

CASA ESSAY

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HORACE: THE MISUNDERSTOOD LOVER? VIEWS ON HORACE'S APPROACH TO LYRIC LOVE POETRY IN HIS *ODES*

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Introduction

Horace is often placed at the opposite end of the spectrum to Catullus in discussions on Latin lyric love poetry. In this oversimplified view, the poets represent vastly different interpretations of love and the poetic process, Catullus being the prototype *Sturm und Drang* poet while Horace embodies calm and self-detachment. This essay explores contemporary views on Horace's approach to writing about love, and proposes that an over-emphasis on Horace's political views and interest in public matters has led to a disregard for his views on love. It is further argued that a comparison between Horace's love poetry and that of Catullus is an unjust categorisation which does little to acknowledge Horace's versatile and developmental approach to lyric poetry. Finally, Horace's self-detachment is seen to be the most effective means through which he succeeds in connecting with the experiences of his reader.

A South African interpretation

South African poet Charl-Pierre Naudé, in his poem *Classical Dialogue*, posits a conversation between Horace and Catullus in modern times. At one point Catullus, apparently having suffered memory loss, asks Horace, 'Who are we?' Horace responds: 'The poets of old Rome, the archetypes. You're the poet of love and restless youth. *Et moi?* The poet of bucolic peace' (Naudé 2007:113). The two figures continue to debate the supremacy of their respective 'poetic ideals' (Murray 2012:29). Horace advocates balance, serenity and calm. Catullus considers this a bore and prefers melancholy, burning and agitation — 'the lyric of anguish' (Odendaal 2008:191).

At first glance it seems as though Naudé is alluding to that common, oversimplified interpretation of Horace, evident when scholars often ascribe to him qualities such as serenity and control, and adversity towards emotional display.

However, in a closer reading, it is revealed that Naudé is oversimplifying the complex literary relationship between Catullus and Horace for his own purposes, in order to illustrate the chosen perspective of the poet to be either pro-state and order (as Horace is depicted to be) or anti-state and per implication pro chaos, as Catullus seems to be. In a later discussion Naudé relates this to the choice before South African poets in a post-Apartheid dispensation to either support and 'build' the State, or criticise it. The choice, he claims, is not as 'obvious' as it was in the previous era (Odendaal 2008:192).

The question of whether Horace was pro-state and pro-order is an entirely different matter to whether he was an intellectual love poet bereft of passion. The interplay between the two questions is significant, however, considering that the perceived focus on Horace as a 'committed public poet' has resulted in a comparative lack of interest in his views on love. This is evident in the views of Lyne (1980:203), who considers that Horace wrote love poetry 'for the occasion', although never affording themes of love disproportionate attention compared to the 'more important' matters in life. Ancona (1999:63) argues that the scholarly neglect for Horace's love poems is evident from the fact that Fraenkel, whom she considers 'one of the most influential Horatian scholars of this century', paid so little attention to these poems, despite themes of love, erotica and desire comprising 'more than a quarter' of Horace's odes. In short, Horace's true regard for love has been largely overshadowed by a fascination with his political views.

Problematic interpretations of Horace and the State

Horace's orientation towards Augustus and the Roman State has captivated scholars since time immemorial. Thom (2004:67) summarises existing literature on Horace's position on Augustus, and finds mainly two positions emerging: those who believe Horace to be generally in support of Augustus (among them West 2002:23), and those who find him to be both more independent from and less supportive of the State (such as Santirocco 1995:225). Thom (2004:68) contends that the median position lies in Horace's 'careful ambivalence' towards Augustus' regime.

The tendency of scholars to (over)emphasize the importance of Horace's attitude towards the State in his *Odes* can be illustrated by means of *Carmen* 1.14 (The 'ship ode'). This ode has long been believed to be about Horace's loyalty to the Roman State, as held by Porter (1987:78) and West (1995:70) among others. However, Knorr (2006:149) makes a compelling argument that it was never intended to be about the State but rather about the conflict between passion and

calm in love. This presents some very interesting parallels to Naudé's interpretation.¹

Carmen 1.14 presents a near-perfect example of the discussion of Horace's views on love on at least two levels: firstly, the ever-present and inevitable choice between 'passion' and 'serenity', which the lover is faced with in this poem; and secondly, the alternative interpretation of the poem as a poem about the State (which raises the interesting question of whether there is perhaps more of Horace's work where the interpretations have focused on the public sphere excluding more personal perspectives. Horace was more than a 'committed public poet', as Lyne (1980:203) believed, or a 'public voice', in the words of Santirocco (1995:225).

