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HORACE'S FIFTEENTH EPODE: AN INTERPRETATION

It has been the practice of Horatian criticism to take note of the fifteenth epode as one of a group of poems which are elegiac and Hellenistic in tone, and focus on the theme of love.¹ Although richly praised for its beauty, the piece has not received the individual analysis so artful a composition deserves. The purpose then of this article is to attempt to interpret and relate the poem's structure and meaning.

Epode 15 admits a bipartite division (1—16 and 17—24). In I, Horace addresses Neaera; in II, he apostrophizes his unnamed rival.² This division is so sharp and clear-cut that, although II is carefully prepared for in I, the epode could nonetheless have ended at line 16 with the reader entirely satisfied with its structural completeness.

I is built around the related concepts of oath and resolution; the first is almost forsworn³ and the second is weakly conditional. Neaera's formal lover's oath comprises lines 1—10, the first six lines describing the occasion of the swearing of the oath and the last four lines reporting its contents. Horace begins the occasion of the oath with a couplet painting nature's setting richly adorned with romantic details: night, clear sky and moon shining amid the lesser stars (1—2). We might next have expected a close-up of Neaera tightly embracing Horace and then, only after the setting and the lovers had been portrayed, to be told that she took an oath, this last to be followed by the details of the oath. But Horace has upset this obvious pattern by intruding the swearing of the oath between the descriptions of the setting and the principals in order to allow the hammer blow (3):

¹ See G. Pasquali, *Orazio lirico* (Firenze 1920) 719, W. Wili, *Horaz und die augusteische Kultur* (Basel 1948) 60—61, and E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 67, among others.

² C. Giarratano, *Il libro degli Epodi* (Torino 1930) 99: «L'epodo si divide in due parti, perchè il poeta prima si rivolge a Neera (1—16), poi al fortunato rivale (17—24).» T. Plüss, *Das Jambenbuch des Horaz* (Leipzig 1904) 96, structures: A 1—10; B I 11—16, II 17—23; C 24. This very curious division is based on his peculiar interpretation of the «bitter irony» of the book. The weakness of Plüss' method was nicely pointed out by one of his reviewers, R. Cahen, *Bulletin Critique* 5 (1905) 91—97.

³ Porphyryon on 3: *ad eventum refert, quasi cum iuraret iam perfidiam fallendi in animo haberet.*

cum tu magnorum numen laesura deorum

to fall earlier and more effectively between the tenderness of night and the tight embrace of her pliant arms. Aside from the artful placement of the future active participle *laesura*,⁴ in this line of six words each contains one «u», «m» occurs five times, «n» three times and the first four feet of the hexameter are spondees. The net result of the spondaic heaviness and assonance is gravity. What makes the participle in this context even more effective is the sequence of tenses: *erat . . . fulgebat . . . laesura . . . iurabas*, which causes the future to clash violently with the imperfect tenses which encompass it.

Lines 7–10 comprise her oath as recalled in indirect discourse: three (an accumulation Horace is partial to) *dum* clauses and the future infinitive *fore*. So long as three *ἀδύνατα* do not take place, their love will be reciprocal. The structural significance of the details of the *dum* clauses as they relate to II (17–24) will be considered shortly; for the present it should be noted that I accept Housman's zeugma in line 7.⁵

The structure of Horace's resolution (11–16) is quite straightforward. He tells Neaera that if he has any manliness she will suffer; and despite the syntax of 12 which makes it dependent upon 13–14, its ties to line 11 are closer as they both develop the idea of *virtus* and *vir*, and together with these terms perhaps play on the word Flaccus.⁶ 11–12 are the key couplet of Horace's conditional resolution, with 13–14 and 15–16 spelling out clearly the particulars. Horace will not brook a rival, but will himself seek an equal,

⁴ A. Y. Campbell, *Horace. A New Interpretation* (London 1924) 142: «The first half-dozen lines of this piece are one of the very few passages of real poetry in the whole book; in the third line the future participle is especially good; though neither one of them knew she was to be false, it was already destined.»

⁵ A. E. Housman, «Elucidations of Latin Poets,» *CR* 15 (1901) 404–406 at 405: «. . . the meaning of Horace's words is the following: 'dum lupus pecori infestus (terrere ovilia, or what you will,) et Orion nautis infestus turbaret hibernum mare.'» Giarratano, *op. cit.*, 100, and Fraenkel, *op. cit.*, 67 n. 6, agree. Other interpretations with or without emendations have been offered. I note, besides the standard *foret*, four of these in chronological order. M. Graf, «Die 15. Epode des Horaz,» *Xenien* (München 1891) 13–19, emended *pecori lupus* to *fureret notus*. S. Allen, «On Horace, Epode XV., 1–10; and on Virgil, *Aeneid* IX., 339,» *CR* 16 (1902) 305–306, thinks *pecori lupus* a corruption of *pecoralibus*, «cattle pens.» E. H. Alton, «The Zeugma in Horace's Epode XV,» *CR* 19 (1905) 215–216, suggested the emendation *lips*: «*Lips* might easily have been mistaken for an abbreviation of *lupus* (*lup̄s*).» J. P. Postgate, «On Horace Epode XV. 5 and Seneca *Herc. Oet.* 335 sqq.,» *CR* 19 (1905) 217–218, reads: «dum lupus infestus pecori turbaret (neuter, sc. 'per ovilia' or 'in ovilibus') et Orion nautis infestus hibernum mare turbaret (active).»

