

## Maecenas in Horace, *Odes* 1. 1

Henry Martin, writing in 1918 declared, “The main lines along which the first ode of Horace must be interpreted have long since been drawn and fixed.” A similar view prevails today. The fixed line interpretation of *Odes* 1. 1 is that it is a priamel. The list of eight (or nine) individuals and their various occupations that occupies lines 3-28 serve a foil to highlight Horace’s superiority as poet, who resides apart from the crowd in an idealized landscape of poetic inspiration (29-34).

But a number of questions remain: What is the organizing principle of the priamel? Is it in some sense a satire (e.g. Santirocco 1986, 17)? How does the man of leisure who appears at the center of the poem relate the others, and could he be Horace himself? And most vexing, how do the first and last two lines, addressed to Maecenas, relate to the rest of the poem? I argue that these problems have been created by constructing *Odes* 1. 1. as a priamel, and that this approach has obscured the fundamental role of Maecenas. Maecenas provides a perspective from which all others in the poem, including Horace, are viewed, and his role as a focalizer reveals a fundamental indeterminacy that runs directly counter to the prevailing interpretation that the first ode is priamel.

The thread that runs through virtually all interpretations of *Odes* 1. 1. is the question of its organization. Earlier readers suggested a variety of ways to understand the order and relationship of the individuals in Horace’s catalog. Some have seen a transition from one broad group to another (e. g., Earle 1902, 398-99), or components of a rhetorical argument (Martin 1918). Fraenkel (1957, 231-32) was among the first to interpret *Odes* 1. 1 as a priamel, in which the catalog functions as a set up for the privileged position that Horace obtains through his poetry. This quickly became the common way of approaching the poem. (e. g., Nisbet and

Hubbard, 1970; Race 1982, 122-23; Mayer 2012, esp. 61-63). The advantages seemed obvious. The priamel gave purpose to the catalog and at the same time satisfied the expectation that Horace would naturally give poetry an elevated position. It also accounted for the negative tone that is easily detectable in Horace's portrayal of other avocations, which could now be seen as inferior to the profession of a poet.

This reading, however, presents new problems, for Horace's treatment of other avocations is not uniformly negative. For example, Shey (1971, 187) notes that Horace seems to admire the small landowner (11-14, and he and others have long felt that the man at leisure who appears in lines 19-22 anticipates Horace's idealized portrayal of the poet and often identify him with Horace himself, a position advocated by Dunn (1985, 108), who concedes that this would disrupt the logic of the priamel, in which various alternatives are rejected in favor of a preferred one (Race 1982, 1-17). The priamel also fails to account for the role of Maecenas.

I argue that Maecenas is not a dedicatee, nor a patron, which would give him an extraneous presence in the poem. Instead Horace presents him as a dispassionate observer. As readers, we see the virtues and flaws of people in Horace's catalog through his eyes, but he makes no judgments. His role becomes clear at the end of the poem. If the ode were a priamel, the poem would naturally end at line 34. But Horace continues *quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseris/ sublimi feriam sidera vertice* (35-36). This is a compliment to Maecenas' literary judgment, but the telling point is that never he gives it.

### Bibliography

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