

VERTUMNUS: A GOD WITH NO IDENTITY*

To show the ‘interconnectedness’ of language, myth and society in the ancient world, I have chosen to reflect on a Roman divinity – Vertumnus – whose principal characteristic is not to possess any particular identity at all. Perhaps better, what I mean to say is that Vertumnus is the Roman god of ‘absence of identity’, as we shall see. Even more germane to our interests here, though, will be to see how this aspect of the god’s nature manifests itself unambiguously through the three cultural dimensions that constitute the central themes of our conference: a mythological narrative in which Vertumnus features as a character (his ‘myth’); the name of the god (Vertumnus is connected to the Latin verb *vertere* – meaning ‘to transform’ or ‘change’); and, finally, the relationship entertained by this divinity with the various ‘roles’ that operate in Roman society. By way of introduction to this topic, let us briefly look at the basic information that Roman authors give us in regard to Vertumnus.

As far as most authors are concerned – Propertius principle among them –, Vertumnus is a god of Etruscan provenance. Specifically, he is said to be from the town of Volsinii, which he is supposed to have abandoned in favor of taking up residence in Rome. Varro considered him to be quite explicitly «the chief god of Etruria». So concerning the Etruscan origins of Vertumnus there does not seem to be any doubt. In any case, we know that Vertumnus came to be firmly established in his new Roman fatherland, since an icon of the god was set up in the Vicus Tuscus: first in the form of a crude effigy made of maple wood; and later in the form of a bronze statue fashioned by no less than the legendary artist Mamurius Veturius. As for the *officium* of the god (by which the Romans meant the god’s sphere of divine influence), we know that he was believed to enjoy a special association with agricultural produce and gardens, the changing of the seasons, ‘change’ in general and above all with the arts of metamorphosis¹.

This is – more or less – the extent of what Roman authors tell us about Vertumnus. But who exactly – or maybe it is better to say ‘what exactly’ – are we talking about? A character who

* This paper was presented as the key – note speech in the Classics Brackenridge Conference «Myth, Language and Society in Ancient World» held by the University of Texas at San Antonio, November 5 – 6, 2010. It is part of a larger project on Roman Religion and the god Vertumnus in particular that is still in progress.

¹ Prop. 4. 2. 11 ff.; Var. L. 5. 46: *quod is deus Etruriae princeps*; 5. 74: *et arae Sabinam linguam olent, quae Tati regis voto sunt Romae dedicatae: nam, ut annales dicunt, vovit Opi, Florae, Vediovi Saturnoque, Soli, Lunae, Volcano et Summano, itemque Larundae, Termino, Quirino, Vortumno, Laribus, Dianae Lucinaeque*. Cfr. RADKE 1965, pp. 317 ff.; EISENHUT 1958, coll. 1669 ff.; SMALL 1997, p. 235; BOLDRER 1999; SCHEID - SVENBRO 2004, pp. 176 ff.; HUTCHINSON 2006, pp. 86 ff.; Serv. *Ad Verg. G.* 1. 21: *nomina numinibus ex officiis constat imposita*.

appears in mythological tales? A cult statue? A god whose divine power – what the Romans called *vis numenque* – enters into and impinges upon the affairs of men?² Scarce as our knowledge of this god may be, as chance would have it what we do know concerns all three of these aspects of the god who interests us today.

I probably do not need to remind anyone that it is not a quality unique to Vertumnus to be able to be ‘realized’ now as a character in myth, now as an image or statue, now as a divine *vis numenque*: all of the Roman gods, and indeed ancient divinities generally speaking, have this potential. To give just one example: we recognize, as quite distinct ‘manifestations’ or ‘representations’, the Juno who appears as a character in Vergil’s *Aeneid*; as opposed to the Juno who was worshipped together with Jove and Minerva on the Capitoline Hill; as opposed again to the Juno represented by so many cult statues that have come down to us. Distinguishing these three different ‘figures’ or modes of manifestation available to ancient divinities is very important, and we will have to apply this rule to Vertumnus as well. Keeping the evidence apart and treating it according to the rubrics I have identified, we will have to differentiate between a Vertumnus ‘*qua fabula*’ (as the character of mythological tales, which the Romans called precisely *fabulae*); a Vertumnus ‘*qua statue*’ (the one standing in the Vicus Tuscus); and a Vertumnus ‘*qua god*’ (the divine ‘power’ that the Romans defined as *vis numenque*). Let’s begin our exploration from the world of myth.