⁶ Giarratano, *op. cit.*, 101: «Spesso il nome proprio usato invece del pronome denota il pathos . . .» So Kiessling-Heinze, *Oden und Epoden*¹⁰ (Berlin 1960) 544, who state flatly: «. . . ein Spiel mit der ursprünglichen Bedeutung von *flaccus* 'schlaff' scheint mir dem Ethos der Stelle nicht angemessen . . .» The contrary is suggested as possible by Cruquius on 12: *fortasse per anthypophoram obiecti convicii alludit ad adiectivum flaccus*; *quasi Horat. flaccidis et demissis auribus, in re Venera illi non satisfacisset*. V. Ussani, *Le liriche di Orazio*² (Torino 1922) I, 41, is more imaginative: «Per quasi de cogliere in questo verso un'eco di corrucci antecedenti, nei quali egli la minacciava della *virtus* ed ella rispondeva motteggiando il *cognomen* dell'amante: 'La tua *virtus*? Oh! tu non sei un *vir*, sei un *flaccus* (un imbecille).»

presumably a girl who can be faithful even as he has been to Neaera (13—14). Nor is Neaera to hope that her beauty will compel Horace's submission to her ways,⁷ his *virtus* is as concretized as *constantia* unyielding⁸, especially if backed by a deep-seated grief (15—16). Despite this bravado, the two *si* clauses (12 and 16) make it abundantly clear that Horace's resolution is even less reliable than Neaera's oath. His sham resolution is in fact merely a thinly veiled plea for Neaera to mend her morals. The careful symmetry of 11—16 may be appreciated at a glance:

<i>o dolitura</i> (first words)	11
<i>nam si</i>	12
<i>non</i>	13
<i>et</i>	14
<i>nec</i>	15
<i>si dolor</i> (last word)	16

The deliberate pattern of alliteration again is striking:

A	1	1	2	3	
<i>o dolitura mea multum virtute Neaera</i>	11				
3	4	5	6	2	
<i>nam si quid in Flacco viri est,</i>	12				
3	6		7	3	
<i>non feret adsiduas potiori te dare noctes,</i>	13				
	5	7			
<i>et quaeret iratus parem,</i>	14				
3	4	6	8	8	6
<i>nec semel offensae cedit constantia formae,</i>	15				
4	8	5	A		
<i>si certus intrarit dolor</i>	16				

II (17—24) abruptly (*et tu*) turns from Neaera to Horace's rival. The unit is built on contrast and reversal, of which *felicior* is the first note in the picture of the man's good fortune that fills six lines (17—22). In 17—18 the rival struts proud over Horace's misfortune and in 19—22 he is conceded (*licebit*) that which Horace lacks: wealth (in the forms of cattle, land and gold), invulnerability to death and handsomeness. We here again have an

⁷ Scholia x1: *Diceret illa : pulchra sum nimis et ideo quicquid faciam, mihi subiacebis precando.*

⁸ I follow the MSS reading *offensae* (15) against Bentley's conjecture *offensi*. For a spirited and sensitive refutation of *offensi* see F. Olivier, *Les Épodes d'Horace* (Lausanne 1917) 121—124.

example of Horace's affinity for grouping by threes: three things are granted,⁹ the first of which, wealth, is not stated as such but is itself represented by three items. But in 23--24, Horace will have the last (if bitter) laugh. The whole presents a tidy architectural study in balance and chiasmus:

Key Words		Lines	Total Lines
<i>es felicior</i>	<i>et tu nunc</i>	17	2
(<i>meo</i>) <i>malo</i> (last word)		18	
<i>sis</i>		19	4
<i>tibique Pactolus</i> fluat (first words)		20	
<i>nec te Pythagorae</i> fallant (first words)		21	
<i>vincas</i>		22	
<i>maerebis</i>		23	2
<i>ego risero</i> (last word)	<i>ast ego vicissim</i>	24	

We may now take note of the epode's linear allocation:

$$24 = 16 (= 10 [= 6 + 4] + 6) + 8 (= 2 + 4 + 2).$$

The second primary unit of eight lines is one half the sixteen line total of the first primary unit. The first and second primary units achieve further symmetry by composition of subordinate units. The central panel of each comprises four lines in which a catalogue of three items is contained. Each panel is preceded and followed by an equal number of lines (6 and 2, respectively).

