

A COMPANION TO
VERGIL'S *AENEID*
AND ITS
TRADITION

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Life of Vergil before Donatus

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Introduction

The collection of biographical information on famous poets and writers began very early in the Greek world. Lives of Homer, Hesiod, and other authors go back to the fifth century BCE. In general the authors' own works were used as sources, and often the lives of the authors were based on the fictional characters and events of their works. Furthermore, several entirely fictional anecdotes were present in these *Lives*. Variants and developments of these anecdotes can often be reconstructed from the various available versions of a single author's *Life* (Lefkowitz 1981).

Analogous features enter into the Roman biographical tradition from Cornelius Nepos onwards. In the case of Vergil this is well documented: the biographical production on this Latin poet is truly the richest. Vergil's work was immediately successful (Horsfall 1995d) and it soon became part of the educational curriculum, beginning with the work of Caccilius Epirota (Suet. *Gramm.* 16). This success supported the collection of notes and anecdotes about Vergil's life, which later nourished a considerable biographical production that was important in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. The influence of this tradition on culture, literature, and art has been continually great, and it remains so in modern times.

The oldest biography of Vergil that we have is the one written around the middle of the fourth century by the grammarian Aelius Donatus as a preface to his commentary on Vergil's works. Donatus' biography is believed to be based largely on the one written at the end of the first century (or the beginning of the second) by Suetonius, who included it in his *De viris illustribus* ("On famous men"). Donatus' version is therefore commonly called *Vita Suetonii vulgo Donatiana* (henceforth *VSD*). However, the presence and quantity of additions and interpolations added by Donatus to the original of Suetonius have been much debated. In the past, Donatian interpolations were considered many and substantial (cf. Geer 1926; Paratore 2007³, 199–302; Bayer 2002², 330–2; list of proposed interpolations in Brugnoli and Stok 1997, XV–XVIII),

but the available thematic and linguistic proofs do not seem conclusive. Today the prevalent belief is that *VSD* coincides largely with the original of Suetonius (Naumann 1981) and that the only addition certainly made by Donatus is *VSD* 37–8 on some of the testamentary provisions made by Vergil regarding the *Aeneid*, together with an epigram by Sulpicius of Carthage about his intention to have the poem burnt. It is possible that *VSD* contains other Donatian interpolations, but there are no sure means of identifying them. It is furthermore unlikely that Donatus omitted large parts of the original Suetonian *Life*: *VSD* is quite long in comparison to other biographies of poets by Suetonius. Our only other witness to the Suetonian *Life* is Jerome's *Chronicle*, which does not quote any part of it that is unknown to *VSD*.

On the basis of this evidence, we will first examine what sources Suetonius may have used, the choices and selections from them that he made in composing his *Life*, and the development of Vergilian biography during the centuries between Suetonius and Donatus. We will then survey some other *Lives* containing further biographical information that might be derived from ancient sources.

Suetonius and his Predecessors

The question of the sources used by Suetonius has been much debated. In spite of the immediate success of Vergil's works, there are no signs that any actual biographies of Vergil existed before Suetonius. Not even the most important biographer of the Augustan age, Hyginus (whom Suetonius includes in the canon of the Latin biographers: cf. Jer. *De viris ill.*, *praef.*), seems to have written one, although he is likely to have written the first commentary on the works of Vergil.

Consequently, it is probable that Suetonius did not use any previous biography, but that he collected and selected from several sources, employing the same procedures that he used in other biographies. Just as in his *Life of Horace*, in *VSD* as well he used letters written to and from Augustus, which were owned at that time by the imperial archives. For instance, in the letter quoted in *VSD* 31, written in 27–24 BCE, Augustus urges Vergil to send him parts of his unfinished poem, or (to employ his own words) "to send me your first sketch of the *Aeneid*, or whatever swatch of it you will" (trans. Wilson-Okamura, in Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008, here and throughout this chapter). Suetonius might also have got information about recitals of the *Georgics* by Vergil at Atella in 29 BCE (*VSD* 27) from Augustus' *Autobiography*. Recitals in about 22 BCE of books 2, 4, and 6 of the *Aeneid* may also have been mentioned there; during this reading, while listening to 6.883 on the death of Marcellus, nephew and heir of Augustus, Marcellus' mother Octavia reportedly fainted (*VSD* 32; also Serv. *ad Aen.* 4.323). Thanks to his governmental position, Suetonius must have had unfettered access to the whole imperial archive, and so to these letters; but he was hardly the only one who knew about them. Their circulation is mentioned by Tacitus in his *Dialogus de oratoribus* (13.2), and even in late antiquity a letter written by Vergil to Augustus on the difficulties that he encountered while composing the *Aeneid* was known to Macrobius (*Sat.* 1.24.11); and another letter by Augustus, on Vergil's coming to Naples to meet him, is quoted by the grammarian Priscian (2: 533.13 Keil).

Besides Augustus, other names from the Augustan age are quoted by Suetonius. They include M. Vipsanius Agrippa, who passed judgment on Vergil's style (the text of VSD 44 reads the otherwise unattested *Vipranus*: see Jocelyn 1979), and the poet Propertius, quoted for his remarks at 2.34.65-6 on the *Aeneid* that Vergil was then composing (VSD 30). A Melissus is quoted at VSD 16 for the opinion that Vergil lacked oratorical skills ("he was very slow in speaking and almost like someone who had not been schooled"). This passage can perhaps be traced to the *Facetiae* of Melissus, a freedman of Maecenas and a grammarian and writer of comedies. If instead the opinion belongs to Aelius Melissus, a grammarian of the second century (Bill 1928, 67), then the passage would have to have been inserted by Donatus. Finally there is Eros, Vergil's own freedman and copyist, whose testimony Suetonius cites to illustrate the way in which Vergil dealt with incomplete verses (VSD 34).

