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### THE ART OF DRINKING

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## INTRODUCTION

America has a drinking problem. Shots. Chugging. Contests. Frat culture. Bro culture. Puking. Passing out. Driving home.

The traditional name for self-destructive drunkenness is *methe* in Greek, *ebrietas* in Latin, and alcoholism in English. The latest name is Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 16 million people in the United States—more than 6 percent of us—have it, and more than 90 percent of them receive no treatment. Temperance failed, Prohibition failed, and here we are.<sup>1</sup>

And it's not just America. Binge culture is spreading worldwide, with many calling it an American import. But that isn't quite right. People have always gotten drunk and suffered the consequences. In ancient Rome, you were supposed to water your wine (*merum*) down to a third of its strength and control yourself. Not everyone did. "In enjoying the freedom that men do," remarked Seneca,

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Women are now enjoying men's problems, too. They stay out late at night no less, they drink no less, they challenge men to wrestling and drinking alcohol (*merum*), and out of equally upset stomachs, they spit and barf all the wine back up.<sup>2</sup>

With a few exceptions, though, binge and bro culture were largely alien to ancient Greece and Rome. The idea that hardcore drinking is a mark of he-man prowess first emerged in Germany in the fifteenth century and spread like a virus in the sixteenth.

I'll say that again: binge and bro culture—so familiar to Americans—started not in classical Greece or Rome but in Germany five hundred years ago. The crusades were over, the economy was changing, and the knights of the medieval world no longer had any purpose in their lives. They turned to wine to fill the void. Jousting gave way to drinking contests, and with Germany's vineyards four times larger—and per capita consumption *six* times higher—than today, the pressure to indulge was ample:

In the 15th century Germans were drinking over 120 litres of wine a head a year. The allowance for a patient in hospital (also for a doctor) was seven litres a day. It is said that

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teetotalism ruled out any chance of preferment in the priesthood.<sup>3</sup>

*This* is the wine-soaked world Vincent Obsopoeus knew. When he published *The Art of Drinking*, Obsopoeus—whose name sounds like *Job? So pay us!*—had been the rector of an elite high school for eight years in Ansbach, a city just south of Würzburg and Franconia’s winegrowing region. Inspired by Ovid’s ancient *Art of Love*, he lifted his pen to compose a how-to manual to teach the “art” of drinking responsibly, sustainably, and with discrimination. He wanted young men to clean up their act and get married. Like Ovid, he sought to devise a total system for channeling primal energies that are typically regarded as ungovernable. The result is an antidote to chaos and a timeless classic.

In America today, the opposite of sleeping around is not celibacy but monogamy. In *The Art of Drinking*, Obsopoeus recommends an analogous attitude toward alcohol. For him, moderation, not abstinence, is the key to lasting sobriety. Readers familiar only with the Alcoholics Anonymous approach to managing addiction will be surprised.

Obsopoeus drafted *The Art of Drinking* while hanging around the learned monks of Heilsbronn Abbey in Ansbach, and a former wine steward there, one Sebastian Hamaxurgus, composed a

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poetic blurb for it that Obsopoeus splashed across the title page. In it, the celibacy-bound monk remarks on the poem's superficial resemblance to Ovid's *Art of Love*:

*Naso quidem pulchre leges praescrispsit amandi,  
ut certa insanus curreret arte furor.  
Pulchrius at multo tradit Vincentius artem  
potandi, quo sit certus ubique modus.  
Ut sit amare nefas, tamen est potare voluptas,  
ex qua virtutem regula iuncta facit.*

Yes, Ovid did do an impressive job of dictating rules for love, so that a definite art would channel that insane madness.

Far more impressively, though, Vincent teaches the art of *drinking*, so that a definite limit is constantly in force.

And while loving is a no-no, drinking is a pleasure, and giving it rules transforms it into a virtue.

