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INTRODUCTION

A reader's preferences and sympathies change with time and circumstances; we react most intensely to the works and writers who suit our own current situation and concerns. As I move through middle age, Horace appeals more and more to me amongst the great poets of ancient Rome for his measured and mature moral advice as well as for his marvellous musicality and technical skill. I very much welcome this opportunity to bring Horace's real and practical wisdom (and my own enthusiasm for this great poet) to a wider audience. When I talk of "Horace" in this volume, I generally mean the figure of the poet-author

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found in the poems transmitted under the name of Quintus Horatius Flaccus; it is difficult indeed to access the actual thought processes of the historical individual.

But this is a poet for whom the known facts of his life are important in understanding his work. We possess a short Latin biography of him, which may go back to one by Suetonius, author of the well-known biographies of the twelve Caesars at the end of the first century CE. This and his poems constitute the key sources for the basic data about Horace, though the first-person statements we find in his work (superficially candid and plausible) are always carefully managed, often hard to pin down, and sometimes misleading, and we must always be cautious in accepting them at face value.

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We can be fairly sure of his day of birth (8 December 65 BCE; for confirmation of the month see *Epistles* 1.10.27), his birthplace (Venusia, modern Venosa, on the border of ancient Apulia and Lucania in southeastern Italy—*Satires* 2.1.34–35), and his date of death (27 November 8 BCE). His father worked as a successful auctioneer and financial agent, and seems at an early age to have been temporarily enslaved following capture in the Social War (91–88 BCE), in which Italian communities fought against Rome for citizen rights. This gave Horace the low and dubious status of a “freedman’s son” (*libertino patre natus*—*Satires* 1.6.3), but his father had enough money and ambition to send his son to the prestigious school of Orbilius at Rome (*Satires* 1.6.76–78, *Epistles* 2.1.71) and later to Athens for university-style

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study with the sons of the Roman elite (*Epistles* 2.2.43–45).

It was there in 43 BCE that the young Horace attached himself to the cause of Marcus Brutus, who was also in Athens after his assassination of Julius Caesar the previous year, and went with him on campaign in Greece, serving as *tribunus militum*, military tribune (*Satires* 1.6.48), a rank for young elite members. In the autumn of 42 BCE he was on the losing side in the crushing defeat of Brutus at Philippi at the hands of Mark Antony and the young Caesar, the future Augustus (a bloody battle ironically depicted in *Odes* 2.7), but escaped and returned to Rome.

Horace himself claims that he lost his father's estate, perhaps in the land confiscations of 41–40 BCE, and turned to poetry to make money (*Epistles* 2.2.49–52); but

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he seems to have had enough funds in this period to purchase the post of *scriba quaestorius*, “clerk to the quaestor,” a significant administrative position, which he retained at least to the end of the 30s BCE (*Satires* 2.6.36–37). By that time Horace was certainly of equestrian status (*Satires* 2.7.53); that is, substantially wealthy.

This was no doubt because in the early 30s BCE he became attached to the circle of writers around Augustus’s important adviser Maecenas, introduced by no less than his fellow poet Vergil (*Satires* 2.6.40–42, 1.6.55–56); at some point in the 30s he received from Maecenas the gift of a substantial Sabine estate, in a beautiful and peaceful valley location about thirty miles from the centre of Rome, which

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contained several subordinate farms as well as a villa (*Satires* 2.6). The remains of this villa may well be under the later grand building close to Licenza near the modern Tivoli, which has been much investigated in recent years. In *Epistles* 1.7 Horace expresses warm gratitude for Maecenas's generosity in enabling him to pursue a leisured country existence away from the pressures of city life.

