

Sermones 2.5: A Shady Prophet, an Obsequious Hero, and Poet with Something to Prove

The tension between propriety and personal ambition was among the foremost social issues for first-century BCE Romans like Horace, whose relationship with a wealthy patron, according to the poet himself, was constantly scrutinized and criticized by envious outsiders (cf. *Serm.* 1.6.46: *quem rodunt omnes*). Indeed, the importance of distinguishing trustworthy clients from self-serving flatterers is at the heart of *Sermones* 2.5, in which Horace, drawing inspiration from a traditional scene from Homer's *Odyssey*, portrays Ulysses as a shameless *adventator* who learns the "tricks of the trade" from a burlesque version of the prophet Tiresias. Like most of the satires of the second book of *Sermones*, however, this poem has received little attention from scholars in recent history; this is despite the fact that, in his detailed portrayal of the Homeric flatterer's various tactics and behavioral modes, Horace essentially disarms his own critics and confirms his own identity as a champion of candor who has nothing to hide from Maecenas. The purpose of this study is to analyze the poet's entertaining yet ultimately self-promoting character portrait of Ulysses through the Epicurean lens of Philodemus of Gadara's ethical treatment of flattery, which, in addition to being a vivid response to the latter's own concerns regarding accusations of obsequiousness (cf. Cic. *Pis.* 70), is also the only surviving philosophical tract of its kind from classical antiquity.

The eight poems of *Sermones* 2, especially 2.5, have received comparatively little attention from Horatian scholars (Fraenkel ignores it; Rudd gives little more than a detailed overview; Muecke's commentary offers more insightful observations). Some have actually stated that, given its piquant style and overly critical tone, *Sermones* 2.5 is proto-Juvenalian and has no relevance to Horace whatsoever (Courtney). According to Fiske, whose consideration of this poem is significantly shorter than his other treatments, the comic portrayal of Ulysses

reflects something of the philosophical debates between Stoics and Cynics rather than anything about Horace's own state in life. Aside from these studies, there have also been enlightening considerations of the Roman phenomenon of legacy-hunting or *captatio* (Tracy; Roberts), which, aside from being a word likely coined by Horace himself (Sallmann), obviously plays a central role in the complex and riotous social commentary that is *Sermones* 2.5. Few experts, however, have seriously considered the influence of contemporary philosophers like Philodemus (Kemp is good but short), whose fragmentary treatise *De adulatione* includes many details and expresses many of the concerns also found in Horace's portrayal of Ulysses.

This study attempts to fill the gap in Horatian scholarship by examining the dialogue between Ulysses and Tiresias in the light of Philodemus' almost clinical observations regarding patronage, friendship and the distinguishing marks of an obsequious client. Tiresias' description of the shrewd legacy-hunter's ideal quarry, for example, echoes what Philodemus states in his treatise regarding the flatterer's disposition, which is characterized by love of money (2.5.12: *res ubi magna nitet*; cf. PHerc. 1457 col. 12.22: φιλαργουροῦσι) and a certain attraction towards flattering speech (2.5. 32-33: *gaudent praenomine molles | auriculae*; cf. PHerc. 1457 fr. 15.6: φιλοκόλακες). Next, Tiresias instructs Ulysses regarding the proper way to charm his victim, which involves being an actor (2.5.91: *Davus sis*; cf. PHerc. 1675 col. 13.35-36: ὑποκριτὰς εἶναι) and feigning concern for everything (2.5.36-38: *mea curaest...curare*; cf. PHerc. 1457 col. 2.6-8: πάν[τ]ων [τ]ῆν ἐπιμέλει[α]ν π[ρ]οσποι[εῖσ]θαι), while worming oneself into his confidence (2.5.48: *adrepe*; cf. PHerc. 1457 fr. 5.36: εἰσδύονται) and keeping close tabs on potential rivals (2.5.54-55: *solus multisne coheres*; cf. [μισεῖ δὲ ὁ κόλαξ] πάντας ἀπλῶς τοὺς [ἐπιτη]δείους τῶν κολακευ[ομένων]). Finally, the prophet gives Ulysses advice about how to avoid being discovered and suffering at the hands of his victim (2.5.66-69 and 84-88), which likewise reflects

Philodemus' remarks concerning the outrage and vengeful desires experienced by those who discover the truth (PHerc. 222 col. 3.3-17). Overall, Horace's exposé of the flatterer's methods of hunting for rewards—coincident with, if not directly modeled on, the description of those methods in Philodemus—contrasts starkly with his own advice elsewhere and thus helps to reconfirm his own identity as a champion of candor and an unambiguously parresiasitic friend of the wealthy Maecenas.

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