We are in the time of the kingdom of Alba Longa – that is, well before the foundation of Rome by the twins Romulus and Remus. A long succession of kings has already occupied the throne, and now it is Proca’s turn to rule. The poet Ovid recounts that «during his reign there lived a maiden Pomona, unmatched among the woodland nymphs in horticultural expertise»³. Notwithstanding her extraordinary beauty, though, all the girl’s interest and energy was spent in pruning, seeding and irrigating her little garden plot – and she cared nothing at all for matters of the heart. You may well imagine, then, that Satyros had tried by every conceivable means to obtain her – and by the same token Pan, Silvanus and even Priapus had been moved to woo her. All in vain. The nymph kept herself out of reach behind the walls of her garden precinct, permitting no one to enter. But he who desired Pomona most of all was Vertumnus – and in his endeavor to seduce her, he applied all the tricks of his trade.

As Ovid tells us, the god was in fact «not only endowed with surpassing good looks (*decus*), but also possessed the gift of transforming himself flawlessly into all shapes (*formasque apte*

² To indicate the divine ‘power’ we use the Roman terminology: Cic. *Ver.* 2. 4. 107 (Ceres in Sicily): *multa saepe prodigia vim eius [Cereris] numenque declarant; multis saepe in difficillimis rebus praesens auxilium eius oblatum est, ut haec insula ab ea non solum diligenti sed etiam incolis custodiri que videatur.*

³ Ovid. *Met.* 14. 641 ff.

fingetur in omnes)»⁴. He could arrange what, in the end, had seemed impossible – and he would succeed. Vertumnus therefore began his courtship, first taking on the appearance (*imago*) of a handsome harvester, then of a reaper of hay, then of a cowherd, then of a gardener, of a soldier, of a fisherman... And «through these numerous different appearances (*per multas... figuras*)», he afforded himself the possibility of enjoying the beautiful spectacle that Pomona presented to his eyes⁵. One day however, donning a head covering, the god took the form of an old woman (*adsimulavit anum*) and, having gained entrance into Pomona's garden by this ruse, began to praise her for her excellent gardening skills⁶. All the while he took the opportunity to kiss the girl – with kisses that were certainly not an old woman's kisses. And under this innocent guise, the god spoke to Pomona – and obviously he spoke to her of love.

Able orator that he was, Vertumnus drew inspiration for his argument from the girl's own interests and concerns – the world of plants: What would the elm tree be, he asked, if it remained celibate and refused to join with the vine? Follow the example of nature, he continued – if only you would desire it, you could have more suitors than Helen; all of the gods who inhabit the Alban Hills would throw themselves at your feet! Continuing in this vein, the old woman naturally came to speak also of Vertumnus – no one knows him better than I, she said... a young man so in love, so beautiful, so faithful. Certainly he is not one of those playboys who chase every woman they meet; he will be faithful to you, you'll see, and he will love only you. This is how Ovid's story ends:

Vertumnus once again takes the shape of a young man (*in iuvenem rediit*), abandoning the trappings (*instrumenta*) of an old woman, and appeared to Pomona like the sun when its disk bursts through the obstructing cloud cover, shining forth in all its splendor. The god was ready to take the girl by force, but there was no need: won over by his beauty, Pomona too felt the wounds of love.

Here, then, we have a story in which the god Vertumnus plays the role of protagonist. Vertumnus is presented as a shape-shifting lady's man – who, in deploying a veritable kaleidoscope of *imagines*, *formae*, *figurae*, and *instrumenta*, blurs the lines between occupation, age, and even gender. In recounting the story of Vertumnus and Pomona, Ovid thus provides us a trove of evidence regarding this god, as it were in his capacity as an agent of narrative: Vertumnus as *fabula*. In other words, the metamorphic achievements described to us are accomplished by Vertumnus as part of that fantastic world – populated by gods, goddesses, nymphs, and so forth – in which the religion of

⁴ Ov. *Met.* 14. 685 f.

⁵ Ov. *Met.* 14. 652 f.

⁶ Ov. *Met.* 14. 654 ff. About the *mitra* see BOLDRER 1999, *ad v.* 31.

the ancients was articulated in narrative form. In this respect, we certainly cannot be surprised by the fact that a figure of mythology possesses the power of metamorphosis: All of the gods of antiquity possessed this power. Zeus in particular takes advantage of it in his attempts at seduction. Except, Vertumnus seems to have a particular aptitude in using this power. His act of 'metamorphosis' articulates itself in a continuous – and long! – sequence of transformations: first harvester, then reaper of hay, then soldier, then cowherd, then gardener, then fishermen, then finally old woman...