Horace's personal relations with Augustus, the first Roman emperor, or *princeps*, proper, who wielded effective supreme power from 31 BCE, seem to have been close, and perhaps became closer after 19 BCE when the all-powerful leader, who had been absent for much of the 20s, was generally in Rome: there seems no real reason to doubt the apparent documentary evidence of their intimacy in the

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“Suetonian” biography, which cites passages from humorous letters between the two. The presence of the *princeps* in Rome as active patron perhaps explains why Maecenas receives only one (warm) mention in Horace’s latest phase of work after 19, whereas all his previous poetic books in the 30s and 20s had begun with fulsome dedications to Maecenas himself.

Horace was certainly commissioned to write the extant *Carmen Saeculare*, or “secular hymn,” a poem of eighty lyric lines for choric performance, for the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE (celebrating the beginning of a new *saeculum*, or ritual period of 110 years), very likely by Augustus himself. There is no particular reason to disbelieve the “Suetonian” biography that Horace died less than two months after Maecenas in 8 BCE, temptingly close though this

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would be to the affectionate assertions in the poetry that the poet would not wish to outlive his patron (e.g., *Epodes* 1.5–6, *Odes* 2.17.5–9).

Horace's literary career lasted some three decades; the chronology and sequence of his works is largely agreed. *Satires* 1 belongs to around 36/35 BCE, *Satires* 2 and *Epodes* to around 30/29 BCE, *Odes* 1–3 to 23 BCE (with possible earlier separate publication), *Epistles* 1 to 20/19 BCE, the *Car-men Saeculare* to 17 BCE, and *Odes* 4 to circa 13 BCE. Only the dates of *Epistles* 2 and the *Ars Poetica* have been a matter of debate: for me these are the poet's latest works, belonging to the period 12–8 BCE.

The three earliest books of Horatian poetry begin from self-consciously low literary

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predecessors: *Satires* 1 and 2 pick up the hexameter *sermo* of Lucilius, the humble and parodic cousin of the grand hexameter epic; their moralising programme is described by the poet himself as *ridentem dicere verum*, “to utter the truth with laughter” (*Satires* 1.1.24). The *Epodes* take on the rumbustious world of archaic Greek iambus, poetry of crude aggression and comradeship, and shows some political engagement with the cause of the future Augustus in the last stages of the civil wars.

The collection of *Odes* 1–3 is self-consciously more elevated. These eighty-eight poems show a dexterous employment of the Aeolic lyric metres of great Greek poets such as Alcaeus and Sappho, more complex than those of his previous books; they also range broadly in topic and tone from light love poems and sympotic

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celebrations to deep moral meditations on the Roman state, and in length from eight to eighty lines. A key feature is their considerable capacity to interact with the whole range of other literary kinds (epic, drama, elegy, epigram) and their memorable and lapidary modes of expression, such as *carpe diem*, “pluck the fruit of the day,” or *auream . . . mediocritatem*, “the golden middle position” (1.11.8, 2.10.5).

The first book of *Epistles* (returning to the more informal hexameters of the poet’s *Satires*) presents a conscious contrast with the first collection of *Odes*. Its opening programmatic poem claims that Horace has renounced the frivolities of poetry for the serious concerns of philosophy (1.1.7–12). The pose of not writing poetry is surely ironic in this book of carefully crafted verse; but the collection’s overt shape as

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a letter collection points to a conspicuous genre of Greek and Roman prose literature, as does its strongly ethical content. Its humorous tone recalls that of the *Satires*; its warm addresses to (male) friends a central feature of *Odes* 1–3.

Horace's commission to write a major lyric poem for Augustus's ideologically crucial *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE (mentioned above) was probably an external stimulus for the resumption of production in the lyric genre more generally, leading to the fourth book of fifteen *Odes* a few years later. Most of its poems are dedicated to celebrating the military and political achievements of Augustus and his family and other elite members, with Horace assuming something of a laureate role.