All of this supposes an intermediate source: Suetonius could not have spoken with Agrippa, Melissus, or Eros, all of whom lived a century earlier. For the other oral testimonies Suetonius identifies the sources he used: the remarks by Plotia Hieria on Vergil's sexual life are taken from Asconius Pedianus (VSD 10), probably from his book *Against Virgil's Detractors* (*liber contra obtretractores Vergilii*), which is quoted later on in the *Life* (VSD 47). A report concerning the opinion of Julius Montanus that Vergil's recitations were unsurpassed (VSD 29) is attributed to Seneca (no doubt the Elder; but unfortunately the passage of his work that contained this reference has been lost). According to what the grammarian Nisus heard "from older men" (VSD 42), Vergil supposedly changed the order of two books of the *Aeneid* (moving 2 and 3 from the beginning of the poem to their current position) and deleted the original proem (*Ille ego qui quondam*, etc., the so-called "preproemium").

Asconius Pedianus (ca. 9 BCE-76 CE) was at times believed to have been Suetonius' main source, but it is unlikely that he composed a real biography. He certainly defended Vergil against his detractors (VSD 43-6) and probably collected anecdotes about him: besides the oral testimony by Plotia Hieria cited above, Asconius recorded (according to Serv. Dan. *ad Ecl.* 4.11) that the son of Asinius Pollio declared to Asconius that he himself was the *puer* celebrated in the fourth eclogue. Asconius was also believed to have heard directly from Vergil that the phrase *spatium coeli* ("space of heaven," *Ecl.* 3.105) alluded to a certain Caelius of Mantua (schol. Bern. *ad Ecl.* 3.105). This same exegesis is known to Servius as well, who adds (*ad loc.*) that Caelius was a wastrel who at his death owned only enough land to be buried in (hence *spatium Coelii*, "space of Caelius"). But the attribution of this statement to Vergil is completely imaginary: Asconius could not have spoken with Vergil himself, as the poet died about ten years before he himself was born. Lastly, Asconius stated that Vergil wrote the *Eclogues* at the age of 28 (ps.-Probus *ad Ecl. praef.*; also ps.-Probus *Vita*; Serv. *ad Ecl.* 1.18 and *ad Geo.* 4.564).

Besides Asconius, Varius Rufus, himself a poet and the first editor of the *Aeneid*, often has been regarded as Suetonius' main source. The only biographical note attributed to Varius regards Vergil's versification: "Varius too tells us that Vergil wrote very few verses in a day" (Quint. *Inst.* 10.3.8, trans. Russell). A similar statement about Vergil's composition was made by the philosopher and sophist Favorinus (ca. 85-155 CE), who is quoted by Gellius: "the friends and intimates of Publius Vergilius, in the

accounts that they have left of his talents and his character, say that he used to declaim that he produced verses after the manner and fashion of a bear" (*amici – inquit, familiaresque P. Vergilii, in his quae de ingenio moribusque eius memoriae tradiderunt, dicere eum solitum ferunt parere se versus more atque ritu ursino*, Gell. NA 17.10. trans. Rolfe). The simile between the bear and the poet presupposes the belief of ancient zoographers that bear fetuses were born shapeless and then licked into shape by their mothers (Arist. *Hist. an.* 6.579a). On the basis of the passage in Gellius, it has been suggested that Favorinus might have had access to a *Liber amicorum*, a sort of collection of memories and testimonies by Vergil's friends (Aly 1923). But it is more likely that Favorinus referred to Vergil's best-known friend, namely, Varius himself (Hor. *Serm.* 1.5.40, 1.6.55, 1.10.83; *Epist.* 2.1.247; cf. Hollis 1996). This supposition is confirmed by the words of Quintilian quoted above. The simile of the bear is also attested by VSD 22, which refers specifically to the composition of the *Georgics*. In addition, it is quoted by Jerome (*in Zacch.* 3.11 *praef.*) from the original Suetonian *Life*. Naumann (1976, 45–9) believed that Suetonius was the source used by Favorinus, but it seems more likely that both used Varius as a source. It is, however, uncertain where Varius could have mentioned the bear simile. Suggestions have included his edition of the *Aeneid* itself (perhaps in a preface?), a hypothetical work entitled *De Vergili ingenio moribusque* ("On Vergil's talents and character," posited, like the hypothetical *Liber amicorum*, by many scholars on the basis of Gellius' anecdotes), and so forth. But these ideas are very doubtful, and we have in any case no indication that Varius wrote a true biography of Vergil. After his friend's death he worked for a few years on editing the *Aeneid*: Jerome (*Chron. ad Ol.* 190.4) dates its publication to 17–16 BCE. Varius then died himself soon afterwards, in about 15 BCE. He certainly did not write about his editing of the *Aeneid*, because about this matter Suetonius is able to cite only the oral information collected by Nisus.

Varius, Vergil's Will, and the Publication of the *Aeneid*

Already Hyginus (according to Gell. NA 10.16.1, 11) pointed out some narrative incongruities in the *Aeneid* and attributed them to the incompleteness of the poem, saying that Vergil would have removed them had he not died without finishing it. The many incomplete hexameters of the poem (about fifty-eight in all) also suggested that the *Aeneid* was unfinished. VSD 24 supplies the following explanation on the incomplete verses: "lest anything should impede his monumentum, he would let certain things pass unfinished (*imperfecta*); others he propped out, as it were, with lightweight verses, which he jokingly said were placed there as struts, to hold up the edifice until the solid columns arrived" (*quos per iocum pro tibicinibus interponi aiebat, donec solidae columnae advenirent*).

