The Elegiac Cityscape

Welch, Tara S.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Welch, Tara S.
The Elegiac Cityscape: Propertius and the Meaning of Roman Monuments.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28268.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28268
IN ELEGY 4.2 Propertius adopts the voice of a statue of Vertumnus, an Etruscan god established at Rome in the archaic period. The god revels in his shifting identity and sets the tone for the poem in its opening couplet:

qui mirare meas tot in uno corpore formas,
accipe Vertumi signa paterna dei.

Passerby, do you marvel that I have so many figures in one body? Learn the ancestral signs of the god Vertumnus. (4.2.1–2)

He proceeds to describe how mutable these ancestral signs are, as various people clothe his statue in different costumes—female, male, agricultural, military, and political—according to their desire. Because of this mutability, many readers have understood Vertumnus as a mouthpiece for the poet, who thus demonstrates with brio the flexibility of his own elegiac poetry. Indeed, Book 4 is a catalogue of Vertumnian flexibility, assuming sometimes male and sometimes female perspectives, sometimes amatory and sometimes epic themes.

I believe this poem celebrates not just the variety possible in elegiac poetry, but the variety inherent in Roman identity itself, particularly in regard to ethnic identity. The god Vertumnus has Etruscan origins and resides in Rome, where he was brought at the time of the Sabine assimilation into Roman culture. According to Propertius, moreover, his
Statue was crafted by an artisan with Oscan connections. In this way the statue is a witness to and result of the Roman melting pot. The location and setting of Vertumnus' statue support this interpretation. Vertumnus was worshipped at two sites in Rome: a temple on the Aventine, built after the Roman conquest of Volsini in 264 BCE, and a statue adjacent to the Forum on the Vicus Tuscus. Propertius' Vertumnus, though he alludes to the former monument at 4.2.4, speaks from the latter location and draws attention to this part of Rome as its most diverse quarter. It is Rome's most bustling entry point on the banks of the Tiber river, a place that preserves in its name (Vicus Tuscus) and its activity the newcomer's delicate balance between foreign and Roman — i.e., a place where foreigners begin to become Romans.

Propertius' Vertumnus highlights the fact that he prefers his place at the edge of—not within—the Roman forum (4.2.6). Though resident in Rome for hundreds of years, he still considers himself an outsider looking in. Indeed, at the poem's beginning, Vertumnus speaks of his ancestral — i.e., Etruscan — marks (signa paterna, 4.2.2). Near its end he speaks of his ancestral — i.e., Roman — language (patria lingua, 4.2.48). Which is his patria — Volsini or Rome? In this respect, too, Vertumnus is much like Propertius himself, who, as we saw above, reveals his own hybrid identity in the introductory poem to Book 4, identifying both with his native patria Assisi (4.1.64) and with his adopted patria Rome (4.1.60). Following on the heels of the multiple perspectives delineated in 4.1, Propertius' mutable Vertumnus draws attention to the instability of the construction of Roman identity. What is it to be Roman? Are all Romans Roman in the same way?

At the same time, Vertumnus invites questions as to the meaning of Roman monuments. As his statue adapts itself to each diverse and individual passerby Vertumnus demonstrates that his monument — any monument — may be viewed in different ways by different viewers. As with poem 4.1, Vertumnus draws attention to a polysemy of Rome's monuments that matches the variety of Roman viewers. In a bold statement about the meaning of his own and other Roman monuments, Propertius' Vertumnus effectively says, "Read me any way you want."

VERTUMNUS IN ROME: TOPOGRAPHICAL ALTERITY

Vertumnus' presence in Rome is a perfect example of the city's inte-
migration of other peoples and their gods. Both Vertumnus’ Roman monuments were understood as commemorations of Rome’s assimilation of another Italic people; and both lay in places resonant with Rome’s “other” Romans—that is, outsiders who became insiders. As such, both these monuments contemplated Roman identity, as they reminded all Romans, old and new, about the plurality of their community. What is more, both monuments suggested to outsiders visiting Rome the possibility of themselves becoming Roman. Though these two monuments both dealt with Romanitas, they differed in one important respect: one suggests a peaceful, the other a violent assimilation into Roman identity.

Vertumnus’ origins and heritage were as obscure then as they are now. The Romans believed he was an Etruscan deity absorbed into Roman religion early in the city’s development. Varro calls Vertumnus deus Etruriae princeps (Ling. 5.46), but this statement is difficult to assess; does Varro mean that Vertumnus is the foremost Etruscan god, or the oldest, or (like Janus) the first to be celebrated in the new year? The widespread appearance of Etruscan inscriptions to the god Velthune supports the first interpretation of Varro’s words, as does the fact that this god was venerated as Voltumnus at Volsinii, meeting point of an Etruscan federation; Livy 4.22.5 speaks of an Etruscan League that met ad Voltumnæ fanum (at the shrine of Voltumna/us). As the patron of an Etruscan federation, this god also appears on an Etruscan mirror, presiding over an instance of hepatoscopy.

