

Moral Unity in Horace's Third Book of Odes

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Horace's philosophical tendencies are no secret; in his Odes, as Highet notes, he "constantly gives his readers moral advice."¹ However Horace might fancy himself, though, he is no philosopher. He is too real, too pragmatic, too human and varied to fit into that occupation. What then is he doing in his third book of Odes, if not philosophy? Some poems are obviously moralizing; others merely stem from a nebulous ethical bulb. Some Odes are serious, others are humorous; certainly all contain a playful bit of Horatian wit. Moreover, consideration of the Odes and their moral messages frequently exposes what appears to be a curious inconsistency within the book. Santirocco refers to it as a "tension between the public and private voices of the poet."² This is a good description, and it applies quite specifically to the most striking set of discrepancies: those between the Roman Odes and the rest of the book. These groups often differ in message and in tone, with the Roman Odes treating of Augustan virtues – *Iustitia*, *Fortitudo*, *Temperantia*, and *Prudentia* – and patriotic Roman virtues, *Pietas* and *Fides*, while the remaining lyrics form a multifaceted description of private, personal morality. One must ask, then, what specific moral messages he puts forth in the Roman Odes and the remaining twenty-four lyrics; and the questions then arise, how the two sections work together, and whether any discrepancy can be solved.³

How does Horace present the Roman and Augustan virtues in the first six Odes of Book III? To pinpoint where each virtue is specifically discussed may prove difficult, but it seems likely that discussion of the cycle as a whole will show that all six virtues have been covered at some point. As he begins the first ode, Horace immediately establishes his role as "*Musarum*

¹ Highet, *Poets* 131.

² Santirocco, *Unity* 110.

³ This investigation is a work in progress, and consideration of the Satires, Epistles, and remaining Odes will offer a much more comprehensive view of Horace's view of morality.

sacerdos” and calls for religious silence, as he will sing “*carmina non prius / audita.*”⁴ This sets the tone for the Ode and for the rest of the cycle. What follows is a discussion of hierarchy, obeisance to the gods and those in power, the universality of fate and death, contentment with what one receives from life, and avoidance of excessive ambition or avarice. After the religious invocation in the opening stanza, Horace continues with the broad generalizations of lines five to nine. In this way he introduces hierarchy and its cosmic appropriateness; kings on earth rule their people, and Jupiter in heaven rules over all.

In this way Horace draws a loose parallel between Jupiter and Augustus, one which will continue to be developed in the subsequent odes. Moreover, just as Jupiter’s rule extends in all directions and over all things, so does the “*capax...urna*” of *Necessitas* sort lots for all men.⁵ The universality of fate is then restated as the fact that death comes to all, even the rich, and the introduction of the rich man allows Horace to address the new topic of avarice and contentment. He emphasizes that the simply-led life brings peace:

...somnus agrestium
lenis virorum non humilis domos
fastidit umbrosamque ripam,
non Zephyris agitate Tempe.⁶

Having declared that the simple life is sufficient for the man “*desiderantem quod satis est,*” Horace reiterates how those who go against nature in their avarice – whether by tempting stormy seas, worrying about the weather, or extending their sphere of domination into the sea – will nevertheless fall victim to “*atra Cura*” and lives of worry.⁷ Broadly speaking, the virtues covered here are *Pietas*, *Fortitudo*, and *Prudentia*. What Horace accomplishes, though, is their conflation: *Fortitudo* and *Prudentia* are seen in the light of *Pietas*, and all three can be equally

⁴ Horace, *C. III.i.3-4*.

⁵ Horace, *C.III.i.5-12*.

⁶ *Ibid.* 21-24.

⁷ *Ibid.* 25-40.

described as obedience to hierarchy. These are all moral themes that Horace continues to develop, and conflate, in the remaining Roman Odes.

For instance, Ode 3.2 opens with the words “*Angustam...pauperiem,*” picking up on the themes of simplicity and, once *pauperies*’ relation to the military is exposed, hierarchy.⁸ Indeed, the entire ode focuses on obedience, military bravery, simplicity, and *virtus*. Horace’s tone is patriotic throughout, and the message of the poem’s first half is epitomized by the beloved lyric “*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*”⁹ The specific *virtus* in question from stanza five onward seems to be *Fortitudo*, the one which allows a young soldier to die for his country, though *Pietas* finds expression in the final two stanzas. In any case, it makes sense that the lines should be blurred. As Horace demonstrated in the first Roman Ode, the virtues are intimately related. Again, as in the first ode, fate’s universality is emphasized, in lines like “*mors et fugacem persequitur virum,*” and “*raro antecedentem scelestum / deseruit pede Poena claudo.*”¹⁰