The poem's supposed incompleteness (on which see O'Hara's chapter in this volume) gave rise to the legend that Vergil, before his death, wanted to burn his poem because he could not finish it. This legend was known already to Ovid in the years of

his exile (8 CE). Alluding clearly to the *Aeneid*, Ovid affirms that the composition of his *Metamorphoses* was broken off by his banishment (*Tr.* 1.7.22; 2.63–4; 3.14.21–2) and that he consequently wanted to burn his unfinished poem (*Tr.* 1.7.16). The recurring image of the *Metamorphoses* as being snatched from the funeral pyre (*Tr.* 1.1.118; 1.7.38; 3.14.20) strengthens the allusion to the *Aeneid*. Ovid admits, however, somewhat ironically, that copies of the *Metamorphoses* were already in circulation (1.17.24) and that the poem was already being read by the Romans (3.14.23). This irony may involve the *Aeneid* as well, which was known to some extent and even celebrated several years before Vergil's death, at least where those books that were read in the presence of Augustus are concerned.

After Ovid, the legend is mentioned again by Pliny the Elder (77 or 78 CE), who writes that Vergil enjoined in his will that the *Aeneid* be burned: "the divine Augustus overrode the modesty of Vergil's will and forbade the burning of his poems" (*carmina Vergilii cremari contra testamenti eius verecundiam vetuit*, NH 7.11, trans. Rackham). Suetonius seems to reject this version of the legend by leaving it out of his report on Vergil's will: "he bequeathed half of his estate to Valerius Proculus, his brother by another father; a quarter to Augustus; a twelfth to Maecenas; and the rest to Lucius Varius and Plotius Tucca" (VSD 37). But Suetonius proposes another version in which the request to burn the *Aeneid* is connected to Vergil's journey to Greece, where he wanted to go in order to revise (*emendare*) his poem. While on this journey, Vergil met with Augustus at Athens, and returned with him to Italy, landing at Brundisium, where he died (VSD 35). Dependable historical data in this story include the information that Vergil died at Brundisium, the usual port of embarkation to or arrival from Greece, and the return of Augustus from the East in October 19 BCE. The idea of the last journey was perhaps suggested either by Vergil's journey to Greece as celebrated by Horace in *Odes* 1.3 or by the sea voyage that Terence undertook to seek new Greek comedies, another voyage that ended with the poet's death (Suet., *Vita Ter.*). In any case, the story of the last journey gave Suetonius a "dramatic" context in which to place the request to burn the *Aeneid*. The request in this version (VSD 39) is made twice by Vergil, first to Varius before leaving, with a sort of premonition of death ("he had arranged with Varius to burn the *Aeneid* if anything befell him"), and then at Brundisium on the point of death ("when his health was failing, he demanded his scroll cases earnestly, intending to burn them himself," *in extrema valetudine assidue scrinia desideravit, crematurus ipse*). The request was rejected, first by Varius (who "had insisted that he would not do so"), then by those who cared for Vergil when he was dying ("but no one brought them").

With the notice that follows ("but he gave no precise stipulations in this matter," *nihil quidem nominatim de ea cavit*), Suetonius seems to deny the version in which the burning of the *Aeneid* was stipulated in Vergil's actual will (Lucarini 2006, 283–5). But this note is somewhat contradicted by the following statement, according to which Vergil left specific instructions in regard to his writings: "For the rest, he bequeathed his writings to the aforementioned Varius and Tucca, on the condition that they publish nothing that he himself had not revised" (*ceterum eidem Vario ac simul Tuccae scripta sub ea conditione legavit, ne quid ederent, quod non a se editum esset*, VSD 40). It is not clear where and when Vergil would have given these instructions: they evidently

regard all his works, not just the *Aeneid*, and seem therefore to go back to a previous time. As testamentary provisions, they must have been contained in Vergil's will, but Suetonius reports only that the will bequeathed to Varius and Tucca a part of Vergil's patrimony.

These incongruences suggest that the statement in *VSD* 40 naming Varius and Tucca as literary executors might have been added by Donatus. This is also suggested by the fact that Tucca is mentioned here together with Varius as legatee of Vergilian writings, whereas Suetonius, on the other hand, attributes the revision and publication of the *Aeneid* to Varius alone. This is shown by the next sentence, which concerns Augustus' provisions for editing and publishing the *Aeneid*: "nevertheless, Varius published them on the authority of Augustus, but revised in only a cursory fashion, so that he even left any unfinished verses that there happened to be" (*edidit autem auctore Augusto Varius, sed summatim emendata, ut qui versus etiam imperfectos, si qui erant, reliquerit, VSD* 41). This statement is entirely consistent with the earlier one (*VSD* 39) on the absence of "precise stipulations" regarding the publication of the *Aeneid*. The tradition regarding Tucca is therefore post-Suetonian; and the fact that Donatus attributed the edition to both Varius and Tucca shows that his reference to them as "the two who corrected the *Aeneid* at Caesar's behest after Vergil's death" (*VSD* 37) is an interpolation by him.

