

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori, That is the Question.

This Horatian *sententia* from *Carm.* 3.2.13, attacked by Wilfred Owen in 1917 as "the old lie," and as *Zweckpropaganda* by Bertolt Brecht, was proudly inscribed in 1920 upon the entrance to the amphitheatre of Arlington National Cemetery adjacent to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The modern conflict reflects a tension in the Horatian original.

Critics are deeply uncertain whose voice should be attached to the *sententia*. Lohmann associated it with the "naive" view of the Roman puer in the opening stanza. The troubling oxymoron, "sweet death" has parallels in Tyrtaeus fr. 10 and Simonides fr. 531, as Winkler notes, yet expresses skepticism (181), "the heroism which Horace extols, or seems to extol in Odes 3.2 is outdated" and "the patriotic sentiment is questionable." Harrison argues that "patriotic self-sacrifice gives pleasure to the sacrificing individual," and cites Cic. *De off.* 1.57, [*patria*] *pro quae quis bonus dubitet mortem oppetere, si ei sit profiturus?* Lowrie takes Horace at his word in 3.5.5-10 that Crassus and his soldiers should be ashamed they did not follow the maxim (244). Nisbet and Rudd call it "least admired of the Roman Odes," and adduce Bacchyl. 3.47, *θανεῖν γλύκιστον*, but reject Nisbet's own former argument for the patriotism of the line (*ad loc.*). We need to extract more determinative guidance from the text – observations like the operation of death in the scansion, as elision robs *dulce* of its sweetness and prodelision steals existence from *est*.

The first problem is which *patria* – the combattant most likely to die is the imagined Parthian *sponsus regius*, not the hardened Roman *puer* (Quinn). The second is that in the explanation that follows, death catches the fleeing coward in language that

recalls Horace's own behavior at Philippi (*ibid.*), which he characterized as *uirtus fractus* (*Carm.* 2.7.11). But Horace does not seem in any delusion that his bravery would have saved the falling republic, or that his survival is a cause for shame twenty years later. At *Aen.* 2.316-17 Vergil calls Aeneas' patriotic instinct to die saving Troy "rage and madness": *furor iraque mentem / praecipitat, pulchrumque mori succurrit in armis* (also noted by Quinn). The third problem is that the poem is composed around oxymoron, beginning with *amice* confined between *angustam... pauperiem*.

The two halves of the poem are in conflict, and both halves concern strife. The uniting theme of the poem is given in l.17 as *uirtus*. The Horatian *uates* teaches the evolution of *uirtus* from the stereotype of manliness in the martial vignette to the struggles of virtuous statesmen and pious leaders to earn divinity from Cicero's "Dream of Scipio". As in much of Augustan literature, the virtues of war are supplanted by the virtues of religion and peace.

There is an assumption that the training of the Roman *puer* to harass the Parthian represents 23 BC. But there are indications that Horace may have in mind earlier contexts. First, Augustus' intention in the late 20s seems to have been to use diplomacy, treachery, and the threat of force to avoid a Parthian war (*CAH* X:159). The first word of the poem, *angustam*, is one inverted letter away from *Augustam*. In 44 BC, Octavian was the Roman *puer* preparing to fight the Parthian. And the second half of the poem describes his evolution into the pious, virtuous statesmen denoted by *Augustus*. This statesman stands in contrast to the *regius sponsus* who appears to have died on behalf of his *patria*. While the *teichoskopeia* may be a generic Trojan scene, we know that Vergil used Paris and Helen imagery (cf. *adulta uirgo* with *Aen.* 1.430, 493) to point to Antony

and Cleopatra. Just as Antony may be the *regius sponsus*, hidden wordplay on *pro patria mori* may point to Cleopatra: in the Ode on Thermopylae (Simonides fr. 531 West), *kleos* attends those who die for their country > *Kleo-patra*. Death pursues the *fugacem uirum* and punishment stalks the *antecedentem scelestum*, perhaps playing on *Antonius*; death does not spare the weak knees and timid back of the *iuuenta*, a curious feminine substantive. We recall how Cleopatra fled at Actium and Antony raced to join her and climb aboard her ship: Horace would not admit the *impius* man into his *fragilem phaselon*. The final question is whether the line is exclusively ironic or polyvalent.

Bibliography

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