Nevertheless, even though the consonant clusters -th-, -lt-, and -mn- are common features in Etruscan words, the god’s name also evokes Indo-European roots. Roman poets and antiquarians linked the name to the verb uertere, to turn. Modern Etruscologists and linguists have also seen in the god’s name traces of a proto-Latin (and Greek-flavored) syncopated participle uert-omenos from uertere (similar to alumnus, from alomenos/alere), or traces of various other Indo-European —i.e., not Etruscan—roots. The question remains: was Vertumnus originally an Etruscan god adopted by the Romans, or an Italic god adopted by the Etruscans and then re-appropriated by the Romans? Whatever the god’s origins in the Italian peninsula, it is important to note that the Romans themselves blended Vertumnus’ identity, considering him an Etruscan original but assigning him an etymologically Roman past. For the Romans, therefore, the god is both Etruscan and Roman. Propertius will have much to say about this elasticity of Vertumnus’ origins and identity, but we must first understand the Roman monuments to which his poem responds.
Vertumnus’ earliest monument in Rome (and the one whose voice Propertius adopts) was a statue of the god, known as the Signum Vortumnii (= Vertumnii), located at the edge of the Velabrum near the crescent of the Tiber river. In one source it is called a sacellum, but this need not imply a building around the statue—simply a sacred spot. The monument was most likely a statue on a base, a description supported by an inscription dating from the tetrarchy: Vortumnus temporebus Diocletiani et Maximiani. The monument may predate the Forum and the Cloaca Maxima, which bends around it, seemingly to accommodate it. Propertius’ elegy 4.2, to be discussed below, reveals that it was frequently the recipient of offerings of various kinds, including fruit, flowers, clothing, and grain.

Both the signum Vortumnii itself and the area surrounding it have a strong Etruscan resonance. According to Varro and Propertius (probably following Varro), this statue was erected to commemorate the aid given by the Etruscans to Rome during Rome’s conflict with Titus Tatius and his Sabines. These same Etruscans who aided Rome are supposed to have given their name to the Vicus Tuscus, the street that starts at the Signum Vortumnii and runs from the statue between the Capitoline and Palatine hills toward the Forum Boarium. Alternative traditions name either settlers left by Porsenna after his treaty with Rome or Tarquinius Priscus’ supporters as the eponymous group for the Vicus Tuscus. One modern scholar even plausibly suggests that the street was so named because it was the quickest path from the Forum Romanum to Etruscan territory on the opposite side of the river. The accommodation of the Tarquin-channeled Cloaca Maxima to Vertumnus’ existing monument suggests Etruscan respect for, if not veneration of, the god.

The stories about the monument’s foundation and its location indicate that, for the Romans, the god Vertumnus was a totem for their relations with the Etruscans. Indeed the founding of his statue as recorded by Propertius and Varro was a gesture of cooperation between Romans and Etruscans, and all three versions of the origin of the Vicus Tuscus chronicle friendly relations. At the end of the Vicus Tuscus, Vertumnus’ statue marks the edge of the area that was once the Velabrum marsh—a shallow but navigable area in archaic times that would welcome visitors from the north who arrived on the Tiber. It is not surprising that, once drained, this area (the future Vicus Tuscus) became a cosmopolitan commercial district for fine clothing, jewelry, books, and other goods traded between Romans and their rich northern neighbors. The huge Horrea Agrippiana, warehouse complexes
of the Augustan age erected in *opus reticulatum* with travertine additions, also testify to this area’s commercial nature. The Signum Vortumni, standing watch over this district and separating it from the Forum Romanum, was, at the same time, both a beacon of the friendship between the Romans and their neighbors the Etruscans, and a reminder of Roman diversity—indeed, a reminder of Rome’s dependence on others in times of need.

This diversity, however, had its negative side. So many things were traded there—including the flesh of prostitutes—that the Vicus Tuscus suffered from a rather unsavory reputation throughout the Republican era. Plautus and Horace both speak of the area with sardonic scorn, labeling it as a place unsuitable for upstanding people. This feature of the Vicus Tuscus area poses some interesting questions about Roman assimilation of other peoples: were immigrants consigned to low-status

**FIGURE 2.** Plan of the Vicus Tuscus, depicting the Signum Vortumni, around which bends the Cloaca Maxima. The statue marks the transition from the ordered Forum Romanum on the north to the more densely built commercial district to the south. After Colonna 1987: 60.
roles in the city, indicating that Vertumnus served as a strong boundary between the area for newcomers and that reserved for more established Romans? Was assimilation quicker politically than economically, suggesting a Vertumnus who stood as a point of transition? Or rather, since Romans seem to have been eager participants in the Velabrum’s commerce, does the area suggest a meeting place of cultural values, pointing to a Vertumnus who promoted cultural traffic in both directions? A glance at a map of the area (Figure 2) reveals Vertumnus’ position as both boundary and mediator between diverse segments of the Roman landscape.

Vertumnus’ other monument in Rome also speaks to Rome’s assimilation of other peoples, but the message is less welcoming. Vertumnus was venerated at a temple on the Aventine, called the aedes Vortumni, every August 13, the temple’s dies natalis according to several Fasti. Inside this temple a painting of Marcus Fulvius Flaccus in triumphal garb indicated that the temple was dedicated after Flaccus’ conquest of the Volsinians in 264 BCE. It is possible that Vertumnus was brought officially to Rome by euocatio—a process whereby Romans in times of war invited their enemies’ gods to switch their loyalties to Rome, under the promise of better temples and more assiduous worship.

