



[Virgil, Eclogues I.6-45](#)

Tityrus, a shepherd-poet tells Meliboeus about his encounter with a man who saved him from expropriation

Name of the author: Virgil

Date: 41 BCE to 39 BCE

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Eclogues

Reference:

I.6-45

Commentary:

Virgil's *Eclogues* were his first compositions to be published. The first *Eclogue* is based around the events following the civil war between Marc Antony and Octavian and the assassins of Julius Caesar, Octavian's adoptive father, which culminated with the death of Caesar's killers in 42 BC. After the war, it was decided that the veteran troops should be given Italian land, including that near to Virgil's home in Mantua. As a result, many local farmers were forced off their land. This *Eclogue* consists of a dialogue between two shepherd-poets, Meliboeus and Tityrus. The latter has been identified by some interpreters with Virgil himself, especially by ancient commentators such as Servius (see his commentaries on *Eclogues* IV.6 and IX.27), as Virgil lost his own farm in the land confiscations. Indeed, the ninth *Eclogue* offers some support for this biographical element, but it remains uncertain. Meliboeus has been exiled from his land, and asks Tityrus how he has managed to escape the same fate. He learns that Tityrus went to Rome in order to plead for his freedom. There are reports of such activity, for instance, in Appian's writings, which record that disgruntled occupants of land given over to veterans came to the forum and temples in Rome to raise their concerns, and were met with a sympathetic ear (*Civil Wars*, V.12). The city of Rome makes an impression upon Tityrus, a modest countryman visiting the city for the first time. Tityrus divulges that while he was there, he met a youth, who he refers to as a god, and who granted his request, allowing him to return to his land. There is some ambiguity as to the nature of Tityrus's freedom (*libertas*), as it appears at first that he is seeking manumission from slave status, yet what he actually receives in Rome is the right to take back his land. The ambiguity is likely deliberate, and as Coleman explains ("Tityrus and Meliboeus," p. 84-85), even as a slave, he would likely have been able to farm a small piece of land for his own purposes, and could have saved enough money from his *peculium* (property or land that slaves were entitled to manage) to buy manumission. The generous youth and "god" that Tityrus praises has frequently been identified with Octavian, who was given the title "son of the deified" (*divi filius*) in reference to the deification of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, in 42 BCE. Coleman, for instance, claims that it is "beyond all doubt" that the youth Tityrus refers to is Octavian ("Tityrus and Meliboeus," p. 94). This is supported by the fact that it was Octavian, not Antony, who oversaw the land settlements for war veterans. It is possible that the three mentions of *deus* in verses 6, 7 and 18 are intended to remind of Octavian's link with the deified Caesar. Verse 6, for instance, echoes the fifth *Eclogue*, written shortly prior to the first, and which contemplates the death and deification of Caesar. Moreover, the monthly sacrifices that Tityrus makes to his god in verse 43 might be an allusion to those made to Hellenistic monarchs, which would further emphasise Octavian's association with his adoptive father. As David Meban states, Virgil uses this *Eclogue* to secure into Roman memory "the effects of the upheavals... caused by civil war" ("Virgil's *Eclogues* and Social Memory," p. 100). He argues that the poem aims to associate Octavian with the "preservation and recovery of order" ("Virgil's *Eclogues* and Social Memory," p. 126), the basis of which was frequently understood as the gift of stability, and one who had the capacity to bring a more prosperous future.



Keywords in the original language:

- [deus](#)
- [libertas](#)
- [pax](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [urbs](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [civil war](#)
- [deification](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [Julius Caesar](#)
- [land](#)
- [manumission](#)
- [Octavian](#)
- [peace](#)
- [stability](#)

Bibliographical references: Coleman, Robert, "[Tityrus and Meliboeus](#)", *Greece and Rome* 13 (1966) : 79-97
Clausen, Wendell, "[On the Date of the First Eclogue](#)", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 76 (1972) : 201-205
Meban, David, "[Virgil's Eclogues and Social Memory](#)", *American Journal of Philology* 130.1 (2009) : 99-130

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