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DEATH BY WATER: HORACE, ODES 1.28

WILLIAM N. TURPIN

"Te maris et terrae numeroque carentis arenae
Mensorem cohibent, Archyta,
Pulveris exigui prope litus parva Matinum
Munera, nec quicquam tibi prodest
Aerias temptasse domos animoque rotundum
Percurrisse polum morituro.
Occidit et Pelopis genitor, conviva deorum,
Tithonusque remotus in auras
Et Iovis arcanis Minos admissus, habentque
Tartara Panthoiden iterum Orco
Demitssum, quamvis elipeo Troiana refixo
Tempora testatus nihil ultra
Nervos atque cutem morti concesserat atrae,
Judice te non sordidus auctor
Naturae verique. Sed omnes una manet nox
Et calcanda semel via leti:
Dant alios Furiae torvo spectacula Marti,
Exitio est avidum mare nautis;
Mixta senum ac iuvenum densentur funera; nullum
Saeva caput Proserpina fugit."

"Me quoque devexi rapidus comes Orionis
Illyricis Notus obruit undis.
At tu, nauta, vagae ne parce malignus arenae
Ossibus et capiti inhumato
Particulam dare: sic, quodcumque minabitur Eurus
Fluctibus Hesperis, Venusinae
Plectantur silvae te sospite, multaque merces,
Unde potest, tibi defluat aequo
Ab Iove Neptunoque sacri custode Tarenti.

William N. Turpin

Death by Water: Horace, Odes 1.28

“I know your life’s a busy one, but it won’t take long: three bits of dust will speed you on your way.”

Horace’s Archytas ode has provoked considerable disquiet. The poem requires the reader to understand that the speaker could talk to Archytas’ tomb about the inevitability of death (lines 1-20), belatedly reveal that he is himself dead (21-22), and then turn to a passing sailor to ask for burial (23-36). Despite attempts to suggest some poetic justification for these awkward shifts, many scholars have remained unhappy with this reading of the poem, and rightly so.

An uninvited monologue from a corpse is bad enough; a corpse who chats, uninvited, with tomb and with passing sailor is almost grotesque.

Thus there are obvious attractions to reading the poem as a dialogue, in which it is an unburied Archytas who is addressed by, and responds to, a passing sailor. This paper will argue that such a reading not only endows the poem with an attractive dramatic consistency, but also reveals a second, and much more important, level of meaning. The text and the translation printed above are given primarily for ease of reference, but they will also, I hope, help clarify this reading of the poem.

The speaker of the second part of the poem asks to be buried. It is therefore essential, if we are to understand him to be Archytas, that the Archytas addressed in the first part of the poem be someone who requires burial. Thus the first part of the poem would consist of

1 For a spirited defense, see Nisbet and Hubbard, A Commentary on Horace: Odes 1 (Oxford, 1970), ad loc., esp. 319: “The poem is undeniably bizarre in conception, but it is original and imaginative as few other Latin writings.” See also Gordon Williams, Figures of Thought in Roman Poetry (New Haven, 1980), 5-9.

2 E.g., E. Fraenkel, Horace (Oxford, 1957), 74 n. 1: “a certain immaturity.”

3 This was the view of the ancient commentators, see O. Keller, Pseudoacroneos scholia in Horatium vetustiora 1 (Leipzig, 1902), 105 and esp. 109, on line 23: “Hic quasi Architam ponit nautam precari, ne remaneat insepultus, sed iam harenam iniciat,” etc. The most recent advocates of this view are R. S. Kilpatrick, “Archytas at the Styx (Horace, Carm. 1.28),” CP 63 (1968), 201-206, with idem, “Two Notes on Horace Carm. 1.28.21-23,” CP 64 (1969), 237; G. Petrovne, “Rivisitando l’ode di Archita (Hor. Carm. 1.28),” Pan 2 (1974), 55-65; J. J. Iso Echegoyen, “Notas para un comentario a Horacio, Carm. 1, 28,” Estudios Clásicos 20 (1976), 73-91. Kilpatrick usefully shows that Horace’s language owes much to the nekuaia of Odyssey XI, but this does not convince me that the sailor is to be seen as an Odysseus figure or that the dialogue is set in the underworld.
lines addressed by a passing sailor to the corpse of Archytas, while the second part would simply be Archytas' reply: he naturally asks the sailor to bury him. The poem begins with the words "Te...cohibent, Archytas, pulveris exigui prope litus Matinum munera" (lines 1-4). This is normally taken to mean that Archytas is dead, and confined by dust to his grave. It is crucial to the dialogue theory, in general, but it can also retain its original sense of "duties" or "obligations"; in the case of an exposed corpse this would obviously mean "the funeral rites which are now required." 6

