

Nemo quam sibi sortem: On being content with one's lot in Horace's Satires and Epistles

Horace begins his first Satire with an address to Maecenas, in which he asks why people are generally discontented with their lot and aspire to the greener pastures of others:

Qui fit, Maecenas, ut nemo quam sibi sortem
Seu ratio dederit, seu fors obiecerit,
Illa contentus vivat, laudet diversa sequentis? (Sat. 1.1. 1-3)

How does it happen, Maecenas, that no one lives content
With whatever lot either reason has given or fortune has thrown
In his way, but praises those who follow different paths?

The soldier envies the merchant, who envies the soldier; the lawyer and the farmer envy one another's lot in life, the country dweller aspires to live in the city, and vice versa. (Sat. 1.1. 4-15). And yet, says Horace, if a god were to grant their wish to change places, they would refuse. (Sat. 1.1. 15-19).

The perpetual discontent of people with their lot, and their greed-driving aspiration to swap places with someone else—the familiar “grass is greener” trope—is a recurring theme in Horace's Satires and Epistles. Horace attributes this to greed, to the desire not only to be secure for the future, but that no one else be richer than oneself: *nil obstat tibi, ne sit te ditior alter* (Sat. 1.1. 40).

In Satires II. 7 Horace upbraids his slave Davus for always being discontented wherever he is and wanting whatever he doesn't have at the moment, though when he gets it he is never satisfied:

Laudas

Fortunam et mores antiquae plebis, et idem,

Si quis ad illa deus subito te agat, usque recuses ...

Romae rus optas; absentem rusticus urbem

tollis ad astra levis.

(Sat. II. 7. 22-24, 28-29)

You praise the fortune and customs of the people of olden days,

And yet, if some god were to lead you to them, you would refuse it. ...

At Rome you wish for the country; when in the country you, fickle one,

Extol the distant city to the stars.

In contrast to those who are perpetually discontented with their lot, even if they wouldn't really want to change places with others, Horace also focuses on those who try the seemingly attractive life of another, only to realize that they were better off to begin with. In Epistle I. 7, Horace tells two fables about being content with what has been given in life. In the first, a hungry fox gets into a grain storehouse and gorges itself but is so stuffed that it is unable to fit through the narrow opening by which it had entered. (Epist. I. 7. 29-31). A weasel advises that the fox will have to wait until it was thin again to escape—i.e., return to its former life:

Si vis, ait, effugere istinc,

Macra cavum repetes artum, quem macra subisti. (Epist. I. 7. 32-22)

If you wish to escape,
you must return to the narrow crack thin, which you entered thin.

Horace goes on to tell the story of Volteius Mena, a poor but honest auctioneer, raised to great heights and wealth by Philippus the pleader. Mena finds himself overwhelmed by his new responsibilities and begs to be restored to his former life (Epist. I. 7. 45-95):

Quod te per Genium dextramque deosque Penatis
Obsecro et obtestor, vitae me redde priori! (Epist. I. 7. 94-95)

But I beg and implore you by your Genius and your right hand
and the household gods, restore me to my former life!

The most famous illustration of this theme is found in Satires II. 6, in the fable of the City Mouse and the Country Mouse. The City Mouse entices the Country Mouse by the promise of easy, rich pickings in the city; but the house turns out to be guarded by large dogs that chase the mice from the table, and the Country Mouse decides that it prefers familiar safe poverty to risking the dangers that accompany abundance (Sat. II. 6. 79-117): *Haud mihi vita / Est opus hac, ait, et valeas!* (Sat. II. 6. 115-116).

Horace continually advises people to be content with their lot in life, both those perpetually discontented who would find a reason to be unhappy wherever they are, and those who are able, in the end, to appreciate what they originally had. In recommending contentment

with one's lot, Horace shows himself to be, as he describes himself, *Epicuri de grege prorum*, a pig from Epicurus' herd. (Epist. I. 4. 16)

Select Bibliography

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