Jocelyn (1990, 273) does not believe that Suetonius' omission of Tucca's name implies that he excluded him from the role of editor as well. But it is significant that when Suetonius later returns to this theme, he again mentions only the name of Varius ("Nisus the grammarian used to say that he heard from older men that Varius changed the order of two books, and that which now is second he moved into third place, and also that he smoothened out the beginning of the first book," *VSD* 42). Suetonius seems skeptical about the information collected by Nisus, presenting it as gossip transmitted by "older men." Rather, he is convinced that Varius revised the *Aeneid* "only in a cursory fashion" and kept the poem as Vergil wrote it. He adds that incomplete lines, except for 3.340, "were freestanding and complete with regard to sense" (*VSD* 41). It is likely that Suetonius knew also of other interventions that later sources attribute to Varius, such as the omission of the Helen episode (2.566-89) attested by Servius in his preface of other material as specified in his commentary (*ad Aen.* 4.436; 5.871; 7.464; cf. also Serv. Dan. *ad Aen.* 2.566). But Suetonius himself did not pass on this information because, one has to suppose, he regarded it as untrue.

Choices, Selections, and Omissions by Suetonius

Information supplied by *VSD* goes back to different periods and shows a process of stratification that began after Vergil's death. As far as we can see, Suetonius based his choices, selections, and omissions on the material that accumulated during the first century CE.

The first biographical information was collected immediately after Vergil's death. These include his date of birth (October 15, 70 BCE, *VSD* 2; cf. Mart. 12.67.5, Pliny, *Epist.* 3.7.8), date of death (September 21, 19 BCE, *VSD* 35), and the places of his

death and burial (Brundisium and Naples, *VSD* 35–6). For his place of birth the poetic tradition (beginning with *Ov. Am.* 3.15.7) indicates the town of Mantua, following Vergil himself in *Ecl.* 9.27 and *Geo.* 3.12. But the earlier passage suggests a village in the countryside, which is identified by *VSD* 2 as Andes. The vagueness of this reference (“a village called Andes, not far from Mantua”) suggests that Suetonius was unable to locate this village with precision. Essential biographical data, in addition to information about his works, were incorporated into the epitaph on Vergil’s grave near Naples: “Mantua gave birth to me, the Calabrians stole me away, Parthenope now holds me; I sang of pastures, plowlands, and leaders” (*Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc / Parthenope; cecini pascua rura duces*). Vergil’s *opera* provided some more information of biographical interest. These include his residence in Naples while composing the *Georgics* (*Geo.* 4.563–4, which were used by the author of the epitaph: Bettini 1976–7); ties with Asinius Pollio, Alfenus Varus, and Cornelius Gallus (all mentioned at various points in the *Eclogues*); ties with Maecenas (the addressee of the *Georgics*). Also the name of Varius is quoted at *Ecl.* 9.35 (and more frequently, together with Vergil, in Horace’s works).

Encouraged by the existence of this much reliable information about the poet’s life in his own works, Vergilian commentators extrapolated additional, unlikely information as well and created a great number of imaginary anecdotes. The fact that Vergil wrote the *Georgics* encouraged a belief that he came from a family of peasants; but this did not prevent the addition of further, contradictory information. As a result Suetonius was uncertain about two possibilities concerning the occupation of Vergil’s father: “some have reported that he was an artisan who was a potter, many that he was at first the employec of a *viator* named Magus, and then a son-in-law on account of his industry, and that he built up a fortune of no mean substance by buying up woodlands and tending bees” (*VSD* 1). The famous *Ecl.* 9.28, where Vergil complains about the consequences of Mantua’s nearness to Cremona (“woe to you, Mantua, too close to poor Cremona”), which was punished after the civil war with confiscation of lands, was perhaps the source of the information that connects Vergil to the latter town. According to *Catal.* 8.6 Vergil’s father lived in Cremona as well as Mantua; according to *VSD* 6 Vergil studied in this town. The *Eclogues* also gave rise to the idea that Vergil preferred pederastic love: *VSD* 9 names two boys, Cebes and Alexander, who were loved by Vergil and affirms that it is the latter who is serenaded in *Ecl.* 2 under the name of Alexis (cf. *Mart.* 5.16.12; 6.68.6; 14.12). *VSD* 14 mentions an analogous identification of Daphnis in *Ecl.* 5, in whose name Vergil supposedly laments the death of a brother whose real name was Flaccus.

In addition to information about Vergil’s method of composition, which Varius himself may have mentioned, several other elements in *VSD* can be correlated with remarks made about Vergil as early as the Augustan age. Among these are some details concerning Vergil’s physical appearance, a usual category in Suetonius’ biographies. There was certainly a tradition of Vergil portraits and sculptures: *Martial* (14.186) knows of manuscripts that featured portraits of Vergil, and *VSD* 8 may refer to them. But some elements may have been suggested by Horace. Ancient commentators identified as Vergil the personage represented at *Serm.* 1.3.31 as wearing his hair “in country style” (*rusticius tonsus*) in the same way as *VSD* 8 describes Vergil as having a

"country appearance" (*facies rusticana*). Horace's comment that Vergil was "dyspeptic" (*crudus*, *Serm.* 1.5.49) correlates with the passage in *VSD* 8 stating that Vergil "suffered very much from pain in his stomach." The "swarthy complexion" (*aquilus color*) that *VSD* 8 mentions when describing Vergil may be traceable, if not to the Augustan period, at least back to the "dark Maro" of Juvenal (*nigro Maroni*, 7.227). It is not certain, however, whether Juvenal refers to a portrait of Vergil or to a darkened manuscript.

