

## Indigenous Roman Comedy in Horace's Hexameters

This paper submits that Horace's use of genre-specific terminology in his second book of *Epistles* retroactively establishes a connection between his first hexametric work, the *Satires*, and an indigenous Italian "comic" tradition. After briefly reconsidering the evidence for Horace's depiction of his brand of satire as a continuation of Greek comic traditions, the paper argues that Horace's alignment with both Greek and Italian traditions enables him to frame his earlier satirical project in distinctly Roman terms.

Horace's *Satires* 1.4.1-8 begins by sketching a direct line of influence from Aristophanes and his contemporaries to Lucilius. In the same poem, Horace ties his poetic practice to that of Lucilius (*Sat.* 1.4.56-57) and asserts generic correspondence (*via* the genre's archegete) between Roman verse satire and Attic Old Comedy. Programmatic passages in the *Satires* also resemble parabolic passages in Aristophanes (Ferriss-Hill 2015: 30). Yet Horace suggests in *Satires* 1.4 and 1.10 that he is refining the genre that Lucilius left him, thus claiming implicit kinship with New Comedy (Freudenburg 1993: 100; Gowers 2012: 13).

Some decades later, Horace complicates his satire's lineage in the *Ars Poetica* and *Epistles* 2.1 when he reflects upon the histories of Greek and Italic drama. In a concise history of Greek drama in the *Ars Poetica*, he chronicles the discovery of tragedy by Thespis; early itinerant performances; the refinement of the genre by Aeschylus; the subsequent appearance of old (*uetus*) comedy, and a shift in comedy that precipitated a legislated silencing of the chorus (275-284). In *Epistles* 2.1.145-155, he offers a corresponding history of native Italic drama and Fescennine verse with an arc that initially resembles the history of Greek comedy—"rustic abuse" and pleasant exchange led to legislation that compelled performers to "be pleasing"

(*delectandum*, 155). Ancient and modern readings connect this drama to Atellan Farce as well as Fescinnine verse (Rudd 1989: 98-99), an ambiguity that may also accommodate Horace's *Satires*. Absent from these parallel histories is anything akin to native Roman tragedy. According to *Epistles* 2.1, a pure strain of comic drama is indigenous to Italy.

Tellingly, Horace's description of the earliest Italian festive drama in *Epistles* 2.1 uses vocabulary that associates these performances with material he had espoused in his programmatic *Satires* (*libertas* in *Ep.* 2.1.147 and *Sat.* 1.4.5; *mala carmina* in *Ep.* 2.1.153 and *Sat.* 2.1.82-3; and *describi* in *Ep.* 2.1.154 and *Sat.* 1.4.3). Horace also couples a defense of comedy with a critique of Plautus's characterization and style (*Ep.* 2.1.168-6). Verbal parallels between his appraisals of Plautus and Lucilius (*percurrat* in *Ep.* 2.1.174 and *currere* in *Satires* 1.10.1) and behavior he aims to avoid in his *Satires* (*ne . . . percurram* in *Sat.* 1.1.23-4) imply an effort to refine Roman comedy in the process of refining Lucilian *Satire*.

Horace provides additional insight into the differences of performance context in comedy's Italian manifestation. Unlike the formal competition of the City Dionysia of Athens, Roman comedians competed with the city of Rome itself: "For what voices are strong enough / to overwhelm the sound our theaters report back?" (*Ep.* 2.1.200-201). Horace likewise proclaims himself to be in perpetual competition, both in the *Ars Poetica* 372-373 ("Neither men, nor gods, nor advertisements condone mediocre poets") and in *Epistles* 2.1.216-218. This competition, namely, the striving for glory and recognition in a distinctly Roman environment, resituates the competition of Greek comic playwrights, Old and New, in a Roman context that expands to accommodate Horatian verse satire.

The paper observes in its conclusion that Horace destabilizes the connection between Greek and Roman comedy through the act of repeatedly describing it. He claims one line of

generic descent for his *Satires* from Aristophanes, but in his later hexametric poems, he implies a second line descending from indigenous Latin comic drama. I conclude that Horace's assertion of a multicultural comic heritage is what permits him to create "comedy"—a genre otherwise conceived of as a form of staged drama—in the unprecedented form of hexametric poetry.

#### Bibliography

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