

Horace's Acrostic Lessons in Wine and Wisdom

The title of Gareth Morgan's article on Horace's five-letter gamma acrostic DISCE (*Odes* 1.18.11-15), "*Nullam, Vare... Chance or Choice in Odes 1.18?*" (1993), conveys the agnosticism typical of those who write about that controversial genre. As Morgan acknowledges, the probability of such a phenomenon (that is, a five-letter sequence springing both horizontally and vertically from the same initial letter) occurring randomly is infinitesimal; yet his note ends in aporia about what this particular acrostic could contribute to our understanding of the poem. In this paper, I argue that DISCE belongs to a series of Horatian acrostics related to the proper and improper use of wine, through which Horace conveys some of his most important messages about poetry, philosophy, politics, and love (see Commager 1957).

After some discussion of recent developments in the burgeoning field of Acrostic Studies (Feeney and Nelis 2005, Korenjak 2009, Thomas 2011: 104, Katz 2013, Hanses 2014, Giusti 2015, Kersten 2017), I explain why DISCE is likely to be intentional and significant even as an isolated acrostic. The passage it spans abounds in cue words and phrases having to do with boundaries, secrets, and hidden things, along with other potential word- and letter-play. More importantly, the poem as a whole concerns learning (DISCEre) to discern (DISCErnere) the thin line that separates good from evil. The concluding presentation of what are normally positive things (*amor*, *gloria*, and *fides*) as their negative doubles (*self-love*, *vainglory*, and *broken faith*) emphasizes how difficult this kind of discernment can be, and it makes "drinking right" a test case and metaphor for other kinds of moderation and wisdom essential to human happiness.

The significance of DISCE is enhanced, however, by recognizing its role as the first of a series. The Cleopatra Ode (1.37), which occupies the same penultimate position in the book's second half that 1.18 does in its first half, similarly highlights the high stakes involved in

learning to drink correctly. Its exquisitely ambiguous acrostic POTA (1.37.2-5—one line from the beginning, as DISCE is one line from the end), which could be both an imperative (“drink!”) and an adjective (“drunk woman”), ties together the poem’s prevailing themes: now is the time for us good Roman *sodales* to drink, because Cleopatra, drunk with fortune and Mareotic wine, has been defeated—and yet has achieved a sort of moral victory by drinking poison into her veins. The ambiguity and doubleness of the horizontal text is mirrored in that of the vertical text.

The most subtle of Horace’s wine-related acrostics, but also the most poignant, appears in his mysterious sympotic eulogy of Vergil (*Odes* 4.12). The bizarre mercantile imagery that characterizes Horace’s other two Vergil Odes (1.3.5-8, 1.24.11-12) and pervades 4.12 finds vertical expression in CAVI (20-23), which has a technical financial meaning of “I gave/received surety” (*OLD* s.v. *caveō* 8 and 9). Yet all Horace’s “caution,” financial and otherwise, could not save his friend from death—and thus both the Shade and the one who aches for his lost friendship are left **CAVI**, “hollow, empty,” without the limitless wine supply of the rich man in a house that is “full,” the antonym *plena* (24) that begins the line immediately following the “empty” acrostic.

After some final considerations about this series and how it relates to other vertical conversations in Latin poetry, I conclude with a bonus “wisdom” acrostic that, lest it be too prodigal of secrets, this abstract will not divulge.

Bibliography

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