Again, themes from one ode carry into the next, as the third ode begins with a picture of *Fortitudo* in the “*Iustum et tenacem propositi virum,*” and in the ode he develops themes of *Pietas*, *Fides* and *Prudentia*.¹¹ It is by virtue of *Fortitudo* and *Clementia* that saviors such as Pollux, Hercules, and Augustus have made it to heaven, and it is by virtue of *Pietas*, *Fides* and *Prudentia* that Rome is allowed to retain her empire. Indeed, as Juno says, Rome may extend her reach to the farthest lands, so long as she abides by “*hac lege,*” namely that she not rebuild Troy in her avarice. Finally, the ode closes with Horace humorously asking his muse “*quo, Musa, tendis?*” By this utterance Horace emphasizes his own *Pietas*, as he has obviously been

⁸ Horace, *C.III.ii.1*.

⁹ Horace, *C.III.ii.13*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹¹ Horace, *C.III.iii.1*.

obeying his muse. And so, Horace once again emphasizes the importance of the natural order, *Fortitudo* in doing one's duty, and remaining content with "*quod satis est.*" Williams observes that, although Horace begins with a "real political situation" in this discussion of Augustan *Fortitudo*, he quickly moves to the foreign, then to the general, and finally to the cosmic.¹² There is a reluctance here to be too specific: typical Horatian slipperiness. He advocates an Augustan virtue, and deifies Augustus himself, but then he shifts to the divine realm, to Jupiter and nature, to Juno and her grudge against the Trojans. Horace shows that *Fortitudo* was there at the city's founding (it helped Romulus escape death, just as it helped Vergil's Aeneas reach Italy), but he takes a circuitous route to this destination: putting words in the mouth of a goddess, expressing real rancor against the forefathers, and avoiding more mention of "real politics," or even of real people. And, he finishes on a note of levity, *proud* levity, and a direct address to the muse. Horace plays a brief note of early dissonance, despite the overall harmoniousness of the Roman Odes. This foreshadows the complexity to come.

Odes four, five, and six all continue in the unified moral vein, each one emphasizing different facets of the six virtues, but all of them proceeding from a unified moral code. For instance, ode four picks up once again on *Pietas* in an invocation of his muse, paralleling the end of the previous ode. This develops into a reiteration of Jupiter's victory over the Giants, which Horace has already mentioned in ode one, thus emphasizing once again the importance of the natural order. In ode five, Horace laments the waning of military fervor, and urges *Fortitudo* and *Fides* for the senate and soldiery. Through the speech of Regulus, Horace is able to describe what he means by *Fortitudo*, as in the beautiful *sententia*, "*neque amissos colores / lana refert medicata fuco, / nec vera virtus, cum semel excidit, / curat reponi deterioribus.*"¹³ Ode six is the

¹² Williams, 42.

¹³ Horace, *C.III.v.26-30*.

most pessimistic of the cycle, and focuses mainly on sexual morality and *Pietas*.¹⁴ As in ode three, Rome's dependence on divine providence finds emphasis, this time in the opening stanza,

Delicta maiorum immeritus lues,
Romane, donec templa refeceris
aedesque labentis deorum et
foeda nigro simulacra fumo.¹⁵

Horace then translates this loss of *Pietas* into a loss of *castitas*, and discusses the sexual depravity of some women in his age. This is likely a reference to the morality laws Augustus tried, and failed, to enact in the year 28.¹⁶ Throughout the cycle Horace has been conflating the virtues with each other, whether as symbol's of Rome's morality or of Augustus' reign. The overall effect is one of unity, wherein each ode refers to all the others and the same, strongly Roman moral core grounds each poem.

This general unity is what may be contrasted with some of the other odes in Book III. For example, contrast ode 3.7, which follows logically from 6 with its theme of *Fides*, with 3.26. In 3.7, Horace gives sage advice to Asterie, who is susceptible to the very moral corruption that Horace bemoans in 3.6, taking on the persona of *avunculus*. "*Prima nocte domum claude,*" he says, "*neque in vias / sub cantu querulae despice tibiae*"; she is not to reply to the types of advances made by the "*institor*" and "*navis Hispanae magister*" of Ode 3.6.¹⁷ Horace is offering a familiar *sententia* in an avuncular voice, thereby privatizing the public message of 3.6. This shift from public to private is precisely what Santirocco rightly points out; the poet has set the public standard in 3.6, and applies it to private life in 3.7. The message in 3.26, though, is very different. After inveighing against blatant sexual advances in 3.6 and 3.7, Horace *becomes* a veteran of youthful love-warfare. He emphasizes his age and the appropriateness of retirement

¹⁴ Santirocco, 116.