In confronting some of the more subtle but not less real relationships of I to II, let us first of all recall several items in the catalogue of Neaera's oath (7--10) and several included in the catalogue of the good fortune of Horace's rival (17--22):

<i>pecus</i> (7)	<i>pecus</i> (19)
<i>nautis infestus Orion</i> (7)	<i>Pythagorae renati</i> (21)
<i>turbaret mare</i> (8)	<i>Pactolus fluat</i> (20)
<i>Apollo</i> (9)	<i>Nireus</i> (22)

That *pecori* (7) and *pecore* (19) are repetitious, and that the sea in turmoil and the flowing Pactolus are two instances of liquid imagery (sea and river) might be dismissed as examples of the many coincidences likely to appear in poetry. One could further note by way of curiosity that while the hostility between wolf and cattle and the turbulence of the sea are to guarantee Neaera's fidelity, strangely enough the young man with whom she betrays this fidelity

⁹ Comm. Cruq. on 22: *Tria commemorat, quibus amor nascitur et augetur, nimirum, divitias, sapientiam, et pulchritudinem. Idem facit Virg. in 2. Ecloga.*

is rich in cattle and far from being on a troubled sea he has the Pactolus flowing with gold for himself and presumably for his beloved. His wealth and success over Horace recall the poet's complaint on another occasion when he had lost out in the game of love (11.11—12):

«*contrane lucrum nil valere candidum
pauperis ingenium?*»

Were this all, the curiosity might be noted and dismissed. But it is not.

Let us turn to a portion of another poem of Horace (*Odes* 1.28.9—22):

... *habentque
Tartara Panthoiden iterum Orco
demissum, quamvis clipeo Troiana refixo
tempora testatus nihil ultra
nervos atque cutem morti concesserat atrae,
iudice te non sordidus auctor
naturae verique. sed omnis una manet nox
et calcanda semel via leti.
dant alios Furiae torvo spectacula Marti;
exito est avidum mare nautis;
mixta senum ac iuvenum densentur funera; nullum
saeva caput Proserpina fugit.
me quoque devexi rapidus comes Orionis¹⁰
Illyricis Notus obruit undis.*

This passage is appropriate for two reasons. First, it makes clear, without going beyond the text of Horace, that line 21:

nec te Pythagorae fallant arcana renati

does not simply mean that he knows the mysteries of philosophy but that he knows the secret of the conquest of death. Pythagoras argued for the death of flesh and sinew, but as for the *anima*, it took its abode in another body. In the ode, Horace refers to the claim of Pythagoras that he was the reincarnation of Euphorbus, a Trojan hero slain by Menelaos.¹¹ To substantiate his claim, Pythagoras selected a shield, hanging in the temple of Argos, which was shown to be that of Euphorbus. On *iterum* (10) Pseudo-Acron explains: *Quia saepe mortuus est, transeunte anima eius in alios*. Second, the passage shows clearly for us the relation by contrast of the *nauta* doomed to die and Pythagoras (or Horace's rival who knows the philosopher's *arcana*) who is

¹⁰ Pseudo-Acron: *Ortus enim occasus Orionis tempestuosi sunt; ideo et comitem eius notum ventum dixit.*

¹¹ *Iliad*. 17.69.

immune to death. The ode also associates with the sailor both Orion and the sea as instruments of his destruction even as the epode does.¹²

That line 22:

formaque vincas Nirea

harkens back to line 9:

intonsoque agitare Apollinis aura capillos

is not at once apparent. The relationship is not intended to be a matter of one-for-one equation. Handsome Apollo's hair streaming in the breeze is appropriate enough as a component of a lover's oath, but warned as we were by (3):

cum tu magnorum numen laesura deorum

it quietly hints at «the other man». And when this other man appears he is favorably compared with handsome Nireus. The positive link between Apollo and Nireus is furnished by Horace in *Odes* 3.20.13—16 where the picture of Nearchus, Nireus and Ganymede is that of Apollo in our epode:

*fertur et leni recreare vento
sparsum odoratis umerum capillis,
qualis aut Nireus fuit aut aquosa
raptus ab Ida.*

But the comparison of Horace's rival with Nireus is not wholly flattering. Nireus is listed among the heroes in the catalogue of *Iliad* 2, and Homer, to be sure, tells us that Nireus was the most handsome of the Greeks (Achilles excepted) who waged war at Troy. At the same time Homer describes him as a weakling and on that account followed but by few men (2.671—675):

*Νιρέυς αὖ Σύμηθεν ἄγε τρεῖς νῆας εἶσας,
Νιρέυς Ἀγλαΐης νιός Χαρόποιό τ' ἄνακτος,
Νιρέυς, ὃς κάλλιστος ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθεν
τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ' ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα·
ἀλλ' ἀλαπαδνός ἔην, παῦρος δέ οἱ εἶπετο λαός.*

Nireus' deficiency of Homeric *aretê* recalls the Roman *virtus* (twice noted in *virtute* and *virī* and specified as *constantia*) of the ousted Horace.¹²

¹² Demetrius, *de elocutione* 61—62, notes the devices of anaphora and disjunction in 2.671—674 that magnify the mean Nireus and his meagre following of three ships to the point of making him a character as easily remembered as Achilles and Odysseus.

Like Catullus in 8, Horace in epode 15 attempts to steel himself against his unfaithful lady's charms. But he struggles with doubtful success. Horace's prophecy to Neaera's new favorite (23):

heu heu translatos alio maerebis amores

sounds more like a feeble attempt to frighten him away than a threat; its relevance to Horace's present condition and the poem's essence is:

heu heu translatos tibi dulcis maereo amores.