



## Horace: Poet & Persona

Why should we still read Horace? What does he say to us now?

(1) age: the inherent interest of the old, things that are still around after so long a time - the same as the fascination of ancient coins.

(2) repute: Horace was esteemed a good poet. In the long span of Latin literature (ca. 3rd cent BC - Renaissance), the most prominent writers included Cicero, Caesar, Catullus, Vergil, Tibullus, Tacitus, Lucan, Seneca, Pliny -- all concentrated in the 1st century BC and AD. But the height of Latin literature was under Augustus (30 BC-14 AD), especially the early part of that Augustan age, and in that period the two poets counted supreme were Vergil and Horace. We have all the poetry Horace published, whereas many ancient writers are represented by only a surviving sample of their work.

(3) human interest: in Horace's day Rome dominated a wide empire. In his lifetime, Caesar was assassinated and Augustus became princeps. So when Horace talks of everyday life, he opens a window to that period.

(4) message: Horace wrote lyric, but he still has a lesson to teach us today. Horace studied philosophy, but it was practical ethics that most involved him: What constitutes a good life? How do we have a happy life?

When Horace was born in Venusia, Apulia, in 65 BC, Cicero was at his peak. Caesar was about 35, campaigning in Gaul, in Horace's youth. Horace writes touchingly in his poetry about his father, a freedman (ex-slave) and auctioneer's agent (a middleman who could make a good deal of money). We know nothing about anyone else in Horace's family (mother, wife? siblings?), but know his father, wanting the best education for Horace, moved to Rome after early school at Venusia. At college age, Horace went to Athens to study philosophy. After the 44 BC assassination of Caesar, Brutus was recruiting a private army in Athens & enlisted Horace along with many other young students. After Brutus' loss at Philippi, Horace, without money and his father now dead, got a job in the treasury, wrote poetry and became a friend of Vergil, who introduced him to Maecenas, a patron of arts who gave Horace a substantial farm, which provided his income and a congenial country retreat until his death in 8 BC. Through Maecenas, Horace became a friend of Augustus.

Best known for his Odes, written in a number of lyric meters taken over from Greek, Horace also wrote satirical Epodes, Epistulae (poetic letters in dactylic hexameter), Sermones ("satires", poetic essays, not necessarily satirical), an Art of Poetry, and the Carmen Saeculare (a patriotic hymn).

Satires II.6 (To Mercury) sets forth Horace's philosophy of the golden mean: Be satisfied with enough; Moderation, not wealth brings happiness. His prayer, "If what I have is sufficient, may I be allowed to keep just it." Life in Rome could be bothersome to Horace; he prefers country life: free time, simple food, friends to dinner, good conversation about the secret of happiness and the nature of the good (recurring themes). Illustration: the country mouse who, at the urging of a city mouse, goes to the city, finds luxury, but flees back to the country when the household dogs

attack - a story (mis)used in a Merrill-Lynch ad that misses the point.

Odes I.5 Quis multa gracilis. Many translators, from John Milton on, have tried to turn into English, this seemingly slight ode, which further reading shows to have deeper meaning. Beyond the surface plot of the fickle woman & the naive young man, Horace says I have put all that behind me. But beyond that, Horace shows that the young man has not yet learned enough to know how to live. Fortune is in

the hands of the gods. If you lose it, keep cool - as this man will not. Horace is probably not talking about a real situation (in a grotto of roses!); he doesn't even say that Pyrrha jilted him, just that he is past all that.

Horace believed craftsmanship was critical to poetry. Thus, in line 1 of Ode I.5, te ("you", the girl) is bracketed by gracilis... puer ("the slender boy"), itself bracketed by multa... rosa ("many a rose"), creating a word-picture of the boy embracing her amidst many roses. He is perfusus liquidis odoribus; it is not unusual to use scents, but this boy has overdone it, drenched himself in them. Pyrrha suggests the color red (pyr = "fire"); compare rosa and flavam ("yellow"). Simplex munditiis is almost impossible to translate. Simplex = simple, uncomplicated; munditiis = elegance, cleanliness. Davis translates it as "chic simplicity", which doesn't work; John Milton's "plain in thy neatness" is okay but bland; Clancy's "deceptively simple" is unwarranted.

Everything changes, implies Horace, and Pyrrha will change too. Aequora aspera nigris ventis - "seas rough with black winds" - gets in another color (picked up two lines later in the aurea - "golden") and the winds and aurea are picked up two lines further on by the aurae in nescius aurae fallacis. The sort of votive offerings (plaster feet, etc.) still seen at Italian shrines as thank-offerings for divine help is reflected in Horace's suspendisse vestimenta (the clothes he put on the temple wall) - and they are dripping, recalling the young man drenched with scent in line 2. Since ancient poetry was read aloud, those hearing the phrase potenti/vestimenta maris deo ("to the powerful god of the sea") would appreciate that the change of a single letter, and a different word break, would, with a play on words, transform Neptune (sea) into Venus (love), both gods important in the poem: potenti/vestment' amoris deo.

Epistles I.20, the last poem of the original book of verse letters, functioned as a colophon, since there was no title page in ancient books. In this poem Horace identifies himself as the son of a freedman father, acknowledges his own part in the civil war that followed Caesar's assassination, and gives his age at the time as 44.

We also owe to Horace many famous lines, the most quoted of which is his injunction to seize the day (carpe diem).