Like its counterpart in the Vicus Tuscus, this Vertumnus also spoke to Rome’s plurality and invited its onlookers to reflect on what it was to be Roman. Its message about Roman plurality, however, was quite different from its partner monument in the Velabrum. Unlike the Velabrum’s Vertumnus, which monumentalized peaceful and gradual absorption of foreigners into Roman culture, the Aventine temple symbolized Rome’s violent assimilation of other peoples and their gods into Roman culture. The Roman victory over Volsinii was particularly thorough, and even sparked anti-Roman propaganda about Roman abuse of this rich town—namely, that Romans had conquered Volsinii merely to confiscate its artworks (Pliny HN 34.34). While booty might have added further incentive to soldiers and commanders, Rome’s violent intervention into Volsinian internal affairs (strife between social classes) and its relocation of survivors suggest a desire to eliminate Volsinii as a political force and to expand Rome’s dominion into Etruria. Not only does the Aventine Vertumnus thus bear witness to his own defeat and assimilation, but, from his location on that hill, he would also observe other conquered peoples led into Rome in future triumphs. From his perspective, to be Roman means to have been conquered by Romans. In this context, the god’s supposed euocatio is par-
particularly interesting. The *euocatio*, signaling as it does the god’s acceptance of defeat and willingness to abandon his hometown in favor of Rome, provides a powerful model for other conquered peoples to behave likewise. The fact that throughout the Republic the Roman army depended increasingly on Italian manpower lends weight to the importance of violent assimilation in Roman culture.

Like the Aventine itself, the *aedes Vortumnii* thus commemorated outsiders who, though assimilated, were still somehow marginalized, still somehow not Roman. The relative absence of Volsinian families from Senatorial records of the last century of the Republic reveals their continued marginality in Rome. The location of the *aedes Vortumnii* on the Aventine is telling. Like the Velabrum, the Aventine was an area for commerce and attracted both foreign and local tradesmen. Also like the Velabrum, the Aventine held negative connotations for some Romans. From its earliest use as Remus’s base in his contest with Romulus, this hill was considered a place for outsiders or for others not central in Roman ideology. Excluded from Rome by the course of the pomerium, the Aventine became the favored hill of the plebeians, who settled there when they wanted to secede from Rome—i.e., when they wanted, in a sense, no longer to be Romans. The *lex Icilia* of c. 456 BCE even gave the Aventine over to the plebeians for them to distribute among themselves.

It was also a hill favored by other outsiders in Rome. Diana, chief goddess of the Latin league, had her temple on the Aventine and shared Aventine Vertumnus’ birthday. Though the importation of this pan-Latin goddess was touted as a unifying move on the Romans’ parts, Livy reveals that Servius’ foundation of this cult in Rome was a crafty attempt to wrest power from the Latin people by appropriating their chief god. Diana’s temple was thus a mark of Roman superiority over the Latin League—another example of Rome’s aggressive assimilation. Add to this Aventine hub the nearby temple to Juno Regina, evoked in 396 BCE just before Camillus’ final destruction of Etruscan Veii, and the tenor of the hill becomes clear: the Aventine is a place for Romans at odds with being Roman—either because (like Rome’s defeated neighbors) they were made Roman or because (like the plebs) they were not made Roman enough.

While Vertumnus’ temple on the Aventine surely evoked feelings of pride or ambivalence for Romans and for those they conquered, the Velabrum monument’s meaning is harder to pin down. As an ancient statue of an ancient god, a playful monument situated at the juncture
between the bustling Vicus Tuscus and the stunning Forum Romanum, Vertumnus’ monument was a bit of a mystery for those who passed by. With its changes of clothing and the variety of offerings left to it, the statue may have been an amusing conversation piece and a curious tourist destination, much like Brussels’ Manneken Pis today. Like its ancient counterpart, the Brussels statue boasts many myths of its origin and meaning, and overshadows in popularity many more venerable and grand monuments. It is this mysterious Vertumnus who speaks in elegy 4.2.

READING VERTUMNUS’ POEM

Propertius’ poem on Vertumnus has more than once been omitted in treatments of Book 4 as a whole. Several possible reasons suggest themselves. First, the statue of Vertumnus is a small and relatively unimportant monument in Augustan Rome, and, unlike the other topographical foci in the book, this monument lacks a known Augustan intervention. Second, the subject himself is quite elusive; not much is known about the god Vertumnus or his shrine beyond the tantalizing details presented in this poem. Third, the poem, though imbued with details important in understanding Roman constructions of gender, can be overshadowed by other poems with similar themes (4.3’s wife Arethusa, 4.8’s martial Cynthia, 4.9’s gender-bending Hercules, 4.10’s male-only cast, and 4.11’s uniua Cornelia). Fourth, the poem has no obvious Vergilian or Livian analogue, and does not lend itself easily to other types of Quellenforschung.

