

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Horace (65 B.C.-8 B.C.)

Lyric poetry and convention. In introducing Catullus we were naturally drawn to the issue of self-expression, and, because that is the convenient pathway, we moved into the themes of that lusty and brilliant opus. We paid little attention to the finesse of prosody, through which Catullus, obviously, filtered his strong feelings. We did, though, remind ourselves that, though the lyric genre introduces expressive modes rare in the genres studied earlier here, the expression of self is always, especially in developed literary milieux, carried out under the banner of prevailing and available literary conventions. Horace, even more than Catullus, would enable us to value this point—which runs so sharply counter of the romantic ideas of poetic expression buoyed up bourgeois interpretations of European poetries of the early 19th century.

Horace as craftsman. To appreciate the complex relation Horace occupies, to the inheritance of Greek lyric, we need only look at the array of odes, epodes, satires, and *sermones* (stories) he draws on to develop his verbally, but not philosophically, complex response to life through poetry. This great poet, in craftsman and world view terms perhaps the greatest Rome created, was deeply immersed in the technical skills the Greek lyric poets—Sappho, Archilochos, Alcaeus—established as early as the seventh century B.C. The views of life Horace expresses through these forms—hearty patriotism, delight in rural life, sexual passion for women and young boys, despair at the loss of the old Roman virtues—these are views of far less conceptual interest than the procedure by which he thinks and sings, complexly, through these views. To the Roman orator Quintilian, these products were the finest verbal achievements of the Romans.

But where did Horace come onto the cultural background which made him privy to the artistic resources he utilizes.?

Horace and the turmoil of the times. Horace was born into the tempestuous first century B.C., which, unlike the tangled and internecine struggles of the first century A.D.—the world of Petronius, Tacitus, Juvenal—was all intra-armies struggle, factional violence, and the overwhelming need for some kind of political resolution, which, as it was, proved to be Augustus.

Horace's birthplace. Horace was born in the Samnite south of Italy, in the town of Venusia. (He was not a Roman, nor properly speaking an Italian, but a Samnite; his dialect of Latin may well have been tinged with the Samnite dialect, and even with some words of the Oscan tongue, a totally non-Italic speech form. This linguistic diversity may have played into Horace's unusual sensitivity to language tone, and, not much later, to his skill in mastering Greek.) In school he was forced to learn 'standard Latin,' which as lifelessly taught induced in him a contempt for forced learning.

Horace's education. By great fortune, Horace was born to a father determined to provide his son with the best possible education. (Horace's father was a slave, but through hard work and superior intelligence gained his freedom in mid life, and ever after remained a beloved model for his son.) As part of that commitment, Horace's dad made it possible for his son to study in Athens, where he went at age nineteen. This was to be a decisive move for the young man. He enrolled in the Academy—the West's first University, founded by Plato in the fourth century B.C.—and began an intensive study of Greek and Greek authors. It was at this time that he read and grasped the great lyric poets of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., Sappho, Archilochus, and Simonides—and found his way into the secret of their intricate meters.

Horace in Athens. While Horace was in Athens, the political drama of Rome itself reached and surrounded Horace. Rome was at this time in turmoil between followers of old Republican ideals, like Brutus, and new social shapers, far more autocratic in temper, who after the death of Julius Caesar were competing to dominate Rome. Brutus, eager to create a strong Republican contingent around himself, came to Greece to recruit appropriate support, and there came into contact with promising young Roman/Italic scions, among whom was Horace.

Horace and Brutus. Brutus approached Horace carefully. and with care recruited him into his republican army. The relationship started well for the non-military, art-loving, Horace. The twists of fate for Horace began when the army of Brutus, which Horace was fighting with, was crushed by Octavian at the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C. Treated not as an enemy, but as a promising fellow Roman, Brutus was quickly befriended by Octavian's friend and super wealthy Roman political advisor, Maecenas. Under the umbrella of Maecenas' protection Horace was enabled to move back into distinguished society in Rome itself, and to serve as a spokesperson for the new regime. Horace made friends of the highest quality, like Virgil, who were to introduce him into Octavian/Augustus' circle, and from that arrived position, during a moderately long but highly creative life, Horace remained a fixture of Roman poetry and culture.

*What slender boy, Pyrrha, drowned in liquid perfume,
urges you on, there, among showers of roses,
deep down in some pleasant cave?
For whom did you tie up your hair,*

*with simple elegance? How often he'll cry at
the changes of faith and of gods, ah, he'll wonder,
surprised by roughening water,
surprised by the darkening storms,*

*who enjoys you now and believes you're golden,
who thinks you'll always be single and lovely,
ignoring the treacherous
breeze. Wretched are those you dazzle*

*while still untried. As for me the votive tablet
that hangs on the temple wall reveals, suspended,
my dripping clothes, for the god,
who holds power over the sea.*

Readings

Horace, *The Odes: New Translations by Contemporary Poets* (Princeton, 2002.)
Maclennan, Keith, *Horace: A Poet for a New Age* (Cambridge, 2010).
Reckford, Kenneth, *Horace* (New York, 1969).

Discussion questions

Does Horace's 'love poetry' display what we might call romantic passion, and if not, what is the drive of his love poetry. Is it purely erotic?

What role did Athens play in Horace's creative development? What did the Greek literary example mean to him?

You will note that Horace, like most of the authors we have studied, was not from Rome. What do you think was the significance of Horace's birth in a region where languages other than Latin were spoken?