

The Eccentric Horace*

IN the flush of Rome's victory at Actium, Horace wrote an ode on the downfall of Rome's great enemy, Cleopatra.¹ As the ode presents her, she is at first a queen drunk with sweet fortune: sobered by disaster, she slinks in fear from the pursuing ships: in the closing stanzas she is a brave woman, discrowned yet grand, triumphing over her captors by proudly courting death. That was hardly the climax Horace's imperial patron, the centrally august Octavian, could have been expected to relish.

With his lady friends, too, Horace could be queer. Writing an ode² to Galatea meditating a journey, he wishes that there may be no bad omens against her setting out; and that she may be safe from such calamities as he would like to see overtaking the wives and children of his enemies. He bids her take good care of herself, and warns her of what befell too trustful Europē. Through more than twenty-three digressive stanzas, he tells Galatea about Europē's misery and remorse, Europē's raving and despair. Then he breaks the verse to bring in a goddess—the goddess Venus—who tells Europē of her wonderfully good fortune. How would Galatea take that?

An acknowledged masterpiece is the ode³ that begins by praising the man of resolute purpose, *iustum et tenacem propositi virum*. To the steadfast man the four opening stanzas are steadfastly devoted; then the ode veers away from that steadily centric path. William Stebbing, the author of a set of translations into English verse of Greek and Latin masterpieces, has a translation⁴ of these first few stanzas only. This renders but the centric Horace. It blinks the grand eccentricity of more than twelve stanzas.

II

Some of those gathered here may remember the glory that was Halley's comet fifty-three years ago. It was radiant in the Eastern sky a little before the dawn. Morning after morning we watched it approach; then for a

* A paper read before the Classical Association of Ceylon on 26th June, 1963.

1. *Odes* I, 37.

2. III, 27.

3. III, 3.

4. *Greek and Latin Anthology thought into English Verse*, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1923, Part II, *Latin Masterpieces*, page 138.

few evenings we saw it recede. It has swept beyond our ken; beyond our earth and its centrally kindred planets that still keep going their centric little rounds of the star that makes our little day. The three odes I have cited are, each in its own way, eccentric as the path of a comet is eccentric.

In the ode that starts with the words *iustum et tenacem propositi virum* the first two stanzas are about the upright and resolute man whom nothing can shake. The third mentions Pollux and Hercules as mortals who have attained immortality by being steadfast and upright. The fourth, after mentioning Bacchus and Romulus, ends in the middle of a sentence.

Having completed the sentence, the fifth stanza begins Juno's speech to the assembled gods. And that speech, predicting Rome's greatness and forbidding the restoration of Troy, goes on and on till the end of the seventeenth stanza—*quo, musa, tendis?* It is Horace who asks the question.

In attempting to explain this remarkable digression commentators differ from one another. To some, the extraordinary emphasis on the prohibition to rebuild Troy suggests a political significance. According to Suetonius, there had been a rumour that Julius Caesar contemplated transferring the seat of empire from Rome to Alexandria or to Troy. Lord Lytton is of the view that the old project was in the time of Augustus 'confined to establishing at Troy, or in its neighbourhood, a colonial or branch government, with special privileges and powers.' Assuming, first, that the idea had favourers sufficiently numerous to raise it to importance, and second, that Augustus wished to discourage it, Lytton concludes that Horace's intention in the speech he ascribes to Juno becomes clear.⁵

T. E. Page deems it almost beyond question that under the image of Troy Horace refers to the republican form of government, which had for ever 'fallen', and was to be succeeded by the new Principate established by Augustus.⁶

According to J. H. Rose, 'Troy stands simply for the East, and the meaning is that, to be great, Rome should remain a Western power, not giving way to the Orientalizing dreams of an Antony'.⁷ Similar to Rose's is E. C. Wickham's explanation. To 'rebuild Troy,' to remove Rome to Troy, means, says Wickham, to spoil Roman life by introducing the luxury and vices of oriental life.⁸

5. *The Odes and Epodes of Horace*, William Blackwood and Sons, 1869, page 213.

6. *Horace Odes*, Book III, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1949, page 51.

7. *A Handbook of Latin Literature*, Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1936, page 275.

8. *Selected Odes of Horace*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1938, (Notes), page 38.

