Introduction

Horace’s Odes 2.3 has proven difficult to critics such as Woodman as a result of three seemingly distinct aspects: a traditional Epicurean moral lesson, a pastoral scene, and a lament about death’s inevitability.

Through a consideration of the most atomic aspects of the poem, it’s diction and inflection, it is evident that there is nothing accidental or disorganized about the poem. Verbs are critical in forming a backbone that unifies the poem.

Horace has used inflectional choices to construct a precise progression through the poem, that dwells on the transition between present and future, between life and death, while at the same time as the speaker instructs the listener to avoid excessive pleasure, constantly impending doom reveals the futility of this endeavor.

The Future Tense

Previous scholarship defines the purpose of an ode to be a focus on the present (Barber). On one hand, the speaker creates a concrete presence with lines such as 13-14.

Huc vina et unguenta et nimium brevis flores amoenae ferre iube roaes

Order someone to bring to here wine and oils and the blossoms of the beautiful roses, too short-lived

At the same time, striking future verbs such as moriture, cedes, and impositura create an underlying tension that connects the pull to the future with the pull of death.

Tense Structure and Ring Composition

Each strophe in Odes 2.3 displays a clearly defined tense that most of the verbs in it follow. Overall, the strophes follow the progression shown below.

Voice and Mood

Beyond tense, other markers such as voice and mood can enhance the effect of the poem.

The passive is used, as in omnes eodem cogimur, to indicate the loss of agency after one’s demise. It is reminiscent of the vocabulary used in sheep herding, but without a clear subject shepherd, it is final and ominous.

Two imperatives, memento and iube, appear in different contexts and usages. While memento is abstract and non-specific, used to introduce the moral lesson with which the poem begins, iube is concrete and immediate, used “to enforce presence rather than look to the future” (Barber 344).

Conclusion

These choices in diction, tense, mood, and voice unify the poem and produce an underlying backbone for its thematic progression. It demonstrates to the listener that death is inevitable and looming, thereby adding uncertainty to the Epicurean lesson presented at the beginning.

Through analysis of the poem’s syntactic properties, the modern reader can better understand the poem’s full effect on a contemporary listener, and find that the seemingly unexpected aspects of the poem are, in fact, inevitable.

References Cited


