

Stoic Paradox and Metapoetics in Horace *Odes* 2.2 and 3.3

Only the wise man is king. Only the wise man is rich. Stoic teachings such as these, known as *paradoxa*, reassign meaning in such a way as to claim for Stoic doctrine the positive connotations that money, political power, etc. enjoyed in a more conventional system of values. In this paper, I consider how Horace uses Stoic paradox in *C.* 2.2 and then how he revises this use in *C.* 3.3. It is well known that ethics and poetics are interrelated in the collection (see e.g. Mette 1961, Davis 1991, Fowler 1995, Lowrie 1997), and I suggest that whereas the Stoics use their paradoxes to reascribe value in the sphere of ethics, in *C.* 2.2 Horace uses them to do so also in the sphere of poetics. He employs two Stoic paradoxes in this poem, writing (a) that “you would rule more widely by subduing your greedy spirit than if you should join Libya to distant Gades” (9-11) and (b) that *Virtus* confers “a kingdom and a secure crown and a true laurel on that man alone who looks at heaps of treasure and then does not look back” (17-24). Wealth and rule are often metaphors in the *Odes* for the “high style,” and the man who looks at treasure and then moves on is a figure for the poet, who just in the previous poem, *C.* 2.1, contemplated and rejected the high style of Pollio’s history. It is this sort of poet who deserves “true laurels.” Just as the Stoics use their paradoxes to lay claim to the symbolic capital associated with worldly success, so Horace uses them here to ascribe to his “moderate” lyric the prestige associated with the highly regarded but “overreaching” genres of epic, tragedy, and history, the genres that he disavows throughout the collection.

Horace then revises this statement one book later, in *C.* 3.3. Language predicating rule on restraint returns, and again Horace juxtaposes this with his own “rejection” of the high style, once more expressed as a rebuke addressed to his muse (3.3.70-72, cf. 2.1.37-40). However, while the form of the language here is reminiscent of the Stoic paradoxes of *C.* 2.2, its function

differs. Here, Juno tells the Romans that they will rule widely by reining themselves in, but “rule” retains its conventional meaning. There is none of the redefinition that is the hallmark of Stoic paradox, nothing metaphorical about the empire that Juno offers: the Romans will extend their domain to the ends of the earth as long as they do not rebuild Troy. In this case the rule is real and the restraint is a symbolic concession.

While these precepts are addressed to the Romans, they apply, with some modification, to Horace’s poetics in this ode, an epicizing poem that ends with him scolding his muse for veering too close to epic. Like the poem’s Romans, Horace can have real “rule,” i.e. he can extend his reach—his range of topics and tone—as far as those “overreaching” genres. He must, however, refuse to build “Troy,” i.e. symbolically refuse to write epic. Where *C. 2.2* simply laid claim to the prestige of the “high style,” *C. 3.3* lays claim to its subject matter as well. This more daring poetic message sits well in the context of the Roman Odes, which wear their elevation on their sleeve. But at the same time, the revision invites us to look backward and question the poetics of *C. 2.2*. Does not the model of *C. 3.3* better fit some of Horace’s earlier poetic “transgressions”? The interplay between *C. 2.2* and *C. 3.3*, which depends on the use and then revision of Stoic paradox, is one of many ways in which over the course of collection Horace gradually undercuts his “moderation,” implying that it is more symbolic than he initially lets on.

Bibliography

Davis, Gregson. *Polyhymnia: The Rhetoric of Horatian Lyric Discourse*. Berkeley, 1991.

Fowler, Don. “Horace and the Aesthetics of Politics.” *Homage to Horace: A Bimillenary Celebration*. S. J. Harrison, ed. Oxford, 1995.

Lowrie, Michèle. *Horace’s Narrative Odes*. Oxford, 1997.

Mette, Hans. “‘Genus tenue’ und ‘mensa tenuis’ bei Horaz.” *Museum Helveticum* 18
(1961).