What is most striking about Vertumnus' shapeshifting power, though, is that the spectrum of metamorphic capabilities deployed by the god in his mythological form is as restricted in actuality as it is extensive in appearance. The ten *figurae* that Ovid attributes to this shape changing god in fact all pertain to the sphere of human society. They are only examples, of course; there could be many more. Vertumnus in his 'mythic' manifestation is, at different times, a harvester, a reaper of hay, a cowherd, a gardener, a soldier, a fisherman, an old woman, a young man, and so on. Yet he never assumes the identity of an animal or of natural element, as for instance Zeus does when he transforms himself into a swan in order to seduce Leda, or into a shower of gold to seduce Danaë. This would be curious enough in itself. But what are we to conclude when we see these very same characteristics – an extraordinary power of metamorphosis played out always within the social dimension – shared by the god's statue, as well? This is when we must turn our attention away from Vertumnus in his manifestation as *fabula* in order to consider Vertumnus in his manifestation as statue.

Now we are in Rome, in the Vicus Tuscus, and the very statue of the god is speaking to us about itself. This scene is an invention of the poet Propertius, who dedicated one of the most imaginative elegies of his fourth Book to Vertumnus. So – the statue, the icon fashioned by the aforementioned Mamurius Veturius, has just told us about his Etruscan roots, about his transfer to Rome from Volsinii, about his original appearance in the form of a crude maple-wood icon, and about his later manifestation in the form of a bronze statue. Now he begins to speak to us about his name.

It cannot be said, in this regard, that the statue of Vertumnus portrayed by Propertius – a very learned author, well-versed in the poetry of Callimachus – is at all begrudging when it comes to etymological interpretation. The statue offers no less than three etymologies of the name *Vertumnus* – two of which the statue does not give any credence to, considering the third to be the correct one. In any case (and this is the most interesting aspect of the question), all three explanations proposed by the statue focus on the act of *vertere*, or the act of 'changing', 'transforming'. And here enters into play the third theme of this conference: the relationship with *language* or, in this instance, the

relationship between the god's name and the Latin root from which it derives. In the interest of time, I will speak only of the etymology of the name Vertumnus that the god considers to be true, that is, the third⁷:

Oh false rumor, you do me wrong: the meaning of my name is different. Believe only what the god recounts to you about himself... Believe me: because I alone knew how to change myself into every form (*formas vertebar in omnis*), the language of our ancestors bestowed upon me a name taken precisely from this (that is, from my ability to be changed [*verti*] in all shapes).

So *Vert-umnus* is to be understood as *vert-(in)-omnis*, the name signifying the god who 'changes into all'. This is the 'true' interpretation of the god's name – the one which he himself authorizes, attributing it to 'language of the ancestors', by which he seems to mean the linguistic sentiment of the Romans. Vertumnus thus portrays himself as the master of metamorphosis, able to take on any form he wishes. But to what exactly does the god mean to refer by these words? What precisely do his extraordinary capabilities consist of? Let us continue to listen to what the statue has to say⁸:

My nature adapts itself to any form (*figuris*): change me (*verte*) as you like, and I will still cut a fine figure (*decorus ero*). Clothe me in garments from Cos, and I will be an adorable young girl; and if I dress myself in a toga, who will deny that I am a man (*vir*)? Give me a sickle and encircle my brow with a wreath of hay: you will swear that my own hand did the harvesting. Once upon a time, I arrayed myself in arms, and I recall I was admired even in that outfit. Equipped with a heavy basket, I was a harvester. I am sober if I attend judicial proceedings, but if I wear a crown on my head, you will proclaim that the wine has gone to my head. Put a crown on me, and I will steal the appearance of Bacchus. I will steal the appearance even of Apollo, if you put a lyre in my hands! When I have nets across my shoulder (*cassibus impositis*), I am a hunter. But if I take birdlime, I will snare birds like the god Faunus. Vertumnus can take on the appearance of a charioteer (*est etiam aurigae species Vertumnus*) or of an acrobat who balances his light weight, leaping from one horse to the other. Give me a rod and I will be the bane of fish! Immediately after, I will step about (*ibo*) with my tunic let down, in the manner of a handsome salesman. I can also lean on the walking stick of a shepherd, or carry baskets of roses amidst the dust. And what motive would I have in adding that for which I am most famous – namely, the gifts of the garden appreciated by my hands. The green cucumber identifies me (*me notat*) and the swollen gourd, and the cauliflower bound up with

⁷ Prop. 4. 2. 17 ff. and 46 f.: *de se narranti tu modo crede deo ... at mihi, quod formas unus vertebar in omnis, / nomen ab eventu patria lingua dedit.*

⁸ Prop. 4. 2. 21.

thin reeds. Nor does any flower bloom in the fields, without also drooping in front of me, when it is placed upon my brow elegantly.