The three poems *Epistles* 2.1 and 2.2 and *Ars Poetica* seem to belong together in the

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final phase of Horace's poetic career, a clo-sural return to the form of hexameter *sermo* with which he began in *Satires* 1. All three share a sense of Horace's self-location in the Roman literary tradition, and deal with the theme of the usefulness of the poet and of Horace in particular to the community of Rome (*Epistles* 2.1.124, 2.2.121, *Ars Poetica* 396–401). The *Ars Poetica* at 476 lines is the longest as well as the last of Horace's poems, addressed to two young brothers from a leading family and suitably providing a range of poetic precepts from the ageing master for a new generation of the Roman elite.

Horace's poetic style is rich, terse, and pointed; an early critic rightly points to Horace's *curiosa felicitas*, his "happy

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expression achieved by effort” (Petronius, *Satyrical* 118.5). The more informal hexameter poems have a more colloquial flavour, while still coining memorable phrases, especially when encapsulated in a single line; the *Odes* have a mosaic and jewelled quality, with densely crafted phrasing and elegantly interlaced word order. This volume reproduces Horace’s Latin text for those who are fortunate enough to be able to tackle it, but also tries to render some of its key qualities in the English verse translation that comes after.

There is a long and distinguished tradition of translating Horace into English verse, which involves some of the greatest poetic names (e.g. Jonson, Milton, Dryden, and Pope long ago, or Louis MacNeice and Seamus Heaney more recently). My versions cannot compete with theirs, but I

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hope to give some idea of what makes Horace special. I have usually used approximate metrical equivalents—lines of roughly the same length for hexameters, and stanzas of analogous short lines for the *Odes*, almost all of which fall into four-line units in the originals.

I hope that this volume can do its part in introducing readers to one of the world's great short-form poets, or in taking them back to an earlier acquaintance. The works of this writer who lived in an alien culture more than two millennia ago still have much to say to twenty-first century humanity, even if they present tensions as well as continuities with modern existence and values. His commendations of Roman racial exceptionalism and Rome's aspirations to world domination, like those of his friend Vergil, are hard to read in our times,

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though they were much more congenial to readers of past colonial eras. Critics have also rightly pointed to the strongly homosocial character of his poetry: women appear mainly as stereotypical love objects and the like, though he can, for example, create a memorable picture of Cleopatra (*Odes* 1.37); female readers have often had difficulty with him. On the other hand, more modern elements in his work have sometimes been underestimated in the past; it is only recent scholars, for example, who have brought out the bisexual aspects of some of his erotic poems.

In claiming that his poems have real value as advice for the good life, I am following Horace himself, who set out the ethical lessons of great poetry in considering Homer,

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the earliest extant Greek poet and author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, supreme epic poems that by Horace's own time had been allegorised and moralised for several centuries (*Epistles* 1.2.1–31):

*Troiani belli scriptorem, Maxime Lolli,
dum tu declamas Romae, Praeneste
relegi;
qui, quid sit pulchrum, quid turpe, quid
utile, quid non,
plenius ac melius Chrysippo et Crantore
dicit.
Cur ita crediderim, nisi quid te distinet,
audi.
Fabula, qua Paridis propter narratur
amorem
Graecia barbariae lento conlisa duello,
stultorum regum et populorum continet
aestum.*

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*Antenor censet belli praecidere causam;
quid Paris? Vt saluus regnet uiuatque
beatus*

*cogi posse negat. Nestor componere litis
inter Pelidem festinat et inter Atriden;
hunc amor, ira quidem communiter urit
utrumque.*

*Quicquid delirant reges, plectuntur
Achiui.*

*Seditione, dolis, scelere atque libidine et ira
Iliacos intra muros peccatur et extra.*

*Rursus, quid uirtus et quid sapientia
possit,
utile proposuit nobis exemplar Vlixes,*
qui domitor Troiae multorum prouidus
urbes,*

* Here I print my own conjecture *Ulixes* (nominative, subject) for the transmitted *Ulixen* (accusative, object), matching the presentation of Odysseus as subject in lines 19–22.