One of the problems with lines 1-4 is that two important words are ambiguous. First, cohibere can mean "confine" in two different ways; it can mean both "enclose" and "detain." 4 Second, and more important, munera can mean "funeral rites" (and therefore "burial" in general), but it can also retain its original sense of "duties" or "obligations"; in the case of an exposed corpse this would obviously mean "the funeral rites which are now required." 6

Scholars who understand Horace to mean that Archytas is already in his grave take each of these difficult words in the first of the senses given here. I translate literally, to emphasize that this rendering, though possible, is not an easy one: "small funeral rites [already performed] consisting of slight dust enclose you, Archytas, on the litus Matinum." The alternative is to understand that when Horace talks of burial, he means lack of burial. Nisbet and Hubbard regard this as intolerably obscure. 8 But it is much less difficult if we understand cohibent to mean "detain" and construe it closely with prope litus Matinum, 9 if we give due weight to the adjectives which stress that the munera as well as the pulveris are small, and if we remember, above all, that munera were not only things offered, but things owed: "Small obligations consisting of a little dust keep you near the Matine shore, Archytas."

This last reading of lines 1-4 gives dramatic coherence to the poem as a whole: an unburied Archytas, addressed by a passing sailor, responds with his request for burial. At this point we must decide exactly where the sailor's lines end and those of Archytas begin. The language itself is less than helpful; the change of speaker could reasonably be assigned to the middle of line 15, to the end of 16, the end of 18, the end of 20, or the end of 22. 10 To my mind the most attractive place for the break is at the end of line 20. The "Me quoque" of line 21 seems to me an attractive way for Archytas to begin his reply, and it is reinforced by the "At te, nauta" of line 23. Moreover it has been observed that after line 21 Horace's language is significantly more lively: "Dem lebhafteren Ethos des zweiten Teiles entspricht der fast durchweg (ausser v. 36) rein daktyliche Bau des Epoden, der im ersten Teile zahlreiche Spondeen aufweist, sowie der Verzicht auf Zusammenfall von Satz- und Verschluss." 11 But perhaps the most significant argument comes from a reading of the poem as a whole; lines 17-20, when attributed to a sailor in dialogue with Archytas, take on a second layer of significance which is, I think, crucial to what Horace is trying to achieve.

The sailor, throughout his long speech to Archytas, really has only two things to say. He begins by pointing out that Archytas is unburied (lines 1-4). But his real interest is in developing his second point, that even for Archytas death was inevitable. The transition makes sense dramatically; the sailor first notices Archytas' corpse, then proceeds to reflect on death in general. But the sailor's preoccupations are surprising, since we would normally expect lack of burial to receive more attention than the mere fact of death. The point is, of course, that Archytas is a special case; as a Pythagorean he had expected reincarnation.