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These are views of men whose erudition is indisputable. Any of them may be right: allegory being capable of interpretation on more levels than one, it may be that all these allegorical interpretations are admissible. Even so, are we prepared to believe that Horace's muse would sweep him through thirteen digressive stanzas merely to put across the political opinions and moralistic precepts which these expositors think they have discerned? Does his *monumentum aere perennius* stand no higher than that ?

Ilion, Ilion. Those are the opening words of Juno's speech. What a picture they call to mind of topless towers that kissed the cloud; voluptuous lips that sucked the soul.

Ilion, Ilion fatalis incestusque iudex et mulier peregrina vertit in pulverem. A crime against heaven, retribution and destruction. *vertit in pulverem:* those towers, those lips, all turned into dust.

Yet from the ashes of the old, a new thing emerges. *protinus et graves iras et invisum nepotem Troica quem peperit sacerdos Marti redonabo.* So long as the utter destruction is accepted with reconciliation, the new order is assured of a fairer prosperity and a greater greatness. *stet Capitolium fulgens triumphatisque possit Roma ferox dare iura Medis.*

All this is within the ambit of Juno's speech. By introducing that speech has Horace compassed anything less than the complete pattern of an Aeschylean trilogy? Troy's prosperity is comparable with *Prometheus the Fire-bringer*; Troy's punishment with *Prometheus Bound*; and Rome's resurgence with *Prometheus Unbound*. There are parallels also in the Book of Job, in the parable of the Prodigal Son and in some of Shakespeare's plays.

Commenting on Shakespeare's *Cleopatra*, E. M. W. Tillyard notes that 'the hints of regeneration in the mind of Othello count for more than all the dying ecstasies of Antony and Cleopatra'.⁹ Of Horace's *Cleopatra* that would scarcely be true: to her dying serenity the word ecstasy will not apply—*ausa et iacentem visere regiam voltu sereno*. In the *Cleopatra* of the last three stanzas of Horace's ode, there has clearly been a significant change.

Without distortion of historical fact, Horace has compressed into a single ode all three parts of the trilogy. First is a state of sweet but tainted

9. *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, Chatto and Windus, 1938, page 21.

prosperity: *contaminato cum grege turpium morbo virorum quilibet impotens sperare fortunaque dulci ebria.*

Second, there is thorough destruction of the old order: *minuit furorem vix una sospes navis ab ignibus.*

Third is the theme of restoration and reconciliation. The concluding stanzas reveal a chastened Cleopatra; a Cleopatra who, if I may borrow a phrase Dr. Tillyard uses in another context, has been melted down and recast into something new.

It is true, nevertheless, that in this ode, the third part of the pattern is not as fully developed as Horace has done it in the two other odes I have cited. The divine assurance of a better state of being is lacking in the Cleopatra ode. In the ode that starts by extolling the upright man of resolute purpose that assurance is given by Juno: Venus gives it in the ode to Galatea.

III

Between these two divine utterances there is, it seems to me, a notable difference of emphasis. Juno's speech places the main stress on the second part of the trilogy, the theme of disintegration and destruction. That Rome may rise, fallen Troy must stay for ever fallen. But in the ode that ends with Venus's annunciation to Europē, the grand stress comes on the third part, the theme of renewal and the emergence of a new order happier and more glorious than the first.

The Juno of Horace's ode is but the mythical, traditional Juno—a Juno who, still brooding over the old wound immedicable, has good cause for hating Troy and the Trojans. In the speech Horace ascribes to Juno there is nothing novel: it reads rather like a paraphrase of Virgil's resounding passage (*Aeneid* XII, lines 808 to 828) with its *occidit, occideritque sinas cum nomine Troia*. However graciously Horace makes Juno speak, however regal her utterance, she says no more than she might be expected to say.

With his Venus it is otherwise: she comes in at an unexpected moment, and then behaves in the most unexpected way. Europē, the prodigal daughter¹⁰ of Agenor, has acknowledged her transgression in abandoning

¹⁰ *The Prodigal Daughter* is the title of an essay published in *University of Ceylon Review*, of July—October, 1953.

her filial duty—*pater, o relictum filiae nomen pietasque*. Arise and go back to her father she cannot. The imagined anger of his rebuke wrings her till she raves. *aderat querenti perfidum ridens Venus et remisso filius arcu*.

perfidum ridens.—Why *perfidum*? Wherein is Europē deceived? The deception lies in the fact of Cupid's bow being unbent—*remisso arcu*.