Vergil had become an object of hostile criticism already in the Augustan age, as the judgments attributed to Agrippa and Melissus point out, and detractors of Vergil were known already to Ovid (*Rem. am.* 367-8). Anti-Vergilianism increased in the ensuing years of the early principate. Caligula led the initiative to remove the books and images of Vergil from libraries, calling him "a man of no talent and very little learning" (*Suet. Cal.* 34: *nullius ingenii minimaque doctrinae*). The author of the *Einsiedeln Eclogues* rates Nero ahead of Vergil as poet. On the list of detractors (*obrectatores*) quoted by *VSD* 43-6 from the aforementioned work of Asconius Pedianus, we find both critics of Vergil and parodists of his works.

Among the issues that occupied the detractors was Vergil's similarity to Homer. The motif was introduced in a positive way by Propertius, who wrote that "something greater than the *Iliad* is being born" (*nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade*, 2.34.66), but afterwards this similarity to Homer was used against Vergil. A certain Q. Octavius Avitus wrote eight books about Vergil's imitations of earlier authors, and particularly of Homer. Melissus' aforementioned judgment on Vergil's oratorical weakness may imply another disadvantageous comparison, namely, with Cicero. This comparison was developed mostly in rhetorical schools. An explicit judgment was given by Cassius Severus, for whom "the felicity of Vergil's touch deserted him in prose" (*Seneca, Contr.* 3 *praef.* 8, trans. Winterbottom).

But anti-Vergilianism in its various forms provoked a reaction that became widespread in the Flavian period. Asconius Pedianus replied succinctly to Octavius Avitus' criticism of Vergil's dependence on Homer, quoting Vergil himself to the effect that "it is easier to steal the club of Hercules than a line from Homer" (*VSD* 46). Vergil's preeminence in poetry gradually extended to eloquence and to various other areas of knowledge. Already Seneca the Younger called Vergil "a very eloquent man" (*De otio* 1.4: *vir disertissimus*); later, in the second century, Florus would debate whether Vergil was greater as a poet or as an orator (this was in fact the title of one of his works: *Vergilius orator an poeta?*). *VSD* 15 credits Vergil with studies in the field of medicine and *mathematica* (i.e., astrology). The ancient tradition of the poet-bard already allowed a sort of "deification" of Vergil in the time of Nero: Calpurnius Siculus spoke of Vergil as an "inspired bard" (*vates sacer*, 4.65). Seneca the Younger called him "the greatest bard inspired with almost godlike utterance" (*maximus vates et velut divino instinctus*, *De brev. vit.* 9.2, trans. Basore).

Many other notes and anecdotes about Vergil go back to this time, such as those that concern the prodigies that supposedly occurred before and after his birth, reproducing patterns well known from the biographies of other famous men (cf. Fairweather 1974). *VSD* 3-5 recites three prodigies, two of which took as their starting point the pseudo-etymology of the name "Vergilius" from *virga*, "twig." Etymologizing is also implicated

in another strand of the tradition that appears at this time, the nickname *Parthenias*, but the background here is more complex. During the early principate the *obtretractores* had attacked not only the poet's work, as we have seen, but evidently his morality as well: we can infer as much from the defense organized by Suetonius regarding Plotia Hieria, Varius' partner or wife (Serv. *ad Ecl.* 3.20), with whom Vergil was believed to have had an affair. Suetonius, in disagreeing with this gossip, quotes Plotia Hieria herself as having denied to Asconius Pedianus that she ever had a relationship with Vergil (VSD 10). On the issue of Vergil's pederastic preferences, Suetonius assumes an attitude of "cursory tolerance" (Baldwin 1983, 390). It is against this background that we must understand the nickname "Parthenias" ("little virgin") that was given to Vergil in Naples (VSD 11). The name is presented by Suetonius in a positive way as referring to the shyness of the poet, who in Rome "would seek refuge in the nearest house from those who followed him and pointed him out." The nickname was based on the name of the town of Naples ("Parthenope"; cf. *Geo.* 4.564) or on the pseudo-etymology of the name Vergilius from the zodiacal sign Virgo. It refers to the general character of the poet, but maybe also, in reaction against the more salacious anecdotes, to his sexual life. At any rate, Pliny the Elder spoke about Vergil's "modesty" (*verecundia*) in the aforementioned testimony regarding the poet's last will and testament, and by this time modesty must have been a recognized aspect of the poet's image. In fact, some years later, Pliny's nephew spoke about Vergil's "moral integrity" (*sanctitas morum*, *Epist.* 5.3.6).

A third part of the biographical information in VSD may have come from the second half of the first century. The earliest quotations from some of the works included in the so-called *Appendix Vergiliana* date to the Flavian period. *Catal.* 2 is cited as Vergilian by Quintilian (*Inst.* 8.3.28), as are *Culex* by Martial (8.55.20; 14.185), Statius (*Silv.* 2.7.74) and eventually Suetonius (in his *Vita Lucani*). *Culex*, remarkably, is the only "juvenile" work for which VSD 18 gives a summary, date, and the final couplet; for the others only titles are mentioned. This collection of pseudoepigrapha was likely encouraged by the precedent with Homer. Suetonius was skeptical in the case of Horace: his *Vita Horati* contests the authenticity of certain works (some elegiacs and a prose epistle to Maecenas) that were ascribed to him. In Vergil's case his doubts seem limited to the *Aetna* ("its authorship is still a matter of debate," VSD 19). The story about Ballista may also have been produced in this period: Vergil was believed to have written an epigram for this teacher-robber (VSD 17), who can be categorized with other strict (not to say violent) teachers attributed to the great poets (for example by Horace himself at *Epist.* 2.1.70-1).

