λ.

(*Iliad*, XXIV. 61 *sqq.* Cited by Ellis in his *Commentary*, p. 225.)

VIII. The burden of the Epithalamion is the greatness of the unborn Achilles. The burden of the Eclogue is the greatness of the unborn child. But whereas the first Achilles was to be pre-eminent in war, this second Achilles is to be pre-eminent in peace. Achilles drew his greatness from Thetis. Boys tend to resemble the mother more than the father. The expression '*patriis*'³

virtutibus' undoubtedly presents some difficulty. But authority is not wholly lacking to justify us in understanding the adjective to mean 'inherited' in the most general sense. This rendering would claim for the child the endowments not only of his father, but also of his mother,⁴ and of his mother's house. In the earlier poem, however, it is Peleus who is introduced by the Parcae with the words,

O decus eximium *magnis virtutibus* augens ;

and honour was due to Mark Antony and his following as well as to Octavia. It would have argued an amazing want of tact in Virgil not to express or imply on such an occasion some appreciation of a man whom even Cicero in the Second Philippic admits to have possessed magnificent fighting qualities, which, if a poet's well-timed compliments could help, Virgil might reasonably seek to press into the service of the new régime. Cf. Agrippa's tribute to Antony in the play:—

A rarer spirit never

Did steer humanity: but you, gods, will give
us

Some faults to make us men.

IX. On the subject and occasion of a wedding the ancients were remarkably frank. They showed even less reserve than the Church of England Marriage Service or the Eugenic Society; witness the '*Fescennina locutio*' in Catullus LXI.; and in particular lines 216 *sqq.*, '*Torquatus volo parvulus*,' etc. Do the four last lines of the Eclogue overstep the limits prescribed by the 'convenances' of a Roman wedding? Are they bolder than the apostrophe in Statius' Epithalamion? Cf. *Silvae*, I. 2. 266 *sqq.*:

Eia age praeclaros Latio properate nepotes,
Qui leges qui castra regant, qui carmina ludant,

biguous word. Anyone who has ever drafted a document in which the views of two opposing parties had to be embodied will know how strong is the temptation to clutch at a word or phrase of more than single meaning on which each faction can put its own (quite distinct and different) interpretation.

⁴ It is important for my argument to note that the only 'capital' MS. which contains this section of the Eclogue, the *Codex Romanus* (assigned tentatively by Nettleship, *C.P.L.*, Praefatio, to the fourth century A.D.), reads *parentum* (not *parentis*) at line 26.

¹ There is a temptation to see in the words a reference to the tradition referred to by Ellis in his commentary (LXIV. 27). An Alexandrian might well have played with this idea. But the style of the Eclogue is altogether too simple. See rather the *Messianic Eclogue*, p. 140.

² Eclogue IV. 34 *sqq.*

³ *Patriis* might conceivably mean simply *i.g. Romanis*; Horace, *Carm.* ii. 7. 4, 'Dis patriis Italoque caelo.' In Virgil, *Aen.* iii. 332 (*q.v.*), the critics disagree—*e.g.*, Mackail renders 'ancestral,' Conington 'his father's altars.' Possibly Virgil intentionally chose an am-

Acceleret partu decimum bona Cynthia
mensem

*Sed parcat Lucina precor. Tuque ipse parenti
Parce, puer, etc.?*

where lines 269-270 are a distinct echo of this Eclogue, and are not without their bearing on the problem of the last four lines.

In his character of prophet—the character of the ‘weird sisters’ in the *Peleus and Thetis*—Virgil projects himself into the future, and sees in his mind’s eye the hoped-for child already born and lying in his mother’s lap;¹ the lines form the climax and conclusion of his *ὀρθομαντείας πόνοσ*. They are meant to leave impressed on the mind of the reader the thought of the ‘*pueritia saeculi*,’

Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.

The world, too, is ‘making a fresh start.’ The time is to be a time of freshness, of promise and of hope. Catullus opens with a reference to the child,

O decus eximium magnis virtutibus augens,
Emathiae tutamen opis, *clarissime nato*, etc.;

while Euripides, in a chorus of the *Iphigenia Aulidensis*, with which the *Peleus and Thetis* shows some acquaintance, makes Chiron—the prophetic character corresponding to the ‘sacer vates’ of the Eclogue—apostrophise

¹ Similarly Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, and similarly the witches in *Macbeth* (IV. 1 init.), express the future in terms of the present: Macbeth sees the children who are to be born hereafter pass before him. Virgil elaborated this device more fully in the vision of Aeneas in Elysium (*Aeneid*, VI.) Gray employs it in *The Bard*. N.B.—In ‘*nascenti puero*’ the participle is a Praesens Futurascens. The phrase = ‘to the child who is to be born.’ Cf. *Aen.* x. 27 (and 74), *Muris iterum imminet hostis (Nascentis Troiae=* this embryo Troy). The perfect ‘*tulerunt*’ in line 61 is, it must be admitted, extremely bold, but scarcely bolder than the *reliquit* of *G.* i. 35, and assuredly not bolder than the metrical license, which can only be justified as a homely touch meant to be in keeping with the homely scene described. The material for a generalisation on this latter point is collected and reviewed by Munro on Lucretius (i. 406). ‘It must always’ (he says) ‘have been a familiar pronunciation.’ To his list of instances add Horace’s ‘*dedērunt*’ (*Epistles*, I. iv. 7) and ‘*vertērunt*’ (*Epode* IX. 17). ‘*Fuerunt*’ in Lucretius (e.g. v. 474 and 667) may fairly be regarded as a disyllable. All the other examples belong apparently to the *sermo cottidianus*.

