

The *Dramatis Persona* of the Client in Horace's *Sermones* 1.9

This paper proposes a new interpretation of the theatrical material in Horace's *Sermones* 1.9, a lively satire depicting the poet's encounter with a particularly persistent pest. The pest assumes that he and Horace are birds of a feather, fellow poetasters who share the same dubious aesthetic and moral values. He aspires to take advantage of Maecenas in the way he imagines that Horace is doing. The pest both voices and personifies the kind of criticism that Horace received – or would have us believe that he received – in the extrapoetic world. One of his main assumptions about Horace is that he is merely “playing a part” and that his devotion to Maecenas is all a self-serving act. In this paper, I illustrate how the poet employs an array of dramatic devices (i.e., dialogue, stage directions, stock characters, and expressly theatrical metaphors) in order to underscore – and ultimately undermine – this accusation. I reveal how Horace reclaims the theatrical material and reinterprets it in order to defend both his reputation and his *amicitia* with his patron.

The first part of the paper examines Horace's use of dialogue. While the poem is framed as a first-person narrative, most of the story is conveyed through dramatic dialogue. This format enables Horace to play a variety of roles. As narrator, he sets the scene and provides running commentary on the events as they unfold. As protagonist, he participates in the action first-hand. Furthermore, as the poet behind the words of the other characters, he essentially performs *all* the parts – in one form or another – from the pest to his friend Aristius Fuscus. In this way, Horace uses the embedded dialogue structure to narrate, enact, and interpret the mini-drama, simultaneously negotiating multiple points of view.

The second part of the paper explores Horace's use of stage directions. By “stage directions,” I mean the implicit and explicit references that Horace makes to the characters' body

language. The most dynamic stage directions occur during his interaction with Fuscus (60-74). With a series of vigorous gestures, he signals to his friend to rescue him from the pest (*vellere coepi,/ et prensare manu lentissima bracchia, nutans,/ distorquens oculos, ut me eriperet*, 63-65). Fuscus understands exactly what Horace is trying to say, but chooses to ignore him. The joke is driven home by Fuscus's deadpan reaction to Horace's ever-increasing agitation.

The third part of the paper investigates Horace's use of stock characters. His portrait of the pest combines stereotypical aspects of the *parasitus* as well as the *miles gloriosus* from Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy. The poet plays up the histrionic characteristics of these two figures in order to reinforce the satire's theatrical message.

The final part of the paper reveals how Horace uses explicit theatrical metaphors to characterize the client as a performer. The pest tells Horace that he would have a great "sidekick" (*adiutor*, 46), who could "play a supporting role" (*ferre secundas*, 46), if he wanted to team up and usurp power in Maecenas' circle. *Adiutor* is a technical term for the subordinate actor in a theatrical production. The significance of this word is further emphasized by *ferre secundas*, another technical dramaturgical expression. In expressing his willingness to play a secondary role, the pest implies that Horace is already playing the lead. I posit that *this* is the issue Horace has been leading up to all along, in laying the poem's theatrical groundwork. The theatrical metaphor becomes explicit here at the climax of the mini-drama, when the pest finally confronts Horace about his relationship with his patron.

Using the language of the stage, Horace is able to confront criticism that he himself likely received, labeling him an actor and impugning his *amicitia* with Maecenas. I posit that the poet draws upon dramatic devices to create a rich theatrical atmosphere in which to contextualize this criticism as well as his self-defense against it.