

Horace's Cleopatra

A GOOD way of enjoying Horace is to be a bit lazy. Laboured search for recondite meaning, persistent tracking down of implication, the care that with superfluous burden loads each line—these gild but to flout; these stiff approaches let him shun who would drink of the delight there is in Horace. *Lingue severa.*

Horace's Cleopatra ode (No. 37 of the first book of the Odes) is followed by one which Professor T. E. Page described as an extremely slight and cheerful drinking-song, *Persicos odi, puer, apparatus.* This is in accordance, the Professor claimed, with Horace's characteristic dislike to end on a high-pitched note. But is it not remarkable that the Cleopatra ode also, though far other in sort, is yet a drinking-song? It opens on a note of carousal, *Nunc est bibendum*, copied from Alcaeus: it closes on a chord, uncopied and uncopyable, of which one note, *ut atrum corpore combiberet venenum*, peals still of grand carousal. And from that opening to that close the theme that keeps developing, in passage after passage, is of carousal.

On two of these intermediary passages Professor Page looked with disfavour. One is line 5, *Antehac nefas depromere Caecubum*; the other is line 14, *mentemque lymphatam Mareotico.* 'The ode seems', the Professor considered, 'to bear traces of being hastily written in a moment of enthusiasm. Its vigour and power are undeniable, but in his more finished odes Horace would hardly have admitted such lines as 5 and 14'.¹ But why judge these lines singled out and apart from their context? Why go far afield to seek the rose's lurking-place? Sit and wait; let but myrtle and vine-bower weave their spell, and those lines fall into place as fugues in a fugal context.

For that rising Rome of Horace, Cleopatra's fall was a great occasion. The fate of the world had been at stake. East and West had faced each other in deadly combat. As had been at Marathon—and as may come to pass yet again—the fight was for survival of one of two opposing modes of life. In Cleopatra's defeat and death Rome saw the end of the struggle; saw the voluptuous indulgence, the magnificent wantonness, of an Oriental court sprawl in the dust before the honoured *gravitas* and *pietas* of the Seven proud Hills. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and Mr. S. L. Bethell have in turn shown how the opposing themes, one Egyptian and the other Roman, meet in Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'.² In Horace's ode the opposition is between Roman

1. *Horace—Odes 1*, Macmillan (1935), page 98.

2. *Cambridge Lectures*, Everyman's Library Series (No. 974), page 194; *Shakespeare and Dramatic Tradition*, King and Staples (1948), pp. 120 et seq.

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and Egyptian wines. Opposed to old Latium's Caecuban, time-mellowed in Roman cellars, is Egypt's Mareotic that maddens Egypt's queen. And this opposition between wines extends to contrasted modes of wine-drinking. At another time, with Cleopatra scheming the Capitol's ruin, indulgence in even the good Caecuban would have been heinous. But this differs from that. This is no indiscriminate drinking. It is prudent; deliberate; after the Roman fashion. At the Salian banquet are to sit also the Roman gods.

Antehac nefas depromere Caecubum cellis avitis is the opening passage of the second stanza. Second in a series of potationary impressions, it catches up the echo of *Nunc est bibendum* and passes it on. Next in the fugal sequence is the passage *fortunaque ducli ebria*, in the next stanza: it is the third of the series. In indicating contrasted wines and contrasted modes of wine-drinking, the first two stanzas state the subject. The third begins to develop that material: Cleopatra drinks after the un-Roman, voluptuous fashion; drinks vintage upon vintage that grows more and more damning with each draught.

'Sweet fortune' merely inebriates. In the fourth stanza, in that other disparaged line, the 14th, is a vintage that does more: it 'maddens' her—*mentemque lymphatam Mareotico*. Cleopatra begins as an unmoral creature. Swayed solely by her affections, never does she pause, as the prudential moralist must, to consider whether by the satisfying of one desire she may be frustrating some equal or more important other. Sweet fortune inebriates her, only to make her the less restrained in fancy—*quidlibet impotens sperare fortunaque dulci ebria*. Recognising no conflict of desires, she feels no practical need of morals—until an inexorable law forces her to face the consequences of her actions.