Nevertheless, Vertumnus occupies a prominent place in the book, as an inauguration into the sort of poetry Propertius promises in elegy 4.1. Elegy 4.2 may be read in a metapoetic light: Vertumnus masks the poet, and his speech elucidates the elegies that follow. The strong affinities between Vertumnus and Propertius point to an alignment of the god and the poet. Both celebrate their Tuscan origins. At 4.2.3 Vertumnus boldly states his ethnic heritage: Tuscus ego <et> Tuscis orior (I am Tuscan and I spring from Tuscan roots), a heritage Propertius himself celebrates at 4.1.64: Umbria Romani patria Callimachi (Umbria, the fatherland of the Roman Callimachus). Likewise, Vertumnus connects himself to Apollo and to Bacchus, the twin divine sources of Propertius’ inspiration.
cinge caput mitra, speciem furabor Iacchi; 
furabor Phoebi, si modo plectra dabis.

Bind my head with a turban, and I shall commandeer the appearance of Bacchus. I'll commandeer Phoebus', if you will give me a plectrum. (4.2.31–32)

Moreover, the poem is replete with self-conscious literary puns that cast Vertumnus as a poet discussing his book. If Vertumnus masks the poet, then his speech of self-revelation is easily understood as a commentary on Propertius' poetry. Vertumnus begins his poem by expressing his aptitude for variety:

qui mirare meas tot in uno corpore formas, 
accipe Vertumni signa paterna dei.

Passerby, do you marvel that I have so many figures in one body? Learn the ancestral signs of the god Vertumnus. (4.2.1–2)

As I mentioned above, this variety of form embodies the *poikilia* sought after by the self-proclaimed Roman Callimachus. It exists within the poem itself, as Vertumnus dazzles us with his ability to assume diverse guises. This *poikilia* is also a feature of Book 4 as a whole, and this poem acts as a sort of “second proem” to the book that follows. Various scholars have discussed this function of the poem. For Shea, the solution to the poem’s opening riddle (“what am I?”) is “Propertius’ apostrophe to Book IV.” The poem’s curious denouement (*sex superant uersus*, 4.2.57)—itself a veiled etymology for the god’s name—connects the god’s/poet’s verses with the six transformations (*uversus*) into other characters later in the book (Arethusa, Tarpeia, Acanthis, Cynthia, Hercules, and Cornelia). Wyke and DeBrohun both read Vertumnus’ “turnings” as evidence of the “bipolar poetics” of Book 4, which alternates between opposite discourses such as the amatory and the patriotic, the private and the public, or the elegiac and the aetiological.

Vertumnus is certainly a mouthpiece for Propertius’ elegiac poetry. Given the poem’s metapoetic content, the fact that the poem is an *action* for a monument becomes especially provocative. O’Neill, in a highly suggestive article, has connected Vertumnus’ generic play with the topography of the poem. Adducing evidence from a variety of literary texts, O’Neill reveals the seamier side of the Vicus Tuscus. A hub
of commercial activity in Rome, the Vicus Tuscus was one of the city’s bookselling districts as well as a center for prostitution. The god’s choice of this location over the more respectable aedes Vorturnni, with its connotations of triumph, is a strong statement of his generic preferences: the Vicus Tuscus connects Vertumnus with amatory and with literary themes. The odd god therefore overcomes elegy 4.1’s apparent schism between amatory and aetiological poetry.

While I agree that this poem connects Propertius’ choice of genre with the cityscape he celebrates in Book 4, I believe the connection between genre and city is even more pervasive than O’Neill suggests. Roman elegiac poetry constructs itself as oppositional—not by its opposition to any moral code, Augustan or otherwise, but rather by its systematic refusal to conform to any code through the contradictions inherent in its moral and discursive positions. So, too, Vertumnus’ monument resists categorization or easy identification. As the god describes himself in Propertius’ poem, he is himself an amalgam of various ethnic contributions to Rome, who enjoys a marginal perspective on Rome and is self-conscious about his marginality. What is more, Vertumnus’ identity changes with every viewer (who dresses the god according to his desire) and every reader (who provides any etymology he likes). The monument’s meaning is deliberately difficult to pin down. Vertumnus’ self-presentation in this poem invites the reader to question Roman identity and to regard it not as something stable or monolithic but rather as something flexible and plural. Furthermore, the poem invites the reader, by this example, to question the meaning of Roman monuments in general, and to regard them, too, not as monolithic in their meaning but as subject to individual interpretations. The poem therefore introduces the reader to the various perspectives on Roman monuments that will appear in the poems to follow, and prepares the reader to read those monuments with an open mind.

WHOSE READING? VERTUMNUS AND PLURAL IDENTITY

Vertumnus begins his poem with a promise to reveal the signs of his fatherland. From his first lines he introduces his own plurality and his Tuscan origins:
Passerby, do you marvel that I have so many figures in one body? Learn the ancestral signs of the god Vertumnus. I am Tuscan and sprung from Tuscan origins, nor am I grieved to have deserted the hearths of Volsinii in the heat of battle. This crowd pleases me, and I do not delight in an ivory temple. It is enough to be able to see the Forum Romanum.