As may be seen, the picture that the statue of Vertumnus paints for us in this monologue is not unlike that presented before by Vertumnus-as-*fabula*. We encounter again the god's shape-shifting capabilities (even if they are not directed towards amorous conquest), along with the god's association with the world of gardens and produce (represented earlier by the interests of *Pomona*, here related to Vertumnus directly). There is no doubt that also in the representations of Vertumnus *qua* statue, the emphasis is on the countless *formae*, *imagines*, or *figurae* that he has the ability to take on. In a word – on the dimension of *vertere*, the dimension that gives the god's name its derivation. That said, we can newly formulate the question we posed above: Is Vertumnus endowed with metamorphic capabilities similar to those possessed by many other ancient divinities, like Zeus or perhaps Proteus, in a marked way? Or in the case of Vertumnus are we dealing with something completely different? Let's take a closer look.

Homer recounts that Proteus, 'the old man of the sea', had the power to 'transform himself into anything and everything that moved on the earth, as well as water, and fire that flames marvelously'. When he is ambushed by Menelaus and his companions, who wish to learn the way home from him, in fact Proteus 'first turned himself into a lion with a bushy mane, and then a serpent, a panther, and a huge boar; then he turned into clear water, and then a tree with lofty foliage'. Vergil repeats the same thing in the fourth Book of the *Georgics*, when he narrates the encounter between Aristaeus and Proteus⁹. The old man of the sea is thus a god of *natural* metamorphosis, so to speak: the *formae* or shapes that he assumes range from those of animals to those of plants; he even possesses the power of turning himself into the elemental forms (fire, water) that constitute the basis of all things¹⁰. Vertumnus, on the other hand, is exclusively a god of 'social' metamorphosis: the shapes he takes on all refer not simply to the human dimension but, even more to the point, to the dimension defined by the *civitas*, 'society'.

The act of *vertere* achieved by the god whose name means 'changes-into-all' is realized in a set of roles that are defined internal to the community. He straddles the line between what are decisively 'civic' identities: the young girl dressed in garments from the island of Cos, the togate citizen, the reaper of hay, the soldier, the acrobatic horseman, the merchant, the gardener, and so forth. Precisely the same thing that we have seen at play in the case of Vertumnus manifested in the form of *fabula*. In his conquest of Pomona, this figure of myth does not transform himself into a

⁹ Hom. *Od.* 4. 41 ff., 456 f.; Verg. *G.* 4. 405 ff., 441 f.

¹⁰ The same about the Periclymenus by Ov. *Met.* 12. 556 ff.

swan or a golden shower, as Zeus might do; he does not take the shape of any animal or any other more generic natural form. At different times, he is a harvester, a reaper of hay, a soldier, an old woman. The range of his shape-shifting repertoire never goes beyond that of human social identities.

In this almost schizophrenic delirium, the statue of Vertumnus has the ability to metamorphose even into another god: Apollo, or Bacchus. In doing so, he obviously takes on the aspect that these divinities have in their own representations – both as images and as narrative characters –, representations traditionally endowing these gods either with the headband or the lyre. In short, Vertumnus appears to be as dissimilar to the god Proteus as he is similar to the god Morpheus described by Ovid: the god who, appearing to men in dreams, imitates the features, gait, and even voice of the individuals whose shadowy form he imitates¹¹. It is only that the god of dreams imitates ‘individuals’, individuals with names and precise personal identities – rather than generic ‘social roles’. Morpheus is not simply ‘a girl’ but, as in the episode narrated by Ovid, specifically ‘the girl Halcyon’. While Morpheus’ imitative act includes even proper names, Vertumnus’ covers the space of titles or generic categories.

Turning our attention now to representations of Vertumnus *qua* god – that is, to representations of Vertumnus in his capacity as *vis numenque*, as the Romans would say – we recognize that in this manifestation, too, Vertumnus demonstrates the same relationship as before with a multiplicity of social roles.

In a passage of Horace’s *Satires*, Davus describes the character of Priscus – a person who «lived capriciously». It is instructive to see in what way Priscus was ‘capricious’ or ‘fickle’, and why. Horace tells us¹²:

At times he went about, identifiable (*notatus*) for the three rings he would wear on his finger; at other times, he went about with his left hand completely bare. He lived capriciously. From one hour to the next, he would change the stripe (*clavus*) on his tunic; he would leave a huge mansion (*aedibus ex magnis*) to go skulking in places a freedman, once respectable, would leave dishonored. Today a bugger (*moechus*) in Rome, tomorrow a philosopher (*doctus*) in Athens. He was born with all Vertumnuses unfavorable.

Now we have before us Vertumnus in his manifestation as a god of Roman religion, conceived as *vis numenque*. And here the god’s *officium* – the sphere of action in which his divine power expresses itself – is described: capriciousness, fickleness, inconstancy, changeability. As we know,

¹¹ Ov. *Met.* 11. 633 ff.

