

*Ars Poetica, Ars Vitae*

To our knowledge no attempt has been made to compose a play according to the precepts laid out in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (*AP*), though anecdotes of farmers who put Virgil's *Georgics* to similar use abound. If the *AP*'s self-representation as a "manual for practising writers" (Laird 2007: 142) has been rather transparently false, there is nevertheless little consensus as to what the poem is really doing. Textual and thematic correspondences with the *Epistles* and *Satires*, as well as *Odes*, have often been noted in passing (e.g., Freudenburg 1993: 186-87, Gowers 1993: 145-56, 158, Möller 2004: 272-77, Rutherford 2007: 249, 253-55), but a more coherent and comprehensive picture of the particular ways in which the material of the *AP* intersects with that of Horace's other collections of poems may be traced.

After opening with a striking vignette of a creature that has a human head, a horse's neck, and colorfully feathered limbs (1-3), Horace explains that characters ought to behave in keeping with their nature, circumstances, and genre (89-119). In short, "create things that befit themselves" (*sibi convenientia finge*, 119), to produce a work that is *simplex . . . et unum* ("straightforward and whole," 23). Running alongside this theme of 'that which is fitting' may be found an exhortation to draw words sparingly into Latin from the fount that is the Greek language (52-53) or the warning that "the attempt to avoid one fault leads to [sc. the other] vice, if done artlessly" (*in vitium ducit culpae fuga, si caret arte*, 31). As Horace himself admits, "in attempting to be brief, I become obscure" (*brevis esse laboro, / obscurus fio*, 25-26).

These twin concerns with 'the fitting' (the Aristotelian τὸ πρέπον) and the need to avoid extremes manifest themselves also in the *Satires* and *Epistles*, where they are applied primarily to life rather than writing: one man uses too much cologne, another none at all (*Sat.* 1.2.27); someone vacillates between having two hundred slaves and a mere ten (*Sat.* 1.3.9-19); while

elsewhere gourmands and misers are contrasted (*Sat.* 2.2). In each of these cases, Horace begins and/or concludes with a maxim: *dum vitant stulti vitia, in contraria currunt . . . nil medium est* (*Sat.* 1.2.24, 28); *nil aequale homini fuit illi . . . nil fuit umquam / sic impar sibi* (*Sat.* 1.3.9, 18-19); *hac urget lupus, hac canis, aiunt* (*Sat.* 2.2.64). Textual parallels with the *AP* present themselves, as *stulti* (*Sat.* 1.2.24) becomes *si caret arte* (*AP* 31), vices lurk everywhere (*Sat.* 1.2.24, *AP* 31), and people continually run and rush (*Sat.* 1.2.24, *AP* 31).

Horace gestures at the multivalence of his prescriptions in the *AP* in the course of the poem: “poets wish . . . to say things that are at once both pleasing and useful to life” (*volunt . . . poetae / . . . simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae*, 333-34), he says, and “being wise is the starting-point and source of writing properly” (*scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons*, 309). Such explicit statements concerning the coherence of ethics and art, of life-style and poetry, serve to alert one to the wider possibilities of the *AP*, as should its contents. The poem has been criticized as disjointed (Fairclough 1926: 442 speaks of its “more or less random reflections”) and stridently prescriptive (Brink 1971: 245), yet such moments are increasingly read as Horace giving a *performance* as one writing a literary critical treatise. Since what passes for poetic advice is therefore highly dubious, the material of the *AP* clearly exists within the context of a larger Horatian schema, in which living and writing are to be governed by the same, interchangeable dictates. I argue that just as moral precepts in the *Satires* and *Epistles* (collections not explicitly concerned with poetic composition) seem most applicable to writing, so the *AP*, which broadcasts its literary concerns in its very title, is perhaps better read as an *Ars Vitae*.

## Bibliography

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