(4.2.1–6)

If his body contains many forms, so too does his ancestry, and in the course of the poem’s sixty-four lines Vertumnus invokes the Etruscans, Romans, and Sabines (and maybe Oscans) as participants in his own creation and, indeed, in Rome’s history. In this way he is a strong symbol of Rome’s religious diversity and a fitting prelude to the diversity of poems to follow.40

Of his many ancestors Vertumnus begins with his Tuscan origins, but he is careful to define which Etruscans are not part of his background: he is not one of the Etruscans defeated by the Romans at Volsinii in 264 BCE.41 The way of becoming Roman that relies on imperialism and expansion is not that of Propertius’ Vertumnus: he is not grieved to have become Roman through violent aggression, nor does he require triumphal temples such as the one on the Aventine.42 Rather, he stresses his location on the Vicus Tuscus, the bustling commercial district discussed above as a cosmopolitan place that hosted many visitors to Rome. Indeed, at 4.2.6 Vertumnus emphasizes the fact that he is not in the Roman Forum (the symbolic center of Roman hegemony) but rather on its margins. His perspective on Romanitas, therefore, comes not from the center but from the periphery.

Later in the poem Vertumnus returns to his Tuscan origins, this time stressing the fact that he was assimilated as a friend and ally to Rome rather than as a conquered enemy:

et tu, Roma, meis tribuisti praemia Tuscis,
(unde hodie Vicus nomina Tuscus habet),
tempore quo sociis uenit Lycomedius armis
atque Sabina feri contudit arma Tati.
uidi ego labentis acies et tela caduca,
atque hostis turpi terga dedisse fugae.

And you, Rome, provided rewards for my fellow Etruscans (from whom the present-day Vicus Tuscus has its name), back when Lycomedius arrived with allies and crushed the Sabine forces commanded by cruel Tatius. I saw the crumbling battles and the weapons falling, and enemies who turned their back in shameful flight. (4.2.49–54)

Vertumnus stresses that his entry into Roman culture fell at the time of the Sabine wars, a tradition shared by Varro but not by Livy, Dionysius, Tacitus, or Festus. The god’s lingering description of this event suggests the idea of Roman plurality; the Sabine wars would lead to the assimilation of Sabines and Romans into one community, and Titus Tatius would eventually share Rome’s monarchy with Romulus. The Sabines were thus indirectly responsible for Vertumnus’ arrival at Rome. Pursuing this thought, Vertumnus again evokes the Sabine presence in the city:

stipes acernus eram, properanti falce dolatus,
ante Numam grata pauper in urbe deus.
at tibi, Mamurri, formae caelator aenae,
tellus artifices ne terat Osca manus,
qui me tam docilis potuisti fundere in usus.

I was a maple stump, hewn by the quick blade, a poor god in a pleasing city before Numa. But, Mamurrius, engraver of my bronze form, may the Oscan earth not wear away your artist’s hands, since you were able to cast me into so many pliant uses. (4.2.59–63)

The Sabine Numa, Rome’s second king and one legendary for developing and codifying religious practices in Rome, contributed to Vertumnus’ presence in Rome. During Numa’s reign, as the text implies—and perhaps even at the king’s commission—the legendary artisan Mamurrius Veturius crafted a more permanent statue of the god. The fact that Propertius’ Mamurrius was buried in Oscan territory adds perhaps another ethnic dimension to Vertumnus’ identity. If
Mamurrius was of Oscan descent (a possibility), or had other strong ties to the Oscans (guaranteed by his burial in Oscan soil), then his work on Vertumnus' statue marks yet another ethnic contributor to the god’s identity. Vertumnus begins by promising to reveal his *signa paterna*, the signs of his fatherland; at the end of the poem he reveals that there are many clues to his fatherland, or, to put it another way, that his *patria* includes many parts of Italy.

Vertumnus’ celebration of Italian identity manifests itself elsewhere in the poem as well. To explain one of his (suspect) etymologies, i.e., that his name has an agricultural origin and derives from *uert-annus*, the god launches into a description of the countryside under his purview, and later describes the agricultural roles he can assume:

seu, quia uertentis fructum praecipimus anni,
Vertumni rursus credis id esse sacrum.\(^45\)
prima mihi uariat liuentibus uua racemis,
et coma lactenti spicae fruge tumet;
hic dulcis cerasos, hic autumnalia pruna
cernis et aestiuo mora rubere die;
isitor hic soluit pomosa uota corona,
cum pirus inuito stipite mala tulit.

pastor me ad baculum possum curuare vel idem
sirpiculis medio puluere ferre rosam.
nam quid ego adiciam, de quo mihi maxima fama est,
hortorum in manibus dona probata meis?
caeruleus cucumis tumidoque cucurbita uentre
me notat et iunco brassica uincta leui;
nec flos ullus hiat pratis, quin ille decenter
impositus fronti langueat ante meae.