Consistent with the findings of Anderson, Knorr (2006:151) contends that there is 'no political subtext' in the Ship ode, and thus no convincing argument for the invoking of the 'Ship of state' *topos*. Instead, he finds that *Carmen* 1.14 forms part of a series of Horace's odes on love triangles. Here, the girl in the poem (represented by the ship) is faced with the difficult task of choosing between a young and passionate lover (personified by the sea), and an older and more serene suitor (depicted as the harbour). Far from the ship being (only) a metaphor for the state, this ode emphasises the conflict between logic and passion, in much the same way as Naudé described it in his poem.

Horace's views on love and a case for misunderstanding

Horace's approach to lyric love poetry in his *Odes* has been discussed at length in contemporary literature (See for example Putnam 2009:8 and 1999:189). Odendaal (2008:192) writes that Horace represents 'poetics of moderation; of serene, light-ironic reflection'. Anderson (1999:ix) goes as far as describing Horace's love poems as 'somewhat disappointing' to those who think of love poetry as passionate declarations of love.

Lyne (1980:204) presents the argument that Horace never thought of love as more than 'youth's folly', which should end with age. He builds this argument on evidence from much of Horace's love-repertoire, where youthful boys and girls seem to be the victims of either pain or passion, all associated with love. Also in support of this argument, he claims that *Carmen* 1.25, aimed at the ageing Lydia, serves as proof of Horace's belief that love belongs only with the young and foolish. Nisbet (1962:184) claims confidently that none of Horace's love poetry 'reaches the first rank'. He does concede, however, that 'love poetry' might be a misnomer for Horace's odes on love.

¹ Ironically, and in contrast with Horace, Naudé's poem is commonly misinterpreted as non-political, while in fact it turns out to be exactly that — political.

In contrast, Ancona argues that when scholars (particularly Nisbet) weigh Horace's love poetry and finds it too light (or even 'disappointing'), they are applying the standard of the classic 'romantic' love poet, a standard which is anachronistic and grossly incompatible with Horace's style (1989:63). Horace's poetry would always fall short compared to the emotion and passion displayed in the poetry of Catullus.

Lyne (1980:203) uses a different standard, namely that of Horace's own work, in following the view that Horace was first and foremost a 'committed public poet', as discussed above, and secondly a love poet. This analysis, according to Ancona, also misses the point. Clear and uncontested proof of Horace's thinking about love as a central part of life (and not only of youth, as Lyne argues) is the fact that themes of love comprise such a substantial part of the *Odes*.

Perhaps the disregard for Horace's love poems is not surprising, considering that they were used as (assumably propagandist) Roman school textbooks by the time of his death (Grant 2015). A further theory is that the themes in the *Odes* were somewhat overshadowed by the first six poems of Book III, which became known as the 'Roman odes' owing to their distinct patriotic (or Augustan) focus, their relative importance perhaps overemphasised by scholars such as Commager (1995:208) and Mader (1987:11).

The odes have been described as 'anti-romantic', subject to the qualification that this does not imply that they are without passion (Connor 1981:626). Although the view has been held in the past by some that Horace is 'not concerned with his emotions' (Ancona 1994:5), contemporary views point to a Horace who is 'sentimental' (Günther 2012:344), his poetry displaying personal emotional content (Santirocco 2015:22) and sometimes even 'passionate' (Johnson 1999:104). This, in fact, Horace had pointed out himself in *Carmen* 1.6.

Poetic process

In *Carmen* 1.6, Horace gives some valuable insight into his own creative process while recusing himself from writing epic poetry (presumably at the request of Augustus): first he strongly contrasts *scriberis* with *cantamus*, implying something about the lyric poets, who 'sing' as opposed to the composers of epic, who merely 'write'. Next he sets out the themes that he is able to write about, having proclaimed himself too *tenues* to write epic poetry about the gods and men:

*nos convivias, nos proelia virginium
sectis in iuvenes iugibus acrum
cantamus vacui, sive quid urimur,
non praeter solitum leves*

(1.6: 17-20)

I sing of feasts, of battles of virgins with their fierce fingernails
 raised against young men, whether I am relaxed, or inflamed, not
 without lightheartedness²

Horace sets out a 'value-system' in which lyric verse exceeds epic verse in importance, effectively 'inverting' the existing hierarchy of literary genres (Connor 1987:190). He also describes his state of mind when composing these works: he is relaxed (*vacui*), inflamed (*urimur*) and lighthearted (*leves*). In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace addresses the question of whether *ars* (the perfection of the art through cultivation) or *ingenium* (natural talent and wit) is the more important ingredient of composition (Lowrie 2002:150). Both are considered crucial, the one complementing the other (Lynch 1988:208). Naudé uses this interplay in his *Dialogue*:

Horace: To write poetry you have to survive. There is no publisher in Hades ...