¹² Hor. *Sat.* 2. 7. 14.

the Romans believed that a person's destiny was determined by the good- or ill- disposition of the gods at the moment of his or her birth¹³. So if in this circumstance, Vertumnus (understood as *vis numenque*) revealed himself to be unfavorable, the character of the newborn would also be affected, and would in fact be characterized by *inaequalitas*, that is, by 'capriciousness' or 'fickleness'. One thing is especially remarkable here. It is clear that Priscus' 'Vertumnian' character – his definitively 'mutable' nature – is realized specifically on the plane of social identity. In other words, to be born «with all Vertumnuses unfavorable» means to be condemned perpetually to changing, to transforming, to 'being someone else' within the *civitas*. It means, in short, being deprived of a stable 'social' identity. In this particular case, it actually appears that Priscus had a predilection for assuming social roles that were contrary to – even polar opposites of – one another. Let's begin with the rings.

In Roman society, the practice of wearing rings was governed by a complex symbolic code. The material of which a ring was made of, the number of rings an individual wore, and the artistic design of a ring could all be 'read' as expressions of status and social position as well as of wealth. Traditional Roman practice was apparently the following: Common citizens would wear a simple ring made of iron, while senators and knights were permitted the use of golden rings. Pliny informs us, however, that at least in his lifetime wealthy Romans already were in the habit of «loading up their fingers with fat fortunes», and many authors tell us of men whose fingers were veritably bursting with rings. Martial, for example, asks (rhetorically) how it is that Carinus never takes off the six rings he wore on each finger – not even when he goes to sleep or takes a bath. Martial's answer is simple: Carinus «did not have his own ring box, *dactyliotheca*»¹⁴. On the other hand, Gaius Ateius Capito, an expert in pontifical law, claimed that slaves «had no right (*ius*) to wear rings», which explains why Pliny found it so unbecoming that «now even slaves cover their iron rings with gold»¹⁵.

So Priscus, with his fickle custom of wearing rings, was sending ambiguous signals about his social identity – sometimes appearing to be a wealthy master, at other times a slave or worse. The same holds true for that other characteristic mark of social status – one's house. Priscus, leaving his huge mansion to go lurk in some hole unworthy even of a humble freedman, abruptly alters his own position within the *civitas*. In an even more explicit way, by changing the stripe (*clavus*) adorning

¹³ The presence of a plurality of *Vertumni* instead of a single *Vertumnus*, is not a surprise. In Roman Religion the goddess Venus can also appear as a plurality of *Veneres*, Iuno as a plurality of *Iunones*, Faunus as a plurality of *Fauni*, Lar as a plurality of *Lares* etc. The expression *Vertumnis ... natus iniquis* seems to be created on the model of stereotypes such as *dis nasci iratis, adversis, inimicis* etc. (cfr. OTTO 1890, pp. 110, 9; cfr. KIESSLING - HEINZE (Erk.) 1999, pp. 321; etc.).

¹⁴ Plin. *Nat.* 33. 22; Mart. 11. 59; cfr. also 37; Ov. *Ars* 3. 445 f.; Sen. *Nat.* 7. 31. 2; Quint. *Inst.* 11. 3. 142; etc.

¹⁵ Macr. 7. 12. 11 ff.; Plin. *Nat.* 33. 23.

his tunic, Priscus wavers between the position of a senator and that of a knight. We know that senators were distinguished from knights because the former had the right to wear a tunic with a large red stripe (*latus clavus*), while the latter were only permitted to show a thinner band (*angustus clavus*). And as if this were not enough, Priscus was even able to switch between playing the role of libertine in the capital of pleasure – Rome – and another, decidedly opposed to it, of intellectual in the capital of culture – Athens. Just like the god whose disfavor cast a cloud over his birth, Priscus has the ability to take on the most disparate social identities. In short, it is clear that *Vertumnus* ‘*qua* god’ is a divinity who presides over *social* changeability and instability. His sphere of action is the *civitas*, and in particular the multiple social roles that individuals act out within the *civitas*.

But let’s move on. When Davus directs our attention to Priscus’ fingers, emphasizing how Priscus varies the number of rings he wears, he uses a very specific expression: *notatus* («he went about, identifiable for the three rings he would wear on his finger; at other times, he went about with his left hand completely bare»). The rings that Priscus wears, or does not wear, on his fingers thus constitute a *nota* – a ‘sign’. But exactly what kind of sign did the Romans understand using the term *nota*? Before going on, it will be useful to look briefly into this aspect of the question.

In most cases, the Latin word *nota* designates a ‘conventional’ or at any rate ‘conventionalized’ sign. In other words, by this term the Romans did not intend the same kind of ‘sign’ designated by the word *argumentum*. An *argumentum* was a sign of inferential character – a kind of sign that, in order to be understood, required a specific process of interpretation (*arguere*). *Notae*, however, are signs whose meaning has been in some way established or agreed upon beforehand, with the result that their meanings are clear to all those who possess the code – as occurs, for example, with signs of punctuation (*notae sententiarum*), stenographic signs (*notae vulgares*), sign languages (*notae digitorum*), and so forth. It is clear, then, that the term *nota* was used by the Romans to denote a customary sign that was easily decipherable. And now we may return to Priscus.

