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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
Aeiras temptasse domos animoque rotundum
Percurrise polum morituro.
Occidit et Pelopis genitor, conviva deorum,
Tithonusque remotus in auras
Et Iovis arcanis Minos admissus, habentque
Tartara Panthoiden iterum Orco
Demissum, 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
Particulum dare: sic, quodcumque minabitur Eurus
Fluctibus Hesperis, Venusinae
Plectantur silvae te sospite, multaque merces,
Unde potest, tibi defluat aequo
Ab ilove Neptunoque sacri custode Tarenti.

William N. Turpin

Neglegis immeritis nocituram Postmodo te natis fraudem committere? Fors et
Debita iura vicesque superbae Te maneant ipsum: precibus non linquar inultis,
Teque piacula nulla resolvent.

Quamquam festinas, non est mora longa: licebit
Iniecto ter pulvere curras.”

"You, who once measured sea, land, and the num-
berless sands, are held, Archytas, by the small requirement
of a little dust; and it’s no help at all that you once explored
the airy realms, and traversed the vault of the world in your
mind.

“Even Tantalus died eventually, despite his dinners
with the gods, and so did Tithonus, though taken up by the
winds, and Minos, who gave even Jove his advice; and Hell
holds Euphorbus, sent down there one more time, even
though he did pick out his old shield, to prove he’d been in
the Trojan war, and maintained that dark death relates
only to skin and sinews — and was one of your favorite
philosophers.

“Everyone, in fact, comes to a common end; at some
point we all have to walk the road to death. Some folk end
up as toys for savage Mars, and sailors perish in a hungry
sea; the deaths of young and old alike crowd one another;
cruel Proserpina always wins.”

“I, likewise, was swamped in Illyrian waves by a
stormy wind, companion to gloomy Orion. But you, O
sailor, must not fail, out of spite, to bestow a grain of drift-
ing sand on my bones and skull: do as I ask, and when the
East Wind clashes with the western waves and the Venusian
woods are assaulted, may you keep safe, and may rich
profit — as far as possible — be given you by Jove and by
Neptune, guardian of this coast.

“Will you neglect a thing so serious for the inno-
cents who will survive you? Then may fate, right judgment,
and just consequences come upon you, too; you will not
abandon me without paying for it, and pious offerings
will not save you.

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, Pseudoacronis scholion
in Horatium vetustiora 1 (Leipzig, 1902), 105 and esp. 109, on line 23: “Hic quisi
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. Petrone, “Rivisitando l’ode di Archita
(Hor. Carm. 1, 28),” Pan 2 (1974), 55-65; J. J. Iso Echegoyen, “Notas para un co-
mentario a Horacio, Carm. 1, 28,” Estudios Clásicos 20 (1976), 73-91. Kilpatrick
usefully shows that Horace’s language owes much to the nekuiia 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, pulvis 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, on the other hand, to show that these words can mean virtually the opposite — that in fact Archytas has not yet been buried.

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." Secondly, 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." The alternative is to understand that when Horace talks of burial, he means lack of burial. Nisbet and Hubbard regard this as intolerably obscure. But it is much less difficult if we understand cohibent to mean "detain" and construe it closely with

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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 paternas parvaque in extertas 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 2.3.70-l: "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 OL D, s.v., cohibeo 3.a gives examples of the word with in, intra, and the simple ablative of place where.
9 Punctuation may have made things easier for Horace's original readers, see E. Otho 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,13 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 Waste-land" 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)