the bride at the marriage-feast with outspoken promise of a son—

μέγα δ’ ἀνέκλαγεν, ὦ Νηρηϊ κόρα,
παῖδα Θεσσαίοις μέγα φῶς,
μάντις ὁ Φοιβάδα Μοῦσαν
εἰδὼς, Γεννάσεις,
Χείρων ἐξονομάζων.

(*Iph. Aul.* 1062 sqq., Paley.)

X. Whether the marriage in question ever yielded a child of a character to bear out the prophecy is, after all, quite immaterial. A Laureate must take risks. And if the poem was published on the occasion of the wedding *and not later*, we have, at any rate, the best of good reasons why it could not afterwards be suppressed. Virgil’s own command did not suffice to effect the suppression of the *Aeneid*. The world had been put in possession of the work at once, and was not likely willingly to let die so fair a prophecy of a golden age, even though the golden lad may never have seen the light at all.

XI. It has been noticed above that the two Songs are of exactly the same length—i.e., sixty lines each; for (a) the first three lines of the Eclogue are not an integral part of the piece; and (b) there can be no doubt that a line has been lost in the Catullus after verse 354.² Further—and this is more remarkable—each is symmetrically constructed, in the Alexandrian manner, on a somewhat elaborate but perfectly clear and definite scheme. The two schemes differ, it is true. The plan of the Catullian song is given by Prof. Ellis in his *Catulli Veronensis Liber* (p. 260). Briefly summarised his view is this. We have first a Prologue of five lines addressed to Peleus alone; then two strophes of Introduction (of six lines and four); then the body of the song (five stanzas of five lines each); then two anti-strophes (of four lines and six); and, finally, an Epilogue (of ten lines) addressed to Peleus and Thetis together: ‘*Nec deest causa geminationis. Nam in principio de Peleo uno sermo est; in fine de Peleo et Thetide. Ex uno duo.*’

The scheme of the Eclogue, which is not dissimilar, may be set out thus:

² See Ellis, *ad loc.*

A¹, *Prologue* (four lines, 4-7), announcing the new era.

B¹, *Introduction* (ten lines, 8-17), in four stanzas (3. 2. 2. 3); stanza 1, Invocation of Diana-Lucina to add her help to that of Apollo; stanzas 2 and 3, Dedication to Pollio, first as consul ('te consule'), second as inaugurator of the event ('te duce'); stanza 4, Declaration of a second golden age under the rule of the expected child.

C¹, D, C², the body of the poem; the prophecy in detail. This portion falls into three sections, viz.:

C¹ (thirteen lines, 18-30), the boyhood of the child, 'At tibi prima, puer,' etc.

C² (thirteen lines, 37-49), the manhood of the child, 'Hinc ubi iam firmata virum,' etc.

D—Between these two sections are interposed two stanzas, each of three lines, D¹, 31-33, D², 34-36, forming a 'mesode.'

D¹ indicates a need, D² promises provision for the need. The last word in D²—Achilles—may be said to 'name the child'; it is repeated and enforced in a stately periphrasis at the end of E—'Magnum Iovis incrementum.' After this line there is an appreciable pause. Then with the word 'Aspice' the poet turns to address the 'ideal spectator.'

B², *Conclusion* (ten lines, 50-59), cast in four stanzas (3. 2. 3. 2), answering to B¹; stanza 1 expresses the joy of the Universe at the new King's advent; stanzas 2 and 3 the prayer of the poet that he may live to see the promised age: 'If he does, neither Minstrel of the Argo nor child of the gods shall outdo his raptures of song.' Stanza 4, 'Even the god of pastoral poetry will be declared by his own subjects to be outsung, if he courts a contest.'

A², *Epilogue* (four lines, 59-63), answering to the Prologue; A¹ ushers in the new Age, A² the boy-prince of the new Age. The splendour of the prophecy dies away in the music of a diminuendo:¹ 'And a little child shall lead them.'²

The scheme of the poem may be seen at a glance, thus:

Obs. The key to the inner meaning—the allusion to the Argo—lies at the very heart of the poem in the 'Mesode' (D), which begins and ends with lines emphatically suggestive of Catullus. Cf. Virgil's 'Pauca tamen suberunt priscae vestigia fraudis' with Catullus' 'Extenuata gerens veteris vestigia poenae'; and Virgil's 'Atque iterum ad Troiam magnus mittetur Achilles' with Catullus' 'Nascetur vobis expers terroris Achilles.' These resemblances are too close to be accidental.