Clever enough, since the beginning of *The Art of Drinking* does contain a half-dozen allusions to

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Ovid's poem. What Hamaxurgus' analogy doesn't spell out, though, is that where Ovid is ironic, Obsopoeus is deadly serious. Most of us think Ovid doesn't really mean what he says, whereas the sincerity of Obsopoeus' moral purpose is beyond doubt.<sup>4</sup> His text pulls back the curtain on the birth of a new and poisonous culture of hazing, peer pressure, competitive drinking, and even, in book 2, on what some now call "toxic" masculinity (see 2.196–97 and 2.443–56).

Warning us against the siren song of excessive drinking, therefore, the first two books of *The Art of Drinking* teach us not how to abstain from drinking but how to get control of it, how to win friends and impress people at social gatherings, and how to live up to our potential. In the third book, the mask slips and Obsopoeus tells us how to win competitive drinking games, citing extensive personal experience.

Obsopoeus published *The Art of Drinking* in 1536 and republished an expanded edition the next year. It proved popular, but in time the Catholic Church placed it on its Index of Forbidden Books. As explained below, the present book is offered as a third edition of the poem.



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Vincent Obsopoeus, *poeta* METHODICUS:  
*Arte Methes methodum inventam praecepit  
honestae.*

His *Art* propounded a system he found to get  
hammered with honor.

— CALIXTUS FONTANUS

Born around 1498 in the village of Heideck, thirty miles south of Nuremberg, Vincent Obsopoeus is not regarded as a major poet, but he should be.<sup>5</sup> The Reformation got under way in his neighborhood in his lifetime, and he played a bit part in it. His humanist surname implies his father was a private chef (Greek *opsopoiós*, German *Koch*) of some local importance. His brother Michael Obsopoeus, a Bavarian preacher, spent six years in a monastery jail on unspecified charges. In 1532 Vincent married Margaretha Herzog of Nuremberg, and six or seven years later he added a touching remark about her to a footnote:

As far as I'm concerned, there is nothing sweeter, nicer, or more precious than my wife. So help me God, I hope we never change. Even if we live longer than Nestor and the Sibyl of Cumae, I hope I'll always be young for her, and she for me.<sup>6</sup>

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His words are all the more poignant because by the time they saw print, Obsopoeus was dead. He had fallen sick and died a few months earlier, between April and August of 1539.<sup>7</sup> His life had been a troubled one.

Vincent Obsopoeus was a strange and difficult character, a man beset by enemies who knew nothing of his existence. He was funny and fun but sensitive and stubborn, impetuous and intolerant, the kind of person who just can't let something go. The famous humanists he regarded as friends—Philip Melanchthon, Eobanus Hessus, Joachim Camerarius—tolerated rather than liked him. He was quick to smirk at others' failings; he *wanted* to alienate himself by being obnoxious (thought Camerarius), while Melanchthon declared him a total basket case.<sup>8</sup> The beginning of a letter Camerarius wrote him reveals the dynamics of their relationship:

*Whoa-ho, Obsopoeus, whoa! Enough already!*  
My mind kept saying that over and over as I  
read your letter, but your letter just went on  
spewing venom right up to the very end.<sup>9</sup>

Another letter Camerarius wrote him is the cover sheet for three poetic blurbs he composed for *The Art of Drinking*.<sup>10</sup> In it, Camerarius tries to forestall some other impulse:



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If you're serious about this and won't listen to friendly or even sensible advice, then fine, do as you will. You're the one taking the risk. I won't try to stop you or your impulsivity any longer, but do give some thought, even at this hour, to what an awful war you're tipping off. But of course, you've thought everything through as you think it's best.