Or, because I receive offerings of the first fruits of the turning year, you believe in turn that mine is the rite of *Vert-annus*. For me the early grape changes color on the purple cluster, and the coarse corn swells with milky fruit. Here you see sweet cherries, here you see plums in autumn, here you see the blackberries blush on a summer day. The grafter fulfills his vows by placing a crown of fruit on my head, after his pear tree has borne apples on its unwilling branch.
Like a shepherd I can bend myself to the shepherd’s crook, or I can likewise carry a rose in baskets amidst the dust. For what will I say about the thing for which I am most famous, that choice gifts from gardens are presented in my hands? The green cucumber, and the squash with its swollen belly mark me out, and the cabbage bound with a light rush; no flower ever blooms in the meadow, which, when placed on my forehead, does not droop modestly. (4.2.11–18, 39–46)

These two passages constitute a lovely miniature of Vergil’s laudes Italiae, a highlight of the Georgics (2.136–76), and they are replete with direct allusions to that text. Dee, who traces all these allusions, sees Propertius’ “Georgics” as an opportunity for the poet to combine poet-ic and rustic language, producing the Callimachean effect of variatio. Shea also sees a literary-critical subtext to these allusions, as Propertius appropriates one of the forms of Augustan poetry. The evocation of Vergil’s Italy has a cultural dimension as well. The Georgics, especially the laudes Italiae, is a text of Italian nationalism, reorienting Roman identity from a Rome-centered perspective to a perspective that includes all Italy. The poem’s production and publication coincided closely with the oath of Italy, sworn to Octavian on the eve of his last civil war. The Roman countryside had been praised before; Vergil’s innovation in the laudes Italiae was to connect that countryside to Rome’s own greatness. Italy participates in every aspect of Rome’s growth: Italy provides food to sustain Rome, soldiers to expand its dominion, and beasts with which to celebrate Roman triumphs (2.148–50). While critics disagree to what extent Vergil’s laudes are encomiastic or censorious of Rome’s mission, they agree that at the heart of this question is the contribution—be it begrudging or enthusiastic—made by Italy and its peoples to Rome. In the context of Italianization it is telling that Vertumnus is venerated with the fruits of a hybrid tree, one grafted unwillingly (inuito, 4.2.18). If the hybrid crop is a double for Vertumnus, then the adjective inuito, like the mention of Volsinii’s conquest in 4.2.4, hints at violent or unwelcome ways of becoming Roman. In the spirit of Vergil’s laudes Vertumnus’ poem not only makes precious the sublime, but also admits of several perspectives on Romanitas.

Vertumnus’ mini-laudes likewise outline the contributions of Italy to Rome, but the god takes it one step further. As god of the turning year, Vertumnus is responsible for Italy’s fecundity and, as recipient of dedicatory offerings, he is a conduit for the fruits of Italy to come to Rome.
Being himself an ethnic hybrid, Vertumnus is also a symbol not so much of Roman Italy, but rather of Italian Rome. Despite his pan-Italian characteristics, Vertumnus resides in Rome. He mentions the city three times during the poem:

Romanum satis est posse uidere Forum.

dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot
dot et tu, Roma, meis tribuisti praemia Tuscis,
   (unde hodie Vicus nomina Tuscus habet) . . .

dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot
dot sed facias, diuum Sator, ut Romana per aeuum
   transeat ante meos turba togata pedes.

It is enough to be able to see the Forum Romanum.

dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot
dot And you, Rome, provided rewards for my fellow Etruscans (from whom
   the present-day Vicus Tuscus has its name) . . .

dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot dot
dot But, divine Parent of the gods, may you grant that the toga-clad Roman
   crowd passes before my feet forever. (4.2.6, 49–50, 55–56)

Despite his Italian roots Vertumnus is now Roman, or Romanized. The princeps Etruriae subordinates himself to a higher god (diuum Sator). As his capstone (and self-preferred) etymology Vertumnus states that it is precisely his ability to change from one thing (Italian) to another (Roman) that explains his name:

at mihi, quod formas unus uertebar in omnis,
   nomen ab euentu patria lingua dedit.

But because I was able to convert my singular self into any form, from
   this capacity my native tongue gave to me the name Vert-omnis.
(4.2.47–48)

These words baffle for several reasons. First of all, they confound understanding of Vertumnus’ name. Linguists link Vertumnus’ name to the Etruscan Veltune/Velthune. Yet the name also acts as a syncopated
present passive participle along the lines of alumnus. This would be proto-Latin and Indo-European, i.e., not Etruscan. What, then, does Vertumnus mean by “native tongue”? This phrase is complicated by its resonance with the opening couplet:

qui mirare meas tot in uno corpore formas,  
accipe Vertumni signa paterna dei.

Passerby, do you marvel that I have so many figures in one body? Learn the ancestral signs of the god Vertumnus. (4.2.1–2)

The word *paterna* in this opening couplet clearly refers to Etruria, but the word *patria* in the later couplet (*patria lingua*, 4.2.48) refers to Rome itself. What is Vertumnus’ *patria*? The resonance between these two couplets reinforces Vertumnus’ assertion of himself as Romanized. Latin is his *patria lingua* because he has become Roman. His hint recalls Cicero’s statement that every Roman citizen has two *patriae*: his native land, and Rome.51

Vertumnus’ amalgamated identity raises interesting problems for the poem and for Roman identity. Johnson, exploring the crux of mixed identity in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, poses this challenge: “The dialectics of hybridity function variously. Some immigrants become wholly assimilated (the massive purity of the recent convert), but some remain, in some degree, émigrés. What we need is a history of Roman literature that searches for traces of such conflictedness, such indeterminate feelings, in all the Roman writers who are émigrés (which means, most of them).”52