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*et mores hominum inspexit, latumque per
aequor,
dum sibi, dum sociis reditum parat, aspera
multa
pertulit, aduersis rerum immersabilis
undis.
Sirenum uoces et Circae pocula nosti;
quae si cum sociis stultus cupidusque
bibisset,
sub domina meretrice fuisset turpis et
excors,
uixisset canis immundus uel amica luto sus.
Nos numerus sumus et fruges consumere
nati,
sponsi Penelopae nebulones Alcinoique
in cute curanda plus aequo operata
iuuentus,
cui pulchrum fuit in medios dormire dies et
ad strepitum citharae cessatum ducere
curam.*

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Lollius Maximus, while you are declaim-
ing at Rome

I have been rereading the writer of the
Trojan War at Praeneste:

What is noble, what shameful, what is
expedient, what not,

He states more fully and finely than
Chrysippus and Crantor.

Hear how I have come to think this,
unless some business detains you.

The plot, in which the story is told of
how Greece clashed with non-Greece

In a slow-moving war on account of
Paris's passion,

Contains the seethings of foolish kings
and peoples.

Antenor proposes cutting free the cause
of the war:

What does Paris say? He claims that he
cannot be compelled

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To reign healthily or live happily. Nestor
makes haste

To settle the quarrel between Achilles
and Agamemnon—

Paris is seared by love, both the other
pair by the same anger together:

Whatever the ravings of their kings, the
Greeks get a beating.

Mutiny, trickery, crime, lust, and rage—
these sins

Are committed inside and outside the
walls of Troy.

And again, as to what courage and wisdom
can do,

Odysseus has set out a useful role model
for us,

He who having conquered Troy inspected
with foresight

The cities and characters of many types
of men, and through the wide ocean

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Endured many hardships in seeking
return for himself
And his companions, insubmersible by
the waves of fortune against him.
You know well the sounds of the Sirens
and the cups of Circe;
If he had drunk these up with his foolish
and lustful fellows,
He would have been shamed and sense-
less under a courtesan's control
And led the life of a filthy dog or a
mud-loving pig.
We are mere ciphers, born to be mere
eaters of bread,
Wastrel suitors of Penelope, or the suite
of Alcinous,
Spending more time than is right on
skin-care,
Who found it fine to sleep to the middle
of the day

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And to lull their cares to rest to the
sound of the lyre.

Here the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are mined by Horace (as previously by various kinds of philosophers) for moral instruction; indeed, the Greek poet Homer is said to outdo distinguished Greek moral authorities (the Stoic Chrysippus and the Platonist Crantor, representing two of the great philosophical schools) as a guide to virtue and vice. As in Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy* (2004), we see the seamy side of the Trojan War ("Mutiny, trickery, crime, lust, and rage") in the account of the *Iliad*, but it is the hero of the *Odyssey* who is held up for admiration for his sense and endurance (a little like his comic descendant Ulysses Everett McGill in the Coen brothers' 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). Typically,

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Horace then casts himself, his addressee, and his readers as morally weak characters who cannot compete with Odysseus, but rather follow the self-indulgent suitors on Ithaca or the luxurious court of the hedonistic Phaeacians; as often, the poet's moral teaching is framed and softened by an expression of his own inadequacy, a successful persuasive strategy.

In his slave-owning, chauvinistic, imperialistic and often brutal society, Horace, like other enlightened Romans such as Cicero and Seneca, nevertheless managed to engage instructively with issues which we still confront today. Chief among these are how to avoid stress and excess in an age of anxieties and extremes, how to live a thoughtful and moderate life in the midst

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of unthinking over-consumption, how to achieve and maintain true love and friendship, and how to face disaster and death with appropriate courage and patience. His brilliant poetic framings of these perennial issues of human existence, and his thoughtful solutions to the difficulties they create, provide memorable advice and assistance which have real value after more than two millennia. That is the rationale of this volume.

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