We have seen that in Roman society rings constituted a true and proper semiotic system, capable of conveying information about the social position, status, wealth, and so on, of those who wore them. That is why Horace insists that the *digitus* (‘finger’) of the fickle man was *notatus* (‘noticeable’, ‘marked’) by a constantly changing number of rings. These finger ornaments are understood as *notae*, as ‘signs’, whose meaning is easily decipherable by members of the community. That Priscus’ different ‘identities’ or ‘memberships’ in Roman society come to be expressed through a semiotics of clothing in general is confirmed also by the allusion to his alteration of his *clavus*. It is not coincidental that the Greeks, to designate this band used by the Romans to adorn the tunic of the highest social classes – narrow for knights, broad for senators –

made recourse to the word *seméion*, ‘sign’. The *clavus* is a semiotic tool, capable of communicating information about the social identity of the person who wears it.

In what way, then, does the fickle Priscus demonstrate his penchant for changing identity? Through *notae* that stand out against his clothing – and in this respect, he corresponds perfectly to the statue of Vertumnus, which changes its identity by wearing, at different times, the clothing of a young girl, the toga of a citizen, or the loosened tunic of a merchant. It is actually explicitly said of Vertumnus *qua* statue that he is ‘identified’ by his attributes (*me notat*), just as in the case of Priscus’ rings (*notatus*)¹⁶. The transformations achieved by Vertumnus the statue are also realized through the use of *notae*, the use of different ‘signs’ – a soldier’s weapons, a harvester’s basket, Bacchus’ headband, Apollo’s lyre – which in each case define a different social role represented by the statue. Priscus, the fickle man born under the bad sign of Vertumnus *qua* god, changes roles and social identities according to the same semiotic system that applies to the transformations of the Vertumnus statue. Resembling the shape-shifting statue of Vertumnus the god, Priscus, the fickle man of Horace’s poem, represents a sort of living and breathing embodiment of this divine power.

Since we have been discussing Vertumnus in his manifestation as god, it is worth highlighting another dimension of the sphere that ‘belongs’ to him in his capacity as *vis numenque*. I mean an attribute that concerns both the sphere of metamorphosis (the sphere of *vertere*) and in a certain sense also the sphere of ‘fickleness’. This time, though, we are dealing with no less than the ‘changeability’ that frequently characterizes the course of human events. For the Romans believed that when a certain occasion started out well enough but ended up badly (or vice versa) – in other words, confronted with a radical change in the course of events – this abrupt change was attributable to the intervention of Vertumnus. Among the powers of the god was also what the Romans defined as *bene vertere* or *male vertere*, that is ‘to turn out well’ or ‘to turn out badly’ – expressions used often in the form of an exclamation and as a wish for the future. The ancient scholar Donatus, in his commentary on the comedies of Terence, discusses this¹⁷. We are at the point of the plot of the *Adelphoe* at which the birth of a child is announced: *di bene vertant* («may the gods turn it out well»), the old man Micio shouts. And Donatus remarks:

Whenever something happens according to our wishes, it is customary to say: «May the gods turn it out well (*di bene vertant*)», because it often happens in human affairs that things turn out in a very different way than we had originally hoped they would. This power... that events have, in turning out in one way or another (*vertentium semet in utramque partem*), the ancients thought was a prerogative... of the god Vertumnus.

¹⁶ Prop. 4. 2. 46.

¹⁷ Don., Ter. *Ad. 728* (p. 145 Wessner); 91 (p. 43 Wessner); cfr. Don., Ter. *Hec. 196* (p. 226 Wessner).

Earlier in the same play, the character Aeschinus had instead uttered the contrary: *quae res tibi vortat male* («may the affair turn out badly for you») he had proclaimed to Sannio. Again Donatus remarks:

The god who presides over things which turn out according to one's desire is named Vertumnus. In actual fact, it often happens that something you wished would turn out well ends badly, and it is this that is said to 'to turn out badly' (*male vertisse*).

According to Donatus, then, when the Romans exclaimed *di bene vertant* or *di male vertant* – to wish someone (or even themselves) a certain fortune or misfortune – they were really addressing the god Vertumnus: they were asking him to turn (*vertere*) the course of events in one way or another. From this point of view, Vertumnus appears to differ from divinities like Felicitas or Bonus Eventus, who 'bring to a happy conclusion' actions undertaken by human beings. Vertumnus does not necessarily make things turn out well – he makes things turn out, end of story. His sphere of divine action consists of *vertere* generally, not just of *bene vertere*. He represents fickleness, or changeability, in the outcome of events.