Now all, or much, of this may seem to be obvious: but the scheme is certainly not observed as it should be in the paragraphing of the standard editions. And it helps so much to a proper appreciation of the whole, that it seems well worth setting down in detail here. We cannot be wrong in recognising in so elaborate a device³ the influence of Catullus in his Alexandrian mood. And if the recognition tends to confirm the hypothesis that the Eclogue is a pendant to the *Song of the Fates*, it may tend also to advance the belief that the new *Peleus and Thetis* were Antony and Octavia. It would have been no compliment to Octavian to make him play *Peleus* to Scribonia's *Thetis*.

XII. One other point. In assuming

was there or who has heard the scene described will ever forget the effect with which the little child was introduced as a finale.

³ The above is only an outline. The correspondences might easily be worked out further. Thus C¹ and C² fall also into four stanzas each, but not, apparently, into stanzas of an equal length: C¹=3. 2. 3. 5., C²=3. 2. 4. 4., i.e. 3. 2. 8. and 3. 2. 8. The transposition of (e.g.) line 30 to follow line 25 would give us 3. 2. 4. 4. in each. But such absolute precision is by no means essential. See Ellis, *loc. cit.* Most of the Eclogues are built up about similar though simpler schemes. Cf. especially numbers VII.-X. The Second would gain appreciably if the first five lines and the last were regarded as Prologue and Epilogue respectively. The 'song' proper stops at line 68, 'Quis enim modus adsit amor?' In 69-73 Virgil points the moral. Cf. Theocritus X. 56-58 rather than XI. 72 sqq.

¹ As often in Greek and Latin poetry, cf., e.g., the close of the *Antigone*, and of Horace, *Carm.* III. 5. See *Virgil's Messianic Eclogue*, p. 69.

² 'Les arts sont frères.' The Sherborne Pageant ended on this note. And no one who

that the poem has an inner meaning, we are doing no violence to literary probability. It was Virgil's custom to 'imply things.' The assumption merely gives us an early instance of his later manner. It is agreed that the *Aeneid* is in a sense an 'allegory.'

The 'pius Aeneas'—the embodiment of the national 'pietas' or patriotism—is, of course, Augustus.¹ Troy stands for the old Republic. The 'appointed city'—which it is the mission of Aeneas to found, and the foundation of which only comes within the sphere of practical politics at the very end of the poem on the overthrow and death of Turnus-Antonius—must, I take it, be the new régime inaugurated by Augustus. Thus much is certain; and though we can never hope to gather up all the threads of allusion and suggestion which were dropped beyond recovery when Virgil died at Brundisium leaving the poem unfinished, we can nevertheless see clearly enough that many of the char-

acters have their prototypes in history.² But a great deal is left to the imagination of the reader. Nor do we find, or expect to find, a precise and detailed correspondence with fact. Sometimes, too, as Prof. Mackail has pointed out,³ Virgil's poetical feeling gets the better of his political purpose. Thus in the original plan of the poem Dido stood no doubt for Cleopatra. But the human element in the theme took possession of the poet's imagination, and led him whither he would not, so that sympathy with Aeneas and his mission is swallowed up in pity for Dido's fate. A like impulse was at work here in the composition of the Eclogue, and compelled Virgil to dwell on the future to the exclusion of the present. His sense of proportion was dulled or lost. The parents of the child are not in the picture. The child himself—the new Achilles whose birth would mean so much for the Roman world—dominates the scene.

D. A. SLATER.

Cardiff.

¹ In the *Sixth Aeneid* Augustus is hailed in so many words as 'the promised deliverer of Rome': 'Hic vir hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,' etc. Perhaps some such title as 'ὁ ἐρχόμενος' occurred in the Sibylline Books.

² See *Virgil's Messianic Eclogue*, p. 48 note.

³ In an address to the Classical Society of the University College, Cardiff, published in his *Lectures on Poetry*.

O MATRE PULCHRA FILIA PULCHRIOR.

JUST how much reality lies behind Horace's heroines we shall probably never know. Those readers who want the poet of love to be a real lover will always prefer to think of his sweet-hearts as real women; whereas they who have formed an ideal of Horace as a perfect Victorian gentleman will perforce think of Glycera, Leuconoe, Myrtale, and the rest as merely so many musical names. In a few cases, however, the pseudonyms cannot hide the very real women behind them. We scarcely needed the scholiast's assurance that the Licymnia of the twelfth Ode of the Second Book is Maecenas' new wife, Terentia. For a very different reason it is impossible to doubt the reality of the notorious Canidia of the Epodes and Satires. Such persistent abuse, such detailed charges, combined with such trivial, not to say prosaic,

insults cannot be traced to the poet's unaided fancy.

One of the poems which has seemed to many critics to have a basis in fact is the sixteenth Ode of the First Book, the famous palinode beginning:

O matre pulchra filia pulchrior,
quem crinosis cumque voles modum
pones iambis, sive flamma
sive mari libet Hadriano.

The very fact that Horace suppresses the name of the woman he had lampooned is suggestive of reality (Kiessling), and the word *iambis* reads like a cross reference to the Epodes. There are besides two ancient traditions as to the identity of the woman or women concerned.

The so-called Commentator Cruquianus says: Cantat palinodiam—i.e., cantando revocat scripserat iratus in amicam Gratidiam. Now Gratidia,