Camerarius may well have meant Obsopoeus' plan to publish *The Art of Drinking*. As Horace once quipped, *laudibus arguitur vini vinosus Homerus*: "You can tell Homer was a wino—his praise of wine proves it." In the letter, Camerarius warns Obsopoeus that everyone will make the same assumption of him:

I'm enclosing the verses you asked for; feel free to disfigure your book with them, if you insist.<sup>11</sup> And if you do publish it, you won't easily convince everyone of your sobriety (as you claim). I mean, who *doesn't* laugh when he reads the same protest in Catullus, that "a pious poet himself should be chaste, but there's no need for his verses to be so"? Ditto Ovid's "Believe me, my character is different from my poetry." People assume speech tracks one's

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true feelings. I get it, though, you don't care what people think; so as requested, here you go.<sup>12</sup>

Events proved Camerarius right. When he died, Obsopoeus had been putting together a translation of epigrams from the Greek Anthology.<sup>13</sup> The book (which includes that moving tribute to his wife) came out posthumously. In it, Obsopoeus tucks away a tiny look back in a comment he makes on an epigram about drinking games. He had discussed that topic extensively in book 3, although—again like Ovid—it is impossible to tell how seriously his “advice” was meant:

I wrote a lot about that in *The Art of Drinking*, and I hear a lot of people are trashing me behind my back for publishing it. They say I went too far. Whatever. Obsopoeus doesn't care (*Sed haec non sunt curae Obsopoeo et Hippoclinidi*).<sup>14</sup> They can go on hating and criticizing me until they explode.

Such was the darker side of Obsopoeus. But he had a lighter side, too, especially in regard to his fondness for wine. When Melanchthon offered to help him get a job, he replied that the advertised salary

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was so low, “it won’t even quench my thirst.”<sup>15</sup> (Melanchthon didn’t find that funny.)

His lighter side also appears in a letter he wrote Camerarius on December 14, 1536.<sup>16</sup> Like Obsopoeus, Camerarius was from Franconia, but he had moved to Tübingen, a city overlooking the Neckar river:

I’m eager to know what those Neckar wines of yours are like. Ours (in Franconia, I mean) are really virile and strong. They’re responsible for not a few wounds and murders, this year especially. Till now, I thought I was a champion drinker, capable of handling the most intensely violent wines. When I drink wine this year, though, I turn into a kid again after a couple glasses. The upshot is that despite all my arts of drinking (*cum omnibus meis artibus bibendi*), I often land in the muck and mud and get stuck there (*saepe in stercore et luto sit iacendum*).<sup>17</sup>

All his life and even into death, Camerarius seems to have remained Obsopoeus’ one loyal friend. He wrote a funeral sonnet declaring that his friend had made it into heaven:

Alas! Death and mighty fate have defeated  
Vincent,

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after overwhelming him with a painful  
illness . . .  
Farewell, Vincent, and be glad! You are not in  
Hades' halls,  
since the road of death no longer leads good  
men there,  
but high, high above the summit of golden  
Olympus.  
That is where the abode of Christian heroes  
lies.<sup>18</sup>

Maybe Camerarius was on to something. As fate would have it, the next year's summer was the hottest in history and the best German vintage of all time. It got so freakishly warm in 1540 that the Rhine dried up, and the resulting wine was so good that a fancy barrel was built in Würzburg to commemorate and hold it all.<sup>19</sup> Maybe that wasn't a coincidence:

*Orbe poli exemptum accipientes, omina omittunt  
Vincentem Francis vinicientia agris:  
RhenVM vvasqve coqvens siccaVIt Sirivs ille, ac  
Herbipoli eximium reddidit inde merum.*

Heaven accepted Vincent when he departed this  
world,

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and it released wine-presaging omens in  
Franconia:

The scorching sun of 1540 cooked the Rhine and  
grapes and dried them up,  
and recompensed Würzburg with an excep-  
tional vintage.

Then again, maybe it was. Either way, Vincent  
would have loved it.

Enjoy the poem.