The custom of public recitations began in the Augustan age, and was introduced by Asinius Pollio. It is therefore not impossible that the *Eclogues* were in fact delivered with success on stage, as VSD 26 claims. There is also attestation, as we have seen, about Vergil's private recitations in the presence of Augustus. But other anecdotes about Vergilian recitations were certainly created later, when public recitations had become common practice. Thus the story told by Servius (*ad Ecl.* 6.11) in which the sixth eclogue was recited by the famous actress Cytheris in the presence of Cicero seems very unlikely. (Cytheris is mentioned in *Ecl.* 10 under the name "Lycoris," which was given to her by Cornelius Gallus.) The same goes for the anecdote reported by Tacitus (*Dial.* 13) in which Vergil, while attending a theatrical performance at

which some of his verses were performed, received an ovation as great as if he were Augustus himself. VSD 33 affirms that Vergil "gave recitations to larger audiences, though not often." This refers perhaps to the doubts expressed by Pliny the Younger, Suetonius' friend and correspondent, who declared that he did not know whether Vergil himself recited or not (*Epist.* 5.3.7).

I have already pointed out some selections made by Suetonius in regard to information he presumably must have had, for example about Varius' modifications of the *Aeneid*. In VSD evidence about any extensive changes is transmitted under the heading of those rumors collected by Nisus, while in Servius such evidence is treated more extensively and taken more seriously. Suetonius is more skeptical because of the loyalty he attributed to Varius in editing the *Aeneid*, as we have seen previously. Likewise Suetonius must have been aware of information known to Asconius that he himself does not cite. The aforementioned exegesis of *Ecl.* 3.105 about Caelius of Mantua as well as the fact that Vergil composed the *Eclogues* at the age of 28 are two examples. The first omission is not surprising if we consider Suetonius' general skepticism about this type of exegesis. The second detail he omitted because the age it attests does not agree with the time line of VSD 25, according to which Vergil spent three years on the *Eclogues*, seven on the *Georgics*, and eleven on the *Aeneid*. If the three works were composed consecutively, Vergil must have begun composing the *Eclogues* at the age of 30. (VSD 25 also gives us the age at which Vergil supposedly composed the *Culex*, but the validity of this testimony – regardless of who really wrote the poem – has been debated: the manuscript reading of sixteen years (XVI) should probably be emended to twenty-six (XXVI).)

Suetonius' most striking omission, however, is that of Vergil's adherence to Epicureanism, an adherence confirmed by a Herculaneum papyrus recovered in the 1980s (Gigante and Capasso 1989). It contains the dedication to a treatise *On flattery* in which the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus mentions the names of Plotius (Tucca), Varius, Vergil, and Quintilius (Varus). Three of these names, Varius, Tucca, and Vergil, are found in Horace's account of the journey to Brundisium (*Serm.* 1.5.39–41). The papyrus thus confirms information given by Servius (*ad Ecl.* 6.13; *ad Aen.* 6.264) about Vergil's Epicurean scholarship at the school of the philosopher Siro (who is mentioned in *Catal.* 5 and 8 as well).

VSD 10, however, refers only indirectly to Vergil's Epicureanism, if at all. For instance, Varius' invitation "to share" Plotia Hicria "with him" (*ad communionem sui*) may have been made in accordance with Epicurean custom; but Vergil, as we have seen, refused the offer. Besides underlining Vergil's morality, Suetonius may have wanted to show that Vergil distanced himself from certain Epicurean habits. Moreover, VSD 35 affirms that Vergil intended, after the projected trip to Greece and the completion of the *Aeneid*, to devote himself to philosophy; but he does not specify which school of philosophy he wanted to join. By being vague Suetonius may have wanted to imply that Vergil aspired to a philosophy other than the Epicurean that he professed in his youth. Maybe for the same reason, Suetonius omitted Naples from the list of cities where Vergil had studied (VSD 6–7: Mantua, Cremona, Milan, and Rome). Naples is, however, found instead of Rome in the list given by Servius – who, unlike Suetonius, made no effort to hide Vergil's Epicureanism.

From Suetonius to Donatus

Suetonius' account of Vergil's last will and testament won general acceptance. Favorinus reproduced it, without significant additions: "when he was laid low by disease and saw that death was near, he begged and earnestly besought his friends to burn the *Aeneid*, which he had not yet sufficiently revised" (Gell. *NA* 17.10.4, trans. Rolfe). The version that was rejected by Suetonius, in which Vergil's will ordered that the *Aeneid* be burnt, seems to reappear eventually in late antiquity, when Macrobius writes that Vergil "bequeathed (*legavit*) his poem to the flames" (*Sat.* 1.24.6, trans. Davies). But a new version of Vergil's testament, as we have seen, was added by Donatus, who testifies that Vergil left his writings to Varius and Tucca, "on the condition that they publish nothing that he himself had not revised" (*VSD* 40). This version is attested by the *Vita Probiana* as well ("Vergil himself had stipulated in his will that nothing which he had not published should exist"); but Servius, in his *Life of Vergil*, refers this instruction to Augustus, who "commanded Tucca and Varius to edit [the *Aeneid*] according to this rule, that they remove superfluous material but add nothing" (*hac lege iussit emendare, ut superflua demerent, nihil adderent tamen*). The addition of the phrase "remove superfluous material" seems intended to justify the testimony concerning Varius' omissions of the "old" proem and of the Helen episode.

