

The Poet as Maker in Horace's *Ars Poetica*

It was well known to the Romans that their words *poeta*, *poema*, and *poesis* derived from Greek ποιητής, ποίημα, and ποίησις, and that these in turn were formed from the verb ποιεῖν, which encompasses the senses “make, produce; bring about, cause; bring into existence; invent; do, act” (Varro *Ling.* 6.77, Isid. *Etym.* 8.7.1-2 [citing Suetonius], Donat. *Ter. Andr. prol.* 3, Diom. *Ars Gramm.* 3). My argument in this paper is two-fold. First, that Horace draws attention in his *Ars Poetica* (*AP*) to the etymology and root sense of *poeta*, *poema*, and *poesis* by using these three terms (which reflect Neoptolemus of Parium's tripartite division of material in his *Art of Poetry*, according to Porphyrio and Philodemus) with notable frequency and by juxtaposing them with Latin semantic equivalents, including *fingere*, *facere/fieri*, *formare*, and *pangere*. Second, I contend that he does so in order to communicate that a poem is a “made thing” and a poet its “maker,” and further that all forms of making and producing are essentially the same in quality.

Terms for poets and poetry are interleaved throughout the *AP* with Latin verbs that communicate the sense of ποιεῖν, a phenomenon that is concentrated in certain passages. At 301-8, for instance, Horace rejects madness as a prerequisite for poetic excellence yet wistfully laments, “no one else would have made better poems” (*non alius faceret meliora poemata*, 303). The notion inherent here of a poem as a crafted object is accentuated by the metaphor borrowed from a highly physical, even primitive, form of making, a whetstone sharpening a blade (304), used to describe Horace's activities as a teacher of other writers. Just as poem-objects are forged into existence, Horace communicates, so are their makers—a point to which he returns at 366-67 in describing the elder Piso son, a prospective poet, as “still being shaped by a paternal voice” (*voce paterna/fingeris*). The verb *fingere* is repeated as Horace complains that those ignorant of

the art persist in “fashioning” verses (*qui nescit versus tamen audet fingere*, 382) and warns that his addressee will “make” nothing unless Minerva co-operates (*tu nihil invita dices faciesve Minerva*, 385). Nestled between two further formulations of writing as making (*natura fieret laudabile carmen an arte*, 408; *nolito ad versus tibi factos ducere plenum / laetitiae*, 427-28) is the remarkable phrase *poemata pango* (416). The speaker’s unjustified boastfulness (*ego mira poemata pango*, “I bang out amazing poems”) is enhanced by the unusual verb *pangere*, the primary senses of which are concrete: “insert firmly, fix by driving in; to fix, set (boundaries)” or “to set in the ground, plant.” Any archaic grandeur, however, is undermined as this particular writer is conceived of as a physical maker of verse-objects in rather brutish fashion, without the necessary gentler shaping and molding. A final notable clustering of *poema/poeta* comes in the last fourteen lines of the *AP* (455, 463, 466), again alongside *facere* (467, 468, 469), here even intensified into its frequentative form, *versus factitet* (“he persists in making verses,” 470), as Horace stresses, for the final time, poetry as a thing made. His insistence on words and verses as physical artefacts becomes all the more remarkable in light of the fact that, as much as he writes about writers (*scriptor*), Horace never once uses the verb *scribere* in the *Ars Poetica* with *versus*, *verbum*, *carmen*, or *poema* as its direct object; likewise, he never juxtaposes *poeta* and *poema* with *fingere*, *facere*, etc., in his *Epistles* or *Satires* (nor do the other Augustan poets).

That Horace’s vision of the poet-maker and his literary artefact is unique to the *AP* and should inform our reading of the poem is evident also from the catalogue of myth-historical poets (391-407). Orpheus teaches men the proper way to eat and soothes wild animals with song, Amphion sings the rocks of Thebes into place, and, once men are living in such cities, they receive from poets laws, religious customs, and the preparation for war. Horace has re-worked his source (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1030-36) into a testament to the poet as creator of the civilized

world, and to the fundamental unity of all forms of creation. The poet may not be quite the Platonic demiurge, but the vast range of basically un-poetic activities with which he is credited shows how all forms of making are interconnected in the *AP*—a theme that radiates outwards from the vignette of the earliest poets and their activities into the entirety of the poem. I contend that the *Ars Poetica* is not focused narrowly on the topic of poetry, and should rather be conceived of as an *Ars Poiētikē* (Ποιητική): an Art in the widest sense of Making, of Doing, of Creating, even of Living.