

## At Sea with Catullus and Horace

In the *propemptikon* we know as *Odes* I.3, the speaker, having charged a particular ship to bring Vergil safely back home, launches into a meditation of human invention and daring, which begins with that hardy soul *qui fragilem truci/commisit pelago ratem* (9-10). Yet, against all odds, Horace's "frail craft" proved hardy enough to be still afloat in 1979; for that year saw the publication of Patrick O'Brian's novel *The Fortune of War*, which repeatedly alludes to and quotes from classical literature.

This paper will explore the reception of Catullan and Horatian poetry in O'Brian's novel, which is the sixth installment of what became, eventually, a series of twenty tales, all set in the Napoleonic wars. All the novels chronicle the adventures of Jack Aubrey of the Royal Navy, and his "particular friend" Stephen Maturin, ship's surgeon, naturalist extraordinaire, and spy for His Majesty's Admiralty. O'Brian might have used snippets from Roman authors simply to lend verisimilitude to his characters: Jack Aubrey, as the type of schoolboy whose grasp of Latin never advanced past a vague awareness of the ablative absolute; and Maturin, the acme of sophisticated learning, equally comfortable discussing anatomy in Latin or quoting Catullus *verbatim* in his diary.

I shall argue, and seek to demonstrate, that O'Brian accomplished much more than this. Like Vergilian similes, the allusions to, and quotations of, Horace and Catullus in this novel not only fit their immediate contexts, but are also multivalent, variously adumbrating later developments or echoing earlier events. For example, O'Brian exploits the *navis fragilis* of *Odes* I.3 as a motif that recurs throughout the novel's narrative arc; the first ship we meet has been rendered frail by collision with an "ice-mountain"; another comes to grief through careless smoking; and, in the climax, two men-of-war maul one another in a hotly contested action.

Catullus comes to the fore through the notorious *odi et amo* of *carmen* 85, which O'Brian uses to illuminate Maturin's mercurial relationship with the elusive Diana Villiers, a 19<sup>th</sup> century analogue to Lesbia. Maturin, like Catullus, claims to be over his infatuation with this woman, even as he continues to pursue her across oceans.

Even more striking may be what O'Brian does *not* say. More than once, the lines preceding or following those actually quoted help to spin thematic threads, not just those detectable within this novel, but also others that extend across others in the series. At one point Maturin quotes the opening lines of Horace's *Odes* IV.1 (*Intermissa, Venus, diu/rursus bella moves?*) to acknowledge a point made by an interlocutor; yet the typical twist at the end of that ode (that Horace, for all his protestations, is not beyond yearning for the winsome Ligurinus) anticipates a poignant episode later in the novel where a ship's first lieutenant pines for a handsome midshipman.

Finally, I shall say a word or two about this enigmatic author himself, who made up a bogus Irish ancestry and apparently received little formal education. How did he come to know Horace as intimately as he did? Did he expect his readers to be as knowledgeable as he was, or were other, perhaps less praiseworthy, motives in play?

By the end of this paper, I shall hope to have proven that O'Brian, in vicariously plying the wine-dark sea, has introduced us to a Horace of a different color.

#### Bibliography

O'Brian, Patrick. *The Fortune of War*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1979