Catullus: To — this?

Horace: What is wrong with this?

Catullus: The equilibrium, old chap. One day the sun is heir to the moon. Next day the moon is heir to the sun. Surprise, surprise.

Horace: To burn is torture. Torture kills the imagination.

Catullus: Imagination itself kills. Mediocrity, for instance.

Horace: It's not about equilibrium, but serenity. In order to reflect.

Catullus: Not torture, but melancholy. To experience.

Horace: Not experience that counts, but creation.

Catullus: Not reflection, but discovery.

Horace: Calm, for horizons.

Catullus: Agitation, to awaken feelings (Naudé 2007:115).

However, as Lynch (1988:38) argues, *ingenium* may take on a far broader meaning, namely as 'a faculty that gives material shape to abstractions.' Thus far from the supposition on Naudé's part that Horace favours serenity alone when composing, he is a self-proclaimed 'inflamed' writer, using his *ingenium* in order

² Own translations throughout the essay.

to turn ‘experiences’ into creation (Freudenburg 2014:9). Marshall (1911:i) commented that Horace was ‘at his best’ when writing about humble themes (such as the feasts, love affairs and lovers’ quarrels mentioned in *Carmen* 1.6), seemingly reacting (‘on the spur of the moment’) on and drawing from his own experiences or those of close friends.

What makes Horace a great love poet in his own right? As will be argued below, his ability to draw from ‘personal’ experience (whether factual or not), his ability to create order from chaos as well as his application of reason and logic are the essential ingredients of his timeless poetic success.

Experience

Being able to ‘master one’s feelings’ requires experience. As Thomson Vessey (1999:29) points out, only experience can endow a lover with the serenity to share his pain as simply and detachedly as Horace does in his *Odes*, with particular reference to *Carmen* 1.5 (Pyrrha). This perhaps casts some light on Naudé’s assertion that Horace prefers ‘creation’ to ‘experience’: far from rejecting the value of experience, Horace is advocating the use of experience to aid creation.

Horace gives countless examples of the value of his ‘own’ experiences in love which have come to clarity in his observations of others. These include *Carmen* 1.5, where he proclaims in the last stanza that he himself was a survivor of love’s ‘shipwreck’; *Carmen* 3.26, where he tells of his past successes as a soldier in Venus’ army and in *Carmen* 1.16 where he proclaims:

*me quoque pectoris
temptavit in dulci iuventa
fervor et in celeres iambos
misit furentem* (1.16:22-25)

Once the passion of the heart tempted me in my sweet youth, and
drove me in rage to swift iambs (verses).

Whether these are fabrications of the poet’s imagination or actual experiences matter less than their implication: Horace is categorically emphasizing the value of the creative process and thought about experience in understanding and gaining clarity on past suffering.

As Gunther (2012:355) puts it, ‘Horace’s love poetry seems, or rather pretends to lack passion; it does not, however, lack deeply felt sentimental experience’. This view is in line with that of Putnam (2006:8), when the latter describes Horace as someone ‘who has mastered [his] feelings through [his] art’. It is precisely this ability — drawing from the paradox of poetry as a ‘dispassionate

expression of passionate emotion', according to Gunther (2012:354) — that enables Horace to connect with readers by presenting their own experiences to them in new ways: creating order from chaos.

The process of turning chaos into order

When Putnam (2006:8) describes Horace as a poet who has 'mastered his feelings through his art', he is referring to a process, not a destination. Not a perfect human (or lover), Horace proves that he continually must learn from his experiences and come to better understanding through this reflective process.

In *Carmen* 1.5 ('Phyrra'), Horace makes a study of his own approach to love lyric by expertly contrasting nature (here a proxy for irrationality and desire) with man-made order, signaling intellect and rationality (Connelly et al 1997). Lowrie (1997:266) explains that, true to his intellectual nature, Horace's poetry is about the *process* of writing and thinking about love, rather than the experience of love itself.