Unlike Suetonius, then, ancient scholars of later periods attributed the posthumous edition and publication of the *Aeneid* not to Varius alone, but to the team of Varius and Tucca. This new version was supported by Donatus in his addition to *VSD* 37 and by Jerome in his *Chronicle* (*ad Ol.* 190.4 – the only case in which Jerome follows *VSD* instead of the original *Life* by Suetonius). Servius, too, as we have seen, attributes several editorial modifications on the *Aeneid* to both Varius and Tucca. This version most likely originated in the second century. Donatus provides conformation of this view by quoting the epigram by Sulpicius of Carthage about the burning of the *Aeneid*. This Sulpicius is perhaps identifiable with a homonymous commentator on the *Aeneid* who is quoted in the *scholia Veronensia* for an exegesis on *Aen.* 9.36 (which agrees with an interpretation of Valerius Probus). The identification is validated by the epigram, which might have been composed to appear at the beginning of an edition or commentary of the *Aeneid*: "Vergil had bidden that these poems were to be destroyed by flames" (*iusserat haec rapidis aboleri carmina flammis*), where "these poems" (*haec carmina*) seem to refer to the books of the *Aeneid* that were introduced by this epigram. Less certain is the identification of Sulpicius of Carthage with Sulpicius Apollinaris, a grammarian who lived in the second century, a teacher of Gellius and of the Emperor Pertinax (cf. Stok 2008; the epigram was rewritten in late antiquity and accompanied by versified summaries of the twelve books of the *Aeneid*: cf. *Anthologia Latina* 653 Riese; cf. Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008, 422–3). Sulpicius' epigram does not actually address the issue of the editing and publication of the *Aeneid*, but only Vergil's desire to burn the poem, as in Suetonius' *Life*, and the refusal of Varius and Tucca to execute this request ("Tucca and likewise Varius refuse," *Tucca*

vetat Variusque simul, 3). The epigram could have strengthened the idea that both Varius and Tuca had edited the poem.

Later biographies modified Suetonius' version on another matter as well, namely the question that stems from the *Eclogues* about the confiscation of land that Vergil might have suffered in the triumviral period. In regard to allegorical interpretations of this work, Suetonius seems rather prudent. He speaks only of the identifications of Alexis with Alexander and of Daphnis with Flaccus, but about the confiscations he says that the *Eclogues* were written in honor of Asinius Pollio, Alfenus Varus, and Cornelius Gallus "because they had kept him from being penalized in the distribution of lands after the victory at Philippi, when the lands on the other side of the Po were divided among the veterans by order of the triumvirate" (VSD 19). Vergil's land, therefore, in Suetonius' view, was never actually confiscated. Other scholars interpreted *Ecl.* 9.28 ("Mantua, too close to wretched Cremona") differently, namely as an autobiographical statement, and argued that Vergil was indeed victim of the confiscations, but that he was later compensated for this by his patrons. This version is told by Donatus in the preface to his *Eclogues* commentary. In this plot, Vergil trusts his patrons and therefore defends himself against the soldier to whom his land was assigned: "Vergil, relying on the worth of his poems and the friendship of certain powerful men, made bold to stand in the way of Arrius the centurion, who immediately reached for his sword (since he was a soldier); and when the poet rushed out to flee, the pursuit did not end until Vergil had thrown himself into a river and thus swum across to the other bank." Only afterwards, in this version, Vergil recovered his lands "with the help of Maecenas as well as the three officers in charge of land division, Varus, Pollio, and Cornelius Gallus" (VSD 63). The name of Arrius is given also by Servius (*ad Ecl.* 1.47; 3.94), but according to Servius Daniellus (*ad Ecl.* 9.1) the centurion's name was Clodius.

Donatus says in his preface that Vergil wrote the tragedy *Thyestes*, "which Varius published under his own name" (VSD 48). This statement is repeated by Servius (*ad Ecl.* 3.20), who connects it to the story of the relationship between Vergil and Plotia Hieria: she may have had the tragedy written by her lover in her possession, and she may have given it to her husband Varius. This story is likely to be invented on the basis of the supposed affair, which was known to Suetonius (Suerbaum 1983). That Vergil composed the *Thyestes* was perhaps suggested by Martial, in whose imagination Vergil could have really been a dramatist: "he gave place to Varius in the renown of the Roman buskin, though he might have spoken in tragic tone with stronger voice" (8.18.7-8).

Commentators continued, after Suetonius, to deduce biographical information from Vergil's works, on the ground of sometimes entirely imaginary clues: Gellius (6.20.1) read in an unspecified commentary that Vergil, when composing *Geo.* 2.224-5 (*vicina Vesevo / ora iugo*, "the region near Vesuvius's height"), had first written *Nola* instead of *ora*, but that he replaced the name of the town after suffering an offense from its inhabitants: "afterwards Vergil asked the people of Nola to allow him to run their city water into his estate, which was nearby; but that they refused to grant the favor which he asked; that thereupon the offended poet erased the name of their city from his poem, as if consigning it to oblivion" (trans. Rolfe; cf. Barchiesi 1979; Holford-Strevens 1979).

The Other Ancient *Vitae*

Besides Donatus, in late antiquity Vergilian *Lives* were written by Servius (*VS*), by the grammarian Phocas (*VF*), and by an unknown compiler who took the name of Probus (*VP*). The so-called *Vita Bernensis* I ("Life of Bern I") and the two *Lives* attributed to "Philargyrius" are of this period or even later. The Philargyrian *Lives* reused known sources (the first one mostly reproduces *VSD*; the second collects the Vergilian items from Jerome's *Chronicle*); the *Vita Bernensis* I, besides the information from *VSD*, adds that Vergil and the future Augustus together attended the school of the grammarian Epidius. Octavian did attend this school according to Suetonius (*Gramm.* 28.1), but the idea that Vergil, who was seven years older, can have been Augustus' schoolfellow is quite implausible.