### About This Edition

*The Art of Drinking* first appeared in 1536. That printing became the basis of every reprint, of a loose German translation in 1537, and of an incompetent English translation in 1945.<sup>20</sup> In 1537, however, Obsopoeus published a second edition. It includes an expanded text, a new preface, and several new liminary poems. I have taken it as the basis of the present edition, which I offer as a third edition of *The Art of Drinking*. This edition omits a gigantic insertion in book 1, a long digression in book 3, Obsopoeus' two prefaces, and most liminary poems (the one liminary poem it does print,

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by Joachim Camerarius, is from an improved text found in Camerarius 1568). I have freely modernized spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and changed the text in a couple dozen places (see the appendix).

### A Note on the Translation

Styles of translation vary. My aim here was not a slavish, and surely not a verbatim, translation of Obsopoeus' text. That would be a hopeless task. Instead, as the samples above show, my aim was to transmute Obsopoeus' thought and spirit into clear and idiomatic English as it is spoken in the United States today, especially as I hear it spoken on college campuses. This has necessitated the use of some metaphors that will jar readers if taken literally. For example, Obsopoeus frequently addresses *iuvenes*, a word I translate as “college kids” or simply “kids.” Why? Because in 2020, nothing else will do: “young men” or “young people” is hectoring, “guys” is off, and “youths”—the dictionary meaning—is ridiculous.

Obsopoeus wrote in the classical Latin of pagan Rome two thousand years ago to describe life as he lived it in Christian Germany five hundred years ago, and, like Ovid, he speaks as a professor

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delivering a lecture. His overarching argument is carefully plotted out; to help readers follow it, I have introduced subheadings in the English. Furthermore, Obsopoeus frequently assumes “presentation mode,” constructing a syllogism or piling up example after example to prove his point. When he does, I have reformatted his couplets as bullet points, sometimes at multiple sublevels, to indicate the rhetoric. An example is 1:877–82:

*Musica laetificat maerentia pectora cantu;  
cum Bromio compar Musica numen habet.  
Nectare lugentes Euhan, haec carmine maesta  
mente melancholicos excitat atque iuvat;  
ille calore replet, movet haec praecordia, et intrat  
cum vino harmoniae viscera tota sonus.*

- *Music* cheers grieving hearts with song;
- *Music* has divine powers on par with Bromius [i.e., Bacchus]:
  - *Bacchus* lifts and cheers the weeping with *nectar*,
  - *Music* lifts and cheers the depressed with *song*.
  - *He* fills the breast with *warmth*,
  - *She* stirs its *feelings*, and
    - as does *wine*,

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- so do *sounds in harmony* penetrate the chest and heart.

Another problem is that Obsopoeus is a great player on and with words; many couplets exploit some double meaning. For example, in Latin *sinus* means your lap or bosom and a *sinum* (a separate word) is a bowl you drink wine from. Meanwhile, *fundere* means to pour our liquid literally and to pour your thoughts or feelings out metaphorically, to confess them. Obsopoeus combines both into a brilliant pun in 1.95–96, where he is advising you to drink at home with your wife:

. . . *semper fidissima coniunx,*  
*cuius in audebis fundere quaeque sinum.*

You can trust your wife completely, always.  
You can drink with her and **pour** your heart out  
on her **bosom** without fear.

In such cases, usually I had to ignore one meaning, though at other times, as here, I felt I had to translate a word twice. Similarly, *Germanus* and *germanus* are two different words; the first means “German” and the second means “brother.” Since this accident of language underpins the concept of “bro” culture, my only choice for the *iuvenes*’



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drinking song in 2.428, *Hic, hic germani discubuerunt boni!*, was to say, “Here, here! Good ol’ German *hermanos* are partying here!”

A final matter calls for comment. Obsopoeus uses many names for a person who drinks too much, and they force a difficult choice on us. How do we decide between “drunk” and “alcoholic” or “desire” and “craving” or “addiction” and “alcoholism”? And indeed, what *is* the difference? The joke has it that alcoholics are simply drunks who go to meetings. True or not, I doubt “alcoholism” and “alcoholic” would have made any sense to Obsopoeus, so I usually refer to drunks and desire. Nevertheless, I have made exceptions where the context seems to warrant it.