Traces of such an ambivalent outlook can be found in Vertumnus’ poem, as the god voices the perspective of the outsider who has become an insider. First of all, his exact position in Rome is telling. At the tip of the Velabrum and the entrance to the Forum Romanum, Vertumnus’ statue was a beacon for newcomers who arrived by the Tiber, like the newcomer, not fully assimilated into his Roman setting but on the verge of being so. He lacks Johnson’s “massive purity of the recent convert” and occupies a marginal position at the edge of the Forum, with a marginal perspective vis-à-vis Rome:

haec me turba iuuat, nec templo laetor eburno:  
Romanum satis est posse uidere Forum.  
hae quondam Tiberinus iter faciebat, et aiunt  
remorum auditos per uada pulsa sonos:
at postquam ille suis tantum concessit alumnis,
Vertumnus uerso dicor ab amne deus.

This crowd pleases me, and I do not delight in an ivory temple. It is
enough to be able to see the Roman Forum. The Tiber river once made his
path here, and they say the sound of oars could be heard as they struck
the shallows. But after he granted so much to his foster-children, I am
called Vert-amnis from the withdrawal of the river. (4.2.5–10)

As we saw above, Vertumnus’ rejection of a triumphal temple is a
rejection of Roman assimilation through conquest. His position at the
edge of the Forum is telling; he is not a part of the civic and symbolic
center of Rome, but rather enjoys a perspective on it from the margins.
The Tiber river, a very Roman figure which was all the same a conduit
to Rome for so many émigrés, Vertumnus casts as a foster parent to his
adopted children—that is, to the non-Roman Romans. The word alumn-
is in 4.2.9, or foster-children, is striking after Vertumnus’ reference to
his natal background, or signa paterna, in 4.2.2 (accipe Vertumni signa
paterna dei, learn the ancestral marks of the god Vertumnus). This com-
bination of natal and adopted fatherlands finds its analogue in the
dynamics of the Roman family, in which adoption was common, yet
adopted children still traded on their natal heritage.53 Vertumnus has
(at least) two perspectives on Rome.

The word alumnis also resonates strongly with Propertius’ introduc-
tion to Book 4, a poem that purports to introduce Rome to an outsider
(hospes, 4.1.1):

nil patrium nisi nomen habet Romanus alumnus:
sanguinis altricem non putet esse lupam

The Roman foster child has nothing from his ancestors except the name:
he would not wish to believe that a she-wolf nursed his bloodline.
(4.1.37–38)

Johnson makes much, but not overmuch, of this couplet’s comment on
assimilated inhabitants of Rome. It is worth quoting him at length:

Propertius and his contemporaries (whom, in this volume, he offers to
escort through the city and its histories) are Romans in name only
because they have become, caught between two sign systems, the mon-
key in the middle. The small rustic village that was the seed of the huge
metropolis they live in, now the hub of a world empire’s wheel, is so remote from them in time, is, in the paucity of its physical remains, so hidden from them, that they cannot “connect with” their founding myths. Therefore, they need the help of a Roman Callimachus to reveal to them Rome’s aetia (its causes) by expounding the significance of the extant monuments that they see about them every day as they go about their business in the old/new city . . . in short, the Romans too are alumni.54

These are the alumni whom the Tiber fosters, who, like Vertumnus, are both Roman and not Roman. Perhaps this is the reason the singular Signum Vortumni boasts about his plural signa paterna. Signa is more than a poetic plural, as some commentators suggest; and it is more than a synonym for indicia, as others suggest.55 Rather, it is a powerful indication of the plurality of sign systems that inform Roman identity, or, more precisely, of the polysemy of Roman signs.

READING VERTUMNUS’ STATUE

Having introduced the ideas of polysemy and Roman identity in the poem’s opening lines, Vertumnus goes on to demonstrate with spirit his own polysemy—i.e., his ability to assume various guises. One concrete expression of his polysemy is the number of variant etymologies he offers for his name: there are at least three ways to understand it. It is useful here to recall these etymological possibilities Vertumnus offers:

\[
\text{at postquam ille suis tantum concessit alumnis,}
\]
\[
\text{Vertumnus uerso dicor ab amne deus.}
\]
\[
\text{..................................}
\]
\[
\text{seu, quia uertentis fructum praecepimus anni,}
\]
\[
\text{Vertumni rursus credidit esse sacrum.}
\]
\[
\text{..................................}
\]
\[
\text{at mihi, quod formas unus uertebar in omnis,}
\]
\[
\text{nomen ab euentu patria lingua dedit.}
\]

But after he [Tiber] granted so much to his foster-children, I am called Vert-amnis from the withdrawal of the river.
Or, because I receive offerings of the first fruits of the turning year, you believe again that mine is the rite of *Vert-annus*.