Let us return for a moment to what Donatus has told us. According to Donatus, when the Romans exclaimed *di bene vertant* or *di male vertant*, their thoughts turned immediately to Vertumnus. Here we see in action a characteristic feature of Roman religion – a feature that is closely connected with themes of this conference. Very often, in fact, in Roman culture the sphere of 'language' coincides entirely with that of religion; the one clarifies the other. The act of 'changing' (*vertere*) a certain situation, whether to a good or bad end, immediately invokes the presence of a god who shares the same linguistic root, *Vert-umnus*. The Romans were actually very well aware of this feature of their own religious system. Speaking of divinities such as Sterculinus (the god of *stercoratio*, 'fertilizing'), Sator (the god of *satio*, 'seeding'), and so forth, Servius explains that: «The divine powers (*numina*) get their names (*nomina*) on the basis of their specific duties (*officia*)»¹⁸. And in the Roman view, the god whose *officium* was 'changing' (*vertere*) could not be called anything but *Vert-umnus*.

Let's look at another case in which the relationship between this divinity and language – namely, the linguistic root from which his name is taken (*vert-* of *vertere*) – is particularly clear. Porphyrio, the ancient commentator on the works of Horace, explains the following:

¹⁸ Serv. *Ad Verg. G.* 1. 21: *nomina numinibus ex officiis constat imposita.*

Vertumnus is the god who presides over things ‘to be exchanged’, that is, of buying and selling (*deus est praeses vertendarum rerum, hoc est emendarum et vendendarum*). He had his temple in the Vicus Turarius.

Another grammarian confirms that Vertumnus was also ‘the god of commerce’ (*deus... mercaturae*)¹⁹. So, rather unexpectedly, the god who represents the linguistic dimension of *vertere* now enters into our discussion from a completely different direction: that of commercial exchange. Columella – the agricultural writer who, in emulation of Vergil, endeavored to become a poet – tells us something similar: It is spring, and the farmers have to hurry to collect hyacinths, roses and marigolds, to put these flowers in baskets and to carry them to market. For what purpose?²⁰

So that rich Vertumnus abounds in vernal goods (*mercibus ut vernis dives Vertumnus abundet*), and so that he who has brought them to market (*gerulus*) brings back a purse (*sinus*) full of money (*aere*) – with unsteady step, drunk from much liquor of Bacchus.

Peasants collect flowers and transport them to market, bringing back in exchange not only money but also solemn inebriation. It is likely that Vertumnus appears here in his capacity as the god who – as we know from Propertius – presides over the changing of year and the changing of the seasons. We have already seen how the statue of Vertumnus concluded his long series of transformations by alluding explicitly to the world of flowers, of which he even makes himself a vendor²¹. But the fact remains that the god is defined expressly as ‘rich’ (*dives*), in a context in which there is explicit reference to the *sinus* of the garment – which served as a Roman’s wallet – that is said to be full of *aes* (‘money’). There does not seem to be any doubt about the fact that this «Vertumnus of the flower vendors» plays the role of a god of commerce (*mercatura*) – in the function, that is, as divinity «that presides over things ‘to be exchanged’ (*vertere*), namely things to be bought or sold». The god brings to a conclusion the affairs of peasants who sell their spring-time wares (*merces*) at market.

What should we conclude on the basis of this new perspective opened up on Vertumnus ‘*qua* god’? Simply that the sphere of transformation, of social instability, of the changing of events on one hand, and that of commercial exchange on the other, can be united under the power of a single divinity. In reality this combination is much more natural than we might at first assume. To

¹⁹ Porph. *Ad Hor. Ep.* 1. 20. 1: *Vertumnus deus est praeses vertendarum rerum, hoc est emendarum et vendendarum, qui in vico turario sacellum habuit.*

²⁰ Col. 10. 307 ff.: *mercibus ut vernis dives Vertumnus abundet / et titubante gradu multo madefactus Iaccho / aere sinus gerulus pleno gravis urbe reportet.*

²¹ Prop. 4. 2. 40 ff.

recognize this, it will be sufficient to peer again through the lens of ‘language’. It is in fact this dimension that permits Vertumnus to cover both the ‘space’ of metamorphosis, of social instability, and of the changing of events, as well as that of the exchange of commercial goods. Returning to the verb from which the name of the god derives: *vertere*... from this verb also derives the name of the typical economic operation of *versura*, or the ‘circulation’ of money that permits it to pass from one creditor to the next, borrowing from the second to pay the first²². In the same way, the verb *convertere* also enters into economic terminology in the sense of ‘changing’ a certain good into money, or ‘exchanging’ it for another²³. And, in the same way, *mutare*, the other verb used in Latin to denote transformation, can be used as a synonym for ‘exchange’ (*mutare res, mutare merces*), while *permutatio* (literally, ‘to thoroughly change’) refers to that elementary form of exchange which we call barter.