The other three ancient *Lives* (*VS*, *VF*, and *VP*) have been generally considered as derivative from *VSD*, and therefore as not having independent documentary value (Naumann 1974). But they also contain material not found in *VSD* and perhaps inherited from traditions that could also be very ancient.

VS appears at the head of Servius' commentary on the works of Vergil. It is likely that the version we have was abridged: Servius himself in another part of his commentary quotes a passage of *VS* that has not otherwise survived (*ad Ecl. praef.*; cf. Murgia 1974, 266). It is based as a whole on *VSD* (not surprisingly, since Servius was a pupil of Donatus), but it also contains the following information: (1) the name of Vergil's mother, Magia; (2) that Naples was among the towns where Vergil studied; (3) that the *Copa* was among Vergil's juvenile works; (4) that Tucca and Varius removed the Helen episode (2.566–89) from the poem as Vergil had left it upon his death. Naples, as we have seen, was perhaps omitted by Suetonius to hide Vergil's Epicureanism. The *Copa* was likely attributed to Vergil after Suetonius; and Servius, unlike Suetonius, did not doubt the authorship of the *Aetna*. The Helen episode was probably known to Suetonius, who nevertheless did not know that Varius significantly modified the *Aeneid* as Vergil had left it.

In addition to these matters of detail, Servius also presents a different image of Vergil's character. He does not mention Vergil's pederastic loves, but presents him as "exceedingly modest" (*verecundissimus*), remarking that he "suffered from only one malady, namely, he was not able to control his lust." In his commentary Servius notes (*ad Ecl.* 2.1) that the character Alexis was intended to represent Alexander, a boy given to Vergil by Asinius Pollio; but he further stipulates that the poet sang about the boy only to please Pollio, presenting his pederastic loves as gossip (*dicitur in pueros habuisse amorem*) and anyway denying that he loved boys "filthily" (*turpiter*).

The versified *Life* by Phocas is dated to the fifth century in consideration of the fact that it appears to rely on *VSD*, but it is not impossible that Phocas used Suetonius directly (cf. most recently Mazhuga 2003, who consequently dates *VF* to the third century). In addition, *VF* contains information that is not found in *VSD*: (1) the name of Vergil's mother, Polla (35), and not Magia as in Servius; (2) the prodigy of bees swarming about the face of the newborn Vergil (52–4); (3) that Vergil was the pupil of Siro (87–8) but apparently in Rome, when in reality Siro taught at Naples; (4) that

Vergil was occupied for nine years in composing the *Georgics* (122; cf. *VSD* 7) and for twelve with the *Aeneid* (125; *VSD* 11). The bee-prodigy is attributed to Vergil also by the *Passion of St. Pansophios of Alexandria* (transmitted in Georgian in a manuscript preserved in Tbilisi), which probably derives from the same source used by Phocas. (The prodigy had been used already for Plato and by Vacca in his *Life of Lucan*). The chronology of the works given by *VF* either aims to reconcile *VSD*'s chronology with the age supplied by Asconius Pedianus for the composition of the *Eclogues* or else simply gives a series 3-9-12, which is more "regular" than the 3-7-11 given by *VSD*.

VP is attributed, together with the commentary that follows it, to the grammarian Valerius Probus (second century CE), but it is certainly a later composition. The author of this *Life*, like the author of *VF*, has also been supposed to have used Suetonius directly (Hurka 2004), but it is more likely that he used *VSD* together with *VS* and *VF*. As Vergil's mother he names Magia Polla, combining the names given by Servius and by Phocas. Regarding the confiscation of lands, he is closer to the version of Donatus and Servius than to Suetonius' version. He connects the confiscations to the civil war between Antony and Octavian and accepts the idea that Vergil actually lost his lands and that he got them back thanks to the intervention of powerful friends. Besides information found in the other sources, *VP* also (1) gives the distance between Mantua and Andes as thirty Roman miles, and (2) notes that Vergil belonged to the Epicurean school together with Varius, Tucca, and Quintilius (Varus). Both notes are probably taken from ancient sources. The distance of Andes from Mantua disagrees with the medieval identification of Andes with Pietole (Grilli 1995), and *VP*'s list of Vergil's Epicurean friends is the only one in any of the *Lives* to be confirmed by the aforementioned fragment of Philodemus' *On flattery* (*PHerc.Paris. 2*; cf. Gigante and Capasso 1989; Brugnoli and Stok 2006, 83n.); the other sources identify only Varius and Tucca as members of this group.

VP is the latest of the *Lives* to give ancient biographical information. All later *Lives* are based exclusively on *VSD*, Jerome, or Servius.

FURTHER READING

The ancient *Lives* and other texts of Vergilian interest are available with English translation in Ziolkowski and Putnam (2008) (only Latin and original texts are provided by Brugnoli and Stok 1991). For critical editions of the ancient *Lives*, see: Hardie (1966²); Brugnoli and Stok (1997); for texts and German commentary of several *Lives*: Bayer (1981⁴). Critical surveys: Suerbaum (1981); Brugnoli and Naumann (1990). On Vergil's epitaph: Frings (1998). On the medieval legend: Spargo 1934; on humanistic *Lives*: Stok (1994); Brown (1998); on Vergilian biography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Ziolkowski (1993, 30-56).