Consolation and Commemoration in Horace *Odes* 1.24 and 4.12

For it shall be my dirge and chant me down  Over the mournful flood to the dim shore,  Where I shall find Quintilius and our tears. Yes, farewell, Horace! Unto you I leave  The laurel and the letters that we loved;  Till we shall meet again. I cannot hold  Your light yet heavy Epicurean creed;  Your lays *“shall outlive brass and pyramid”*,  But he that made them shall outlive the lays,  Though how or where we know not.

– 328-37, from *The Death of Virgil, A Dramatic Narrative* (1907) by Sir Thomas H. Warren

## Introduction

The death of Vergil was no doubt a tragic event for Rome and her citizens, and even more so for his friends, among whom would surely be the poet Horace.[[1]](#footnote-22) Unfortunately, we have little extant which might shed light on their friendship more generally and Horace’s reaction to Vergil’s death in particular;[[2]](#footnote-23) little, that is, save *Odes* 4.12. An odd poem, it invites Vergil to join Horace at a symposium, although the poem was published six years after Vergil’s death in 19 BC.[[3]](#footnote-24) This post-mortem poem to Vergil forms an odd pair with an earlier ode also addressed to Vergil and also written following the death of a friend—*Odes* 1.24. In this poem Vergil receives frank criticism for his excessive and misguided mourning after the death of their mutual friend Quintilius Varus.[[4]](#footnote-25) While in 1.24 Horace consoles the aggrieved Vergil, in 4.12 Horace finds himself in Vergil’s position—grieving the death of a friend.

Horace confronts grief and death directly in both *Odes* 1.24 and 4.12, and each poem ends with a generalizing *sententia*, yet their import would appear contradictory. On the one hand, *Odes* 1.24 recommends the consolatory power of patience:

Durum; sed levius fit patientia

     quicquid corrigere est nefas  
– *Odes* 1.24.19-20  
  
It is hard; but whatever is forbidden to correct becomes easier to bear with patience.,[[5]](#footnote-26)

On the other hand, *Odes* 4.12 turns to the sweetness of folly:

misce stultitiam consiliis brevem:

     dulce est desipere in loco.  
– *Odes* 4.12.25-28  
  
Mix brief folly into your plans: it is sweet to act the fool in the proper place.

This seeming contradiction forces the question: How ought one to understand *Odes* 4.12 in relation to 1.24? More specifically, this paper considers whether Horace has contradicted his own advice in 1.24 by addressing Vergil as if alive in 4.12. Taken together, these two post-mortem poems addressed to Vergil form a diptych of sorts, offering insight into how Horace believes one ought to or can mourn. In *Odes* 1.24 Horace, in the persona of a philosophical teacher, advises that one *ought* to mourn moderately and patiently; in 4.12, however, Horace the convivial poet suggests that the foolishness of mourning has its proper place. I argue that this is not an about-face in Horace’s philosophy, but rather a shift in emphasis.

This paper begins with brief but thorough readings of the two odes, paying particular attention to their consolatory elements. I demonstrate that *Odes* 1.24 offers a consolation built upon Epicurean philosophy and emotional therapy, while *Odes* 4.12 draws heavily from the Epicurean practice of commemoration. This leads me to my final argument, that the symposium of 4.12 represents a poetic memorial of Horace and Vergil’s friendship. In the end I argue that Horace, in an attempt to console himself, imagines and invokes Vergil’s literary persona to share in a poetic dialogue, thereby creating a poetic space in which the acknowledged folly of such a post-mortem invocation is permitted.

1. On their friendship, see Campbell 1987: 314-318 and Duckworth 1956: 281-316; that the two were not friends by the time of the *Odes*, see Thomas 2001: 60 who argues that Horace and Vergil were only acquaintances and Moritz 1969: 13 who believes that the friendship was strained by the publication of the *Odes*. For a response to such readings, see Margheim 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. Horace’s poetry provides the sole basis for positing a friendship. Vergil never mentions Horace by name in his poetry, and no other contemporary or near-contemporary sources ascribe *amicitia* to the two poets, although by 380 St. Jerome assumes a friendship. Horace names Vergil ten times throughout his corpus (*Sat*. 1.5.40, 48, 1.6.55, 1.10.45, 81; *Odes* 1.3.6, 1.24.10, 4.12.13; *Ep*. 2.1.247; *A.P*. 55), five times in the *Satires* alone, where Vergil consistently appears as a friend and colleague.  [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. Though there is some debate whether the Vergilius of 4.12 is Virgil the poet, the *opinio communis* today asserts this identification (see below, p. –). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
4. For readings of *Odes* 1.24, see Commager 1995: 287-90, Khan 1999, Nisbet and Hubbard 1970: 279-89, Lowrie 1994: 377-394, Putnam 1993, and West 1995: 112-15. For the Epicurean, and specifically Philodeman, influence on the ode, see Thibodeau 2003: 243-56 and Armstrong 2008: 97-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
5. Unless noted, Latin text of Horace’s *Odes* is Garrison 1991 and translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)