The fact is that both metamorphosis and commerce necessarily entail a transformation: in commerce, a certain object or a certain good is ‘changed’ into money or into a good of another type. Likewise, in Vertumnus’ shape-changing act of *vertere*, the man dressed in a toga takes the place of the prettily dressed young girl, the money weighing down the peasant’s purse takes the place of the flowers in his basket. In a certain sense, the flowers have ‘changed’ into money, just as the beautiful girl has ‘changed’ into a togate citizen. The notion of converting, of changing, of exchanging, is fundamental both to the fabulous world of metamorphosis and to the ‘concrete’ practice of commercial trade. In both cases, the process inevitably involves one thing becoming another. This is why Vertumnus, the god of *vertere*, is well positioned to be the god who presides over the moment in which the *res* (‘stuff’) of the flower venders, entering into the chain of commerce, is ‘converted’ into *aes* (‘money’). Needless to say, in this case too Roman religion seems to be founded on a strict correspondence between linguistic designations on one side, and cultural practices on the other. Again we recall what Servius told us: the *nomen* of the divinity, its divine *numen*, and associated *officium* (the ‘responsibility’ of the god) exist in a relation of reciprocal triangulation²⁴.

Vertumnus demonstrates, therefore, how the three cultural forms that we have chosen to explore in this weekend’s Symposium – myth, language and society – can intersect with one another in fascinating ways. The social dimension of the god merits one final remark, however. For we have not yet spoken of the relationship that stands between this god and identity – or perhaps better, between this god and the ‘absence’ of identity.

²² Cfr. OLD *s. v.*, 3; NADJO 1989, p. 407 f.

²³ Julian. *Dig.* 4. 2. 18: *Si ipsa res, quae ad alium pervenit ... in pecuniam aliamve rem conversa sit, nihil amplius quaerendum est, quis exitus sit, sed omnimodo locuples factus videtur, licet postea deperdat.*

²⁴ Serv. *Ad Verg.* G. 1. 21.

Returning to the *notae* that signal the diverse social roles assumed by Vertumnus (or by anyone, like Priscus, who is victim of his wrath). At least at first glance, these *notae* (the garments from Cos, the harvester's basket, the soldier's weapons, and so forth) seem to be analogous to the 'attributes' that in the ancient world traditionally identified representations of the gods. The Romans called these attributes *insignia*, and their function was to differentiate one divine image from another. Castor and Pollux, for example, were identified by the stars of gold that constituted their *insignia*, just as Magna Mater wore a crenellated crown as her *insigne*. Statues of Hercules were identifiable from the lion skin and club that he carried; and so on. But this analogy between the *insignia* that accompanied icons of gods and the *notae* worn at different times by Vertumnus is superficial. We could almost say – instead – that the different *notae* that identify Vertumnus have a contrary function in respect to the attributes of other divinities. In the case of Vertumnus, we are dealing with an image whose different 'attributes' – toga, garments from Cos, weapons – are not there in order to define a specific identity, as the club does for Hercules. Just the opposite. They are there to 'negate' the existence of a specific identity. The accent falls not on the unique identities assumed at different times by the god, but on his ability to take on one identity after another in a single continuous series. The emphasis is on their 'changing' (*vertere*) – in short, on the verb from which the name of the god is directly taken.

In being able to assume any and all identities he wishes, Vertumnus turns out not to have any identity at all. So then who is Vertumnus, really? Our answer must be that his identity is the very fact of his own perpetual metamorphosis. In a certain sense, he is a god endowed with a sort of negative *officium*: that of 'non-identity'. And yet it cannot by any means be said that he has been entrusted thereby with a province of secondary importance – especially in a society such as ancient Rome was, where different social roles (whether constituted by differences in gender, differences in status or differences in occupation) were so rigidly codified. It is as if this shape-shifting divinity represented a model diametrically opposed to the actual practice of Roman society... allowing members of that society to glimpse a manner of living in which the one and the many, the other and the self, were no longer exclusive categories. The moralism of Davus, that wise slave of Horace's satires, condemned Priscus' capriciousness nature (*inaequalitas*) out right. But it would be interesting to hear the opinion of the defendant. For who can tell whether this quintessentially 'Vertumnian' and fickle character was so dissatisfied after all with his own wanderings of identity?

Maurizio Bettini

Università degli Studi di Siena
 Centro Antropologia e Mondo Antico
 Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia
 Via Roma 47
 I – 53100 Siena
 e-mail: bettini@unisi.it

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