4 Nisbet and Hubbard, 318 and 321-322.
5 Contrast OLD, s.v., 3.b, "poet., of a prison, dwelling." with 3.a, "To keep (in a place)" ("in portibus," "intra limen," "domi," etc.). See also Orelli-Hirschfelder, Odae, Carmen Saeculare, Epodi (Berlin, 1886), ad loc.
6 For munera as funeral rites already performed see esp. Orelli-Hirschfelder, ad loc., citing Ovid, Fast. 2.533: "est honor et tumulis; animas placare paternae parvaque in extructas munera ferre pyras." For the original sense of something required of someone else, see Festus, ed. Lindsay, 125.18: "Munus significat <officium> cum dicitur quis munere fungi. Item donum, quod officii causa datur;" see also TLL, s.v., munus 1666.70 ff. Cp. Statius, Thebaid 2.370-1: "Audax ea munera Tydeus / sponte subit;" Val. Fl. 3.313: "date debita caesis / munera;" Virgil, Aeneid 4.623-4: "cinerique haec mittite nostro / munera."
7 Nisbet and Hubbard, 318, translate simply "a little dust confines you."
8 Nisbet and Hubbard, 322; see, contra, Kilpatrick, CP 63 (1968), 202 n. 8.
9 OLD, s.v., cohibere 3.a gives examples of the word with in, intra, and the simple ablative of place where.
10 Punctuation may have made things easier for Horace's original readers, see E. Otha Wingo, Latin Punctuation in the Classical Age (The Hague, 1972), esp. 105 and 108.
Thus the irony merely latent in lines 1-4 ("numeroque carentis arenae/ mensorem" is opposed to "pulveris exigui . . . parva . . . / munera") becomes more marked even by the end of the sentence (lines 5-6): "nor did it profit you to have assaulted the airy homes and the vaulted dome with a mortal soul." This irony — which remains, I think, quite gentle — is absolutely clear by the time he has finished with his exempla (7-15). His point about Tantalus, Tithonus, Minos and Euphorbus/Pythagoras is surely that despite their various and bizarre claims to immortality they are in fact all utterly dead.12

In what follows (lines 15-18) the sailor begins by summing up: everyone — even a Pythagorean — has to die. He then goes on to provide specific examples: some men die in war, and some sailors die at sea. It is impossible, I think, to read this in the lighthearted spirit evoked by the previous lines; by shifting from mythological examples to real ones, however conventional, the sailor has introduced a more somber mood. Moreover, death at sea, though apparently introduced simply as a parallel to death in war, has immediate relevance: if Archytas is lying unburied "prope litus Matinum" (line 3) it is presumably because he has been drowned, and as we are soon to learn (line 23), the speaker is himself a sailor.

The sailor continues with what looks at first like mere Homeric embroidery: "the deaths of the young and the old crowd in on one another" (line 19).14 But these words also introduce an issue which will become important in the second half of the poem. The young and the old do not, in fact, stand in an identical relationship with death, and line 19 raises the question of whose views we are given. Archytas died at sea, but it is nevertheless difficult not to think of the dead philosopher as an old man. And when we learn in line 23 that his interlocutor is a sailor, it is equally difficult not to think of the sailor as being young.

The sailor’s remarks are therefore dramatically appropriate; it is characteristic of the young that they can discuss the inevitability of death with a lightheartedness denied to their elders. Archytas’ reply is equally appropriate; he is in complete agreement with everything the sailor has said, but much less cheerful about it.

But Horace is not simply interested in verisimilitude; Archytas’ speech, which is outwardly a simply request for burial, is in fact much more ominous. By saying that he has drowned (lines 21-22), Archytas focuses attention on something about which no sailor can be frivolous for long; Archytas’ "quoque" suggests that drowning is something in which the sailor, too, has an interest. There are similar undertones even in the polite part of Archytas’ request (lines 25-29); Archytas, in promising to hope for the sailor’s safety and prosperity, in fact simply emphasizes the dangers of his calling.

Moreover it is not just the sailor for whom Archytas has sobering thoughts; he uses language which, although ostensibly intended for the sailor, also has a more general application. If the sailor refuses to bury him, Archytas will call for "just deserts and stern reversals" (line 32). This threat, aimed originally only at the sailor and only in certain circumstances, in fact reminds us of the inevitability of death in general: Archytas speaks of "fors" and "debita iura" (lines 31-32). Even more pointed is the climactic last couplet, which clearly transcends the relatively uninteresting problem of Archytas’ burial, and formulates a more universal truth: "Quamquam festinas, non est mora longa."

Horace’s delicate double entendre receives its full force only if the poem is read as a dialogue. The sailor’s unarguable but tactless observations about death set up a request for burial which is also a reproof. But Archytas’ reproaches are not intended for the sailor alone; by the end of the poem Horace has in effect turned Archytas’ attention to his readers, who may require a similar reminder. A similar shift occurs, with similar effect, in the section of “The Wasteland” which gives this paper its title, and which perhaps offers the best introduction to Horace’s poem:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and the loss.  
A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.
Gentile or Jew
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.
(lines 312-321)

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