¹⁵ Horace, *C.III.vi.1-4*.

¹⁶ Williams, 65.

¹⁷ Horace, *C.III.vii.29-30* and *C.III.vi.30-31*.

from that demanding occupation: “*Vixi puellis nuper idoneus...nunc arma defunctumque bello / barbiton hic paries habebit.*” Yet he follows this claim with the surprising – and somewhat impertinent – prayer to Venus, “*tange Chloen semel arrogentem.*”¹⁸ From pious *sacerdos* in 6 to gentle *avunculus* in 7, Horace has degenerated into a “dirty old man” figure! Why such a jarring inconsistency?

The answer to this question may appear more clearly after a similar discrepancy is investigated. In 3.4, Horace trusts in the protection of the muses to the point that he is willing to journey to what “happen to be the great trouble-spots on the borders of the empire,”¹⁹ and then extends his muse-protection to Augustus in the “*Pierio...antro,*” implying that Caesar can and should trust in his war efforts.²⁰ In 3.5 Horace as much as counsels Augustus to wage war against the Britons and the Parthians,²¹ making him a promise of divinity that is similar to the one Odysseus makes to Achilles in Book IX of the Iliad: Horace says, “*praesens divus habebitur / Augustus adiectis Britannis / imperio gravibusque Persis*”;²² Homer, “*σὺ δ’ ἄλλους περ Παναχαιοῦς / τειρομένους ἐλέαιρε κατὰ στρατόν, οἳ σε / θεὸν ὥς τίσουσ’.*”²³ From the *Fortitudo* of this strong call to war, though, Horace shifts to virtual political nihilism in 3.8. With sincerity equal to his hawkish zeal in 3.5, he advises Maecenas: “*mitte civilis super urbe curas,*” and forget about the wars in some of the very regions mentioned in the Roman Odes. In his public persona Horace urges attention and confidence in foreign wars, but as a *privatus* he is more interested in the quiet life: “*amphorae fumum...institutae / consule Tullo.*”²⁴

¹⁸ Horace, *C.III.xxvi.1-4 and 12.*

¹⁹ Williams, 51.

²⁰ Horace, *C.III.iv.40.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² Horace, *C.III.v.2-4.*

²³ Homer, *Il.IX.301-303.*

²⁴ Horace, *C.III.viii.11-12*

In each of the preceding examples there appears to be a discrepancy, either between odes from the second portion of the book, or between a later ode and a Roman Ode. Yet, one central aspect of Horace's moral (referring to *mores*, character, so almost 'ethical') thought is the appeal of the simple, balanced, pleasant life. This has an Epicurean flavor, to be sure; Horace seemed to fancy himself a sometimes Epicurean, as his epistle to Albius (Tibullus) demonstrates: "*me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises, / cum ridere voles, Epicuri de grege porcum.*"²⁵ In fact, this very epistle emphasizes once again the very same lifestyle that Horace advocates throughout his third book of odes. The lines preceding those quoted above read, "*Inter spem curamque, timores inter et iras / omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum. / grata superveniet, quae non sperabitur hora.*"²⁶ Here as elsewhere, Horace pushes for a carefree, joyful life. His odes present the same lifestyle, but with an important twist: with the introduction provided by the Roman Odes, everything that follows may be seen in the light of Augustan virtue. Horace may be working from an Epicurean standpoint, but he reconciles his happy lifestyle with the cardinal virtues of his leader and his state. In the Roman Odes, he has conflated the virtues to bring out their intimate relationships to one another; in the remaining twenty-six poems he does the same with his own. In 3.26, for instance, Horace need not be seen as the "dirty old man" looking for one last fling. The lifestyle he advocates in this ode, even though it appears to conflict with others in the book, nevertheless falls in with his Epicurean tendencies as well as (adapted) Augustan virtues: he demonstrates *Pietas* in praying to Venus, boasts proudly of his past *Fortitudo* in the arena of love, and shows some *Fides* and *Constantia* in his continued hope for love (and the faith in Venus that such hope requires!). Moreover, the negative feelings generated toward the character might be misplaced anyway; it would seem inappropriate to feel anger at a

²⁵ Horace, *Epist. IV.15-16*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

mischievous puppy in a Rockwell painting, after all, and why must Horace be treated any differently?

