

*Et versus et cetera ludicra pono: Horace's Retirement and the Reception of Odes 1-3*

The standard line is that Horace was upset at the reception of *Odes* 1-3. The evidence for such an assumption is the uncritical acceptance of statements Horace makes in his other works, especially *Epistles* 1.1 and 19. Upon closer inspection, however, these statements do not paint the picture of Horace's sobbing retreat into himself and philosophy in order to avoid the scorn of the crowd, but rather the winking *recusatio* of an innovative poet who, like any artist, would rather break new ground than regurgitate more of the same.

In this paper, I begin by arguing that Horace should not be taken seriously when he states in *Ep.*1.1 that he is retiring from lyric poetry. I will show that Horace's withdrawal from poetry described in the epistle is clearly ironic. The *Epistles* are Horace's foray into philosophy; yet when he actually turns to the subject, he advocates the superior ability of poets in filling this role. His poetry about philosophy is actually leading back to poetry. With supporting evidence drawn from *Sat.*1.4 and *Ep.*1.2, I will argue that Horace is not withdrawing from poetry but rather reinventing it, trying something new. He is attempting to transform the walking muse of his earlier *Sermones* into an innovative new genre.

I then turn my attention to *Ep.*1.19, the poem where Horace allegedly vents his frustration at the reception of the *Odes*. According to Fraenkel, *Ep.*1.19 revealed "the depth of his resentment," and was "the only thoroughly bitter document that we have from Horace's pen." When we turn to the poem which supposedly proves that Horace was upset with how his poems were received, we find that the picture Horace paints is indeed one of frustration, but not at the reception *Odes* 1-3. Horace is not complaining about the way his poetry is being received but rather about the expectations placed on him because his book was so successful. The epistle begins with Horace's cry of tired exasperation at the slavish ways that he is imitated by would-be poets. They lack his ability so they mimic his manners. He then proceeds to reiterate the innovations and triumphs of *Odes* 1-3, before concluding the epistle with what is taken as his frustration over his work being poorly received. The actual complaints, though, are petty responses to his aloofness, not evaluations of his poetry.

I conclude by arguing that Horace receiving the commission to write the *Carmen Saeculare* further buttresses the idea that his poetry was well received. If the *Odes* were not successful, Augustus would never have selected him. The *ludi saeculares* had been carefully considered and painstakingly arranged to reflect the new attitude of the Augustan Age. Such a defining moment is not the right occasion for the *princeps* to attempt the rehabilitation of a poet whose most recent work had been a failure.

When considered together, it is reasonable to conclude that the idea of *Odes* 1-3 being poorly received is a fiction having its origins in the misreading of Horace's other words and that the *Odes* were in his own day, as in our own, received as a great poetic achievement which eventually propelled their author into being the poet laureate of Rome.