Equally important to the metapoetry in *Carmen* 1.5 is the actual handling of the subject, namely Horace's recount of a personal emotional disappointment — a similar experience to what he forecasts the *puer* in the poem will go through. In the final stanza he describes his own process of creating order from the chaos that was his emotions: of giving thanks to the 'god of the sea' for his own survival from what is assumed to be heartbreak. Sutherland (1995:442) contends that the speaker's controlled presentation in the Pyrrah-ode is a particularly important part of its success in convincing his reader of the importance of calm reflection and emotional distance. Horace attains the distance required to 'catalogue dispassionately the physiological symptoms of his emotional distress' (Santirocco 2015:33).

Carmen 3.9 presents another metapoetic study of the role of perspectives in a relationship: in a dialogue with a former lover, Horace illustrates how logic and rhetoric can bring calm to an otherwise emotional discussion. However, eventually emotion triumphs over logic when Lydia chooses her former flame (who is 'as light as cork' and 'more fleeting than the stormy Adriatic' over one that is by all *logic* the more favourable candidate. Thus 'order' and 'chaos' are often in conflict. Another example of this perspective can be found in *Carmen* 3.26, where logic is again overcome by passion when Horace, after elaborately explaining that he had given up on fighting in Venus' army, contradicts himself when he asks the goddess to aid him one last time in his quest for love.

Horace's 'dispassionate expression of passionate emotion', as will be argued next, is further made possible through the application of logic and reason:

two ingredients we have come to expect from Horace, the ‘intellectual poet’ (Lowrie 1997:266).

Logic and realism

Horace applies logic to the utmost in his handling of love: When he attempts to convince Lydia in *Carmen* 1.25 that she ought to open her door to the lover wailing outside, he applies rhetoric and logic instead of reverting to the senseless moans of other lovers who cry outside her house. In *Carmen* 3.7 he looks past Asterie’s pretence of heartbrokenness about an absent lover, identifying the true cause of her pain to be her conflicting desire for her neighbor Enipeus while distant Gyges remains true to her.

According to Thom (2010:82), the use of realism in *Carmen* 3.10 is the ‘hallmark of lyric poetry’ insofar as it sets out anew the possibilities of lyric poetry. The same can be said of *Carmen* 3.11, where the *exclusus amator* is again applied but effectively rejected by the lover in favour of reason and realistic assessment of his situation. In *Carmen* 3.12 Horace contrasts Nebule’s meticulous, sensible approach to heartbreak with her vulnerability at the mercy of Cupid, who is the cause of her suffering. Both these poems are examples of Horace’s clever use of a somewhat exhausted *topos*, namely that of the *exclusus amator* or excluded lover, by turning the *topos* on its head, so to speak.

Staking a claim

In *Carmen* 3.30, Horace notoriously claims that he has built a monument ‘more everlasting than bronze’, which will perpetuate him in the memory of posterity. However this claim is applied solely to Horace’s accomplishment of transferring Greek metre onto Latin. Perhaps Horace’s claim should be expanded to also include his exquisite handling of a topic for which he was largely not acknowledged for a long time — his accomplishments as a poet of love.

De Botton (2000:199) argues that it is precisely the ability of artists and philosophers to ‘turn pain into knowledge’ which compels humans through the centuries to turn to poetry and art to better understand their own experiences. What Horace achieves by writing of love while pretending to be an outsider to the many emotions hinted at in his poems, is to make these emotions (and ultimately his interpretations of these emotions) more accessible and relatable to his reader. By playing the role of ‘detached observer in the love lives of others’ (Santirocco 2015:32), Horace strategically becomes the ally of his reader, rather than of the character in his poem (Commager 1995:135). It is precisely this ability that has made Horace’s love poetry withstand the test of time.

Conclusion

Following a brief overview of contemporary readings of Horace's lyric love poetry in his *Odes*, the notion that Horace, as Lyne implies, disregarded love in favour of his role as a public poet, is rejected. It is revealed that his intellectual approach to the topic of love has resulted in a misunderstanding of his true regard of love, mostly due to the tendency among earlier scholars to overemphasise Horace's views of the State.

Horace's ability to draw from experience while remaining self-detached, 'bring order from chaos' by simplifying possibly the most complex human experience to a rhetorical interplay between logic and passion, and to apply logic and reason to his interpretations of love has contributed immensely to the universal acceptance of his love poetry. While he himself was certainly not bereft of passion, his ability to understate emotions has made his readers take him seriously for two millennia — an accomplishment not unworthy of praise.

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