A similar idea can be applied to 3.8. To see Horace's ambivalence to national issues as an irreconcilable shift from his patriotism in 3.5 is to miss the importance of context. In the context of a private get-together, civil worry is out of place. Maecenas would be acting inappropriately if he focused too much on his job while acting as a *privatus*, as a guest of his client. We might say that Horace has adapted the virtue *Prudentia* to cover judgments of social propriety. Of course, Horace also shows the way to be *pius* in a private context: when a god has diverted death "*arboris ictu*," the appropriate action is annual tribute.²⁷ Similar common *Pietas* is also demonstrated in 3.13, wherein Horace properly venerates the *fons* that is his source of refreshment and sometime inspiration.²⁸ With almost every ode in Book III, the same reconciliation is possible; where a moral parallel or adaptation is not obvious, discrepancy may perhaps be excused as either realism or playful variety, or both.

Santirocco points out an important distinction between the public and private voices of Horace. He is also correct that the discrepancies are not "insoluble."²⁹ Horace presents his country's morality in the Roman Odes: this is true. He presents more personal morality in the rest of the odes; this is also true. But he probably subscribes to both. He performs his duty as *vates* or *sacerdos* in odes 3.1-6, and he puts forth some *dulcitus* in the rest. There are indeed some apparent discrepancies between the groups, but that is excusable. Horace is representing both how the world is and how he wants it to be, and he is conflating the two. He is putting certain types of behavior (his own?) under the umbrella of Augustan morality. Even as he reluctantly deifies Augustus at points, he humanizes that morality and leader all the more at other

²⁷ Horace, *C.III.v.8*

²⁸ Horace, *C.III.xiii*.

²⁹ Santirocco, 111.

points. He offers a picture of a good Augustan life and makes it apply at a broad, national level. He performs his public duty as *sacerdos*, and obeys the pleasant demands of mood and muse; moreover, the two jobs are mutually inclusive. Indeed, it is interesting how obeying the muse and Bacchus provides such a nice bridge between what seems like a wanton, quasi-Epicurean lifestyle, and real Augustan virtue. Augustus is a complex figure in Horace's poetry, at once godhead and human leader; his attempt at moral legislation exposed both his divine aspirations (human lawgivers inevitably mimic Jupiter "*cuncta supercilio moven[s]*"³⁰) and, through his failure, humanity. Like his unique leader and patron, Horace displays divinity (as *sacerdos*) and humanity (as lover of wine, women, and song). His odes reflect their author as he reflects his ruler; Horace himself maintains the hierarchy of 3.1. The Roman Odes represent his *decorum*, but they are also intensely personal. They are a good way to systematically introduce his themes while making a serious, nationalistic and patriotic statement, but he is still intimately involved in them. Thus they introduce the rest of the book, with its richly varied entries, like facets of a character, or individual tiles in the mosaic of Horace's personality. Consistency is both achieved and mostly irrelevant.

Any discrepancy here is not irreconcilable, nor is it difficult to understand. Horace has good reasons for making varied moral arguments. On the one hand, he has a holy duty to fulfill as the *sacerdos musarum* and client of Maecenas; on the other hand, he is a humanist and a poet, and has certain personal and aesthetic "duties" as well. There is no reason to suppose that either set of claims is presented insincerely, or that the apparent inconsistency is the result of inattention, misunderstanding, or whimsy. As has already been noted, Horace is no philosopher. He has no need for consistency or good rhetoric. He offers his moral advice in a very sincere, human way, and pays attention to the flexibility that context sometimes allows or requires. His

³⁰ Horace, *C.III.i.8*.

work reflects the complexity of its author, representing both his strong Roman “decorum,” and his “dulce” human aesthetics and simple wisdom. In the Roman Odes, the public portion of Book III, one would expect Horace to formally describe the four cardinal Augustan virtues, as well as the two Roman virtues. In the rest of the book, he certainly seems to lay out a picture of those virtues in private life, and it is no bad thing that his work reflects the variability of real life. Like a true *sacerdos*, Horace has two sets of obligations: first and foremost is his obeisance to the divinities, his muses; secondly, though, Horace must attend to his public duties and obeisance to the *pontifex maximus*. Augustus broke new ground with his attempt at moral legislation, as with his rebuilding of temples and so on. Horace is similarly original, combining the virtues with a humanistic pragmatism in a completely new way. He is not an Epicurean, or a Stoic, or even a pure Augustan. His artful balancing of private and public, of *dulce et decorum*, make him profoundly unique, and, like his art, entirely and exclusively Horatian.

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