And then—*redegit in veros timores*. By becoming damned, the unmoral Cleopatra is made moral. She takes her damnation in a series of draughts. The last of them, *ut atrum corpore combiberet venenum*, is one that more than inebriates and more than maddens. She drinks death; drinks it up with her whole body; drinks it deliberate, in that grave Roman fashion which reckons before it carouses. The high Roman echo of that opening *Nunc est bibendum* rings in this last of Cleopatra's libations. No longer is she the unmoral, inchoate, rough-hewn Cleopatra of the earlier vintages.

With look serene as of finished marble, now she is 'brave to face fallen grandeur and void palace'. This 25th line, *ausa et iacentem visere regiam*, echoes again, but this time in a different way, that 5th line, *Antehac nefas depromere Caecubum*. While the potationary figure is maintained, there is in these two lines a notable likeness of rhythm. The three syllables of *Antehac* count in the scanning as two. But in the actual pronunciation, the ordinary utterance of a Roman of Horace's time, the extra syllable would not be wholly

cut out. Sounded lightly, it gives a tremor to the line, causing it to quake as though in recollection of the awe that had hung over the Capitol. To borrow a phrase Miss Edith Sitwell has used more than once, 'it is not a weak shaking—it is the shaking of a huge and smoky volcano'.³ Now there is in this ode one other line, and one only, that repeats just this tremor of an extra syllable: *ausa et iacentem visere regiam*. The prosodically elided but lightly sounded 'a' of *ausa* gives this line the same tremor, and it recurs at precisely the same syllabic point in the line.

With all this likeness, there is yet an unlikeness; and in the unlikeness is the best of the tale. It is a difference of accentual rhythm: in the one line the accentuation contradicts, while in the other it accepts, the fundamental rhythm of the metre. That fundamental rhythm has sounded, and resounded in the opening lines of the first stanza; and on coming to the first line of the second stanza, this is the rhythm the ear presupposes:—

Ant'hac nefas depromere Caecubum

This, in fact, is how the line scans, the mark (') denoting the fall of the metrical stress or ictus. But this presupposed rhythm is not the word-rhythm of every-day speech, which gives:—

Antehac nefas depromere Caecubum.

Here the mark (') indicates the syllable on which the word-accent falls. In the pronunciation of Horace's contemporaries, whether the word-accent overrode the ictus, or the ictus the word-accent, is a matter on which modern theorists disagree. Sir Henry Newbolt and Dr. Robert Bridges, each a practitioner too in the art of poetry, were among those in whose reading of Latin verse the stress-rhythm of common speech supersedes the fundamental metrical pattern.⁴ That, however, is a by-path it will not be feasible to enter here. For the present purpose, it is enough to show that, in this particular line, there is in fact antagonism between the one rhythm and the other. One prevails, and is therefore heard in the reading; the other, thwarted and unheard, still exists in the memory and haunts the ear. Between the heard rhythm and the unheard, there is a conflict in the line *Antehac nefas depromere Caecubum*. But there is not this conflict in the answering line, *ausa et iacentem visere regiam*. Here every one of the word-accent of common speech coincides with a metrical stress or ictus. Still that tremor of an extra syllable is there, and because of it the line still rocks and shakes. But the mode of rocking and shaking has altered: where that challenged and contradicted,

3. *The Pleasures of Poetry*, First Series, Duckworth (1930), page 20; *A Poet's Notebook*, Macmillan (1943), page 144.

4. *A New Study of English Poetry*, Constable and Company Limited (1919), pages 32 et. seq.; *Milton's Prosody*, Oxford University Press (1921), pages 3 and 85.

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this reconciles and stabilizes. And this serves to express the superb calm with which she who prepared the crash of ruin for the Capitol now looks, *vultu sereno*, on the heart-quaking ruin of her own fallen kingdom.