But because I was able to convert my singular self into any form, from this capacity my native tongue gave to me the name *Vert-omnis*. (4.2.9–10, 11–12, 47–48)

Though Vertumnus seems to endorse the last of these three etymologies, assigning it an active verb and distinguishing it with *at*, the others make sense to his suppliants. His name means different things to different visitors, according to their needs and their relationship to him. One of the sign systems at play in this poem is language, as Vertumnus draws attention to the mutability of words. With this sort of wordplay Vertumnus (and Propertius behind him) situates himself within the Varronian tradition of etymologizing. As Wallace-Hadrill has pointed out, this tradition is far from politically neutral. As the semantic field of words became an ideological battleground during the fall of the Republic, etymology arose as a way to validate meaning via a “neutral” history. Vertumnus’ multiple etymologies defy any attempts to assign fixed meaning to these signs. In fact, I would add a fourth etymologizing example that drives home the point of his polysemic name:

```
opportuna mea est cunctis natura figuris:
in quamcumque uoles uerve, decorus ero.
```

My nature is fitting for all formulations: con-vert me into whichever you wish, and I’ll be appropriate to it. (4.2.21–22)

Make whatever etymology you like, Vertumnus says, and you will be right. Vertumnus plays here on the etymology of *figura* (figure) from *fingo* (to devise or fashion). An extension on the poem’s interplay of linguistic sign systems is its insistence on evoking many literary genres, from epic (*arma tuli quondam*, 4.2.27) to pastoral (*pastor me ad bacculum possum curare*, 4.2.39) to epigram (*te, qui ad uadimonia curris, / non moror*, 4.2.57–58) to Priapea (*tumido . . . uentre*, 4.2.43), to traditional love elegy (*indue me Cois, fiam non dura puella*, 4.2.23). This variety is more than *poikilia*; it is a statement about the lightning ability of words to blur the boundaries of sign systems.
As Vertumnus’ etymologies and literary registers shift, so too can the Signum Vortumni, in this poem, shape-shift into any and all signa (4.2.2). Vertumnus adapts himself and can be adapted to any sort of passerby, and adopts no fewer than fifteen personae, each with its own accouterment. For DeBrohun these changes signal a “rhetoric of fashion” through which elegiac poetry tries on different costumes. For me, Vertumnus’ changing fashion blurs into his changing identity, as he becomes whatever his audience wants him to become. As Hardie points out, “…the long catalogue of metamorphoses has been uttered by a motionless statue: the principle of mutability frozen in the perfection of a work of art.”

The monument has no fixed identity independent of the viewer’s desire. The meaning of the monument lies with the viewer as much as the maker.

CONCLUSION

At 4.1.69 Propertius promised to unfold the meaning of Roman monuments: sacra diesque canam et cognomina prisca locorum (I shall sing of the rites and festivals of Rome, and of the hallowed names of its places). Poised at the opening of this book, Vertumnus provides a powerful lesson to Propertius’ audience about reading monuments: they may be read in many ways. Indeed Vertumnus’ own polysemy paves the way for Propertius’ unconventional interpretations of monuments in the rest of the book. Just as elegiac poetry espouses the rejection of conventional morality and social roles, Vertumnus’ poem urges us to resist the received wisdom on any given monument. After a decade of focused and thematic urban renovation by the Princeps, Vertumnus’ defiance is strong: though the Signum Vortumni was of no particular interest to Augustus in his urban renovation, the mutability that Vertumnus imparts to all Roman monuments militates against the broader imprimatur of the emperor on the gentrified city. In this way, the poem is intimately connected not only with the topographical poems that follow and their aetiological program, but also with the majesty of the Augustan city.

It is connected with its immediate neighbors in the book as well. By standing on the edge of the Forum, Vertumnus follows Horos’ injunction to avoid that central urban node at 4.1.134 as a place antithetical to his generic—and cultural—identity. Arethusa, in the next poem, will
draw new attention to the interplay of marginality and centrality. In a letter expressing her longing for her husband, Lycotas, who is away on military service, Arethusa promises to dedicate a votive offering of thanks at the city’s Colline gate (4.3.71–72), the exact point on the city’s threshold where it is permeable, and where Lycotas may repatriate himself after his tour abroad. Arethusa contrasts nicely with Vertumnus: whereas Vertumnus offers an outsider’s perspective on Rome, Arethusa, imagining the far-off places where Lycotas serves, reveals a Roman perspective on other parts of the world.

It is ironic that this poem about marginality is central to reading both Propertius’ fourth book and Augustan Rome. More important, though, is the way Propertius links the Signum Vortumni with a variable Roman identity. His poem reminds us that Rome’s splendors appeared differently to different audiences. As Vertumnus signifies something unique for women and men, for soldiers and statesmen, for shepherds and suppliants, this poem admits of perspectives other than that of the elite Roman man—whose own perspective is by no means rigid or circumscribed. This poem, then, goes some small distance toward redressing the balance of Roman texts by recuperating perspectives that are lost or silenced in our literary sources. In a culture masterful at incorporating others into itself, a culture proud of its hybridity, a culture destined, as it thought, to civilize the rest of the world, Vertumnus’ multiplicity stubbornly reasserts an awareness of the other within the Roman self. Propertius thus invites us to go beyond our narrow (and imperialist) view of Roman identity, and to consider if not further voices, then at least further eyes.