Yet this is not all: the ode has a wider swoop. It is true Cleopatra is driven to become moral; true she acts 'after the high Roman fashion'—yet only up to a point. Never is she quite as her conquerors are. Always she is either less or more than they.

The climax that has been developing is not Cleopatra's death: it is the grandeur, the live unpaling grandeur, of her high, pulsating resolve. *Deliberata morte ferocior saevis Liburnis*—what do these words really mean? My reading will not, I fear, find ready acceptance with readers accustomed to the traditional interpretation. Apart from a minor divergence in regard to the precise meaning of the word *Liburnis*, all translators and editors, so far as I know, appear satisfied that *saevis Liburnis* is a Dative governed by *invidens*. In this belief they insert a comma between *ferocior* and *saevis*, and take the words to mean that Cleopatra grudged something to the fierce Liburnians. The word *Liburnis* is taken by some as Dative of *Liburni*, meaning Liburnian tribesmen, and by others as Dative of *Liburnae*, meaning Liburnian ships. In regard to the object Cleopatra grudges, there is no doubt: expressly, it is *privata deduci superbo . . . triumpho*—in proud triumph to be dragged unqueened. But that triumph is a thing of the land, not of the sea. When her hand is on the serpent, and οὐ Θριαμβεύσομαι is in her heart, the sting she feels in the thought of Rome: that shouting varletry is of censuring Rome; that 'imperious show of the full-fortuned Caesar' is to reek and glitter in the streets of Rome. To Octavian's navy, to its Liburnian units or their personnel, there is nothing Cleopatra grudges now.

Is it not better to read *saevis Liburnis*, not as Dative with *invidens*, but as Ablative of comparison governed by *ferocior*?

*deliberata morte ferocior
saevis Liburnis, scilicet invidens
privata deduci superbo
non humilis mulier triumpho.*

Read in this way, the words mean in effect that Cleopatra, by resolving to die, shows herself now fiercer than the fierce from whom she fled in shame at Actium, and who may, if she lives, be warders of her voyage in shame to Italy. It is not merely an expression of the poet's generous admiration for a fallen foe. Those words, read in this way, mean that she, the impulsive Egyptian voluptuary, now proves, and in a deliberative, Roman fashion, sterner than her stern conquerors.

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But would such glorification of Rome's great enemy, one may object, be compatible with the spirit of this Roman ode, whose avowed purpose is to celebrate a Roman victory? In the very flush of patriotic feeling, could a Roman poet suffer his admiration for a foe to carry him that length? It is not impossible. This involution of one moved with another, this 'complexity of impulsions', is surely within the compass of a true poet. Opposing strains balance; the fountain curves and arches—*unde loquaces lymphae desiliunt*. And presently, in that brightest heaven of invention, Shakespeare's stage, a coursing star marks the sweep and learns the curve of Horace's fountain.

Horace's Cleopatra ode is patriotic. *Non semel dicemus*: sincere patriotic feeling is strongly there. But with all its strength and sincerity, the patriotic is a primary impulsion, and becomes subordinated. The loud, full-fortuned day-beam—*O pulcher! O laudande!*—goes its imperious way: *io triumphe! io triumphe!* But it declines; the great flame fails, and a young moon takes the sky in her third night. Patriotic and nothing else is the opening note, *Nunc est bibendum*, resuscitating a patriotic opening note of Alcaeus. For Cleopatra the close of Horace's ode is yet another *Nunc est bibendum*: she who drank the wine of sweet fortune, she who quaffed of the mad Mearotic, now deliberately turns to carouse on the fulness of death. But this is something more than resuscitation. It echoes; but the echo, transmuted and purified, floats free of the clash and clatter of practical politics. 'A strain rather than a composition', it sings Cleopatra up through weakness into strength and through damnation into triumph. She is overthrown, yet *non humilis*; dethroned, yet not conquered; discrowned yet august and royal with a royalty not of the things that are Caesar's . . .

Is this a whimsical, Quixotic view to take of Horace's Cleopatra? Some, perhaps, will deem it the outcome of too long a sitting *sub arte vite*.

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