How illusive that slackening of Cupid's bow can be! It has deceived even T. E. Page, who supposes it to be symbolical of Cupid's peaceful purpose.¹¹ Eminent expositor though he is, he fails to see that Cupid's bow is unbent because Cupid's shaft has already sped to its target. This is what Europē has yet to learn. Venus, because she knows, comes smiling like a Mona Lisa.

The Venus and Cupid of this ode are not the Venus and Cupid of old tradition. In presenting them anew, Horace paints like a master artist of the Renaissance, daring to take liberties with the fabric of ancient fable.

What is the fabric of this ancient fable? So far as I know, and subject to correction by those who must know better, Sidon, and not Crete is the scene of Venus's and Cupid's activities in the old story. In the old story not Europē's but Jupiter's heart is the target of Cupid's arrow. Nowhere in the old story is there room for Europē's remorse after her arrival in Crete.

J. Lempière in his *Classical Dictionary* and Herman J. Wechsler in an illustrated *Pocket Library* edition have re-told the old story in English. Wechsler's book reproduces a painting by Titian of the girl and the bull moving over the water. But lovelier than that is Ovid's word-painting in the Fifth Book of his *Fasti* :—

praebuit, ut taurus, Tyriae sua terga puellae
Iuppiter, et falsa cornua fronte tulit;
illa iubam dextra, laeva retinebat amictus;
et timor ipse novi causa decoris erat.
aura sinus implet: flavos movet aura capillos:
Sidoni, sic fueras aspicienda Iovi.
saepe puellares subduxit ab aequore plantas,
et metuit tactus assilientis aquae;

11. Op. cit., page 117.

saepe deus prudens tergum demittit in undas
 haereat ut collo fortius illa suo.
 litoribus tactis stabat sine cornibus ullis
 Iuppiter, inque deum de bove versus erat.

Picturesque and romantic as Ovid is, he keeps well within the ancient fabric. The moment girl and bull reach the shores of Crete, the horns vanish, the bull disappears, there stands the god. *litoribus tactis stabat sine cornibus ullis Iuppiter*. The scene in Crete, where Europē raves in despair and Venus comes on the stage to bring happiness out of impending tragedy, is to be found nowhere but in Horace. Is not this the authentic touch of a master-hand ?

Venus is love personified: in what light did the ancients view what we moderns—some of us, at any rate—have come to regard as a grand and noble passion ? ‘In ancient literature’, observes C. S. Lewis, ‘love seldom rises above the levels of merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as a tragic madness, an *ἄτῆ* which plunges otherwise sane persons (usually women) into crime and disgrace. Such is the love of Medea, of Phaedra, of Dido; and such the love from which maidens pray that the gods may protect them.’¹²

Not such is the love of Europē. The love kindled by the Venus of this ode is no tragic madness. This shaft of Cupid strikes not to harm but to heal; not to debase but to exalt; not to madden Europē, but to drive out the *ἄτῆ* that threatened her.

An apprehension of love beyond the ancient surmise, it glimmers first in the Augustan firmament. Well may succeeding ages stand and stare. Well may children of the New Learning, well may great Shakespeare too, have looked and learned and followed the gleam.

Of ancient writers on love, the most influential in the Middle Ages was, undoubtedly, not Horace but Ovid. Yet ponder what C. S. Lewis has to say of Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*.

‘In the piping times of the early empire—when Julia was still unbanished and the dark figure of Tiberius had not yet crossed the stage—Ovid sat down to compose for the amusement of a

12. *The Allegory of Love*, Oxford University Press, 1938, Page 4.

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society which well understood him an ironically didactic poem on the art of seduction. The very design of this *Art of Love* presupposes an audience to whom love is one of the minor peccadilloes of life, and the joke consists in treating it seriously—in writing a treatise, with rules and regulations *en règle* for the nice conduct of illicit loves. It is funny, as the ritual solemnity of old gentlemen over their wine is funny. Food, drink and sex are the oldest jokes in the world; and one familiar form of the joke is to be very serious about them. From this attitude, the whole tone of the *Ars Amatoria* flows.¹³

And from this attitude flows also, may I say, the tone of some of Horace's odes. Is it Horace the joker you want? turn then to the ode¹⁴ just before the one about Europē. He has finished, Horace says with mock-seriousness, his warfare in the lists of love. In the manner of an old warrior dedicating his sword and his spear, he professes to dedicate to Venus the lover's lute which has done with the service of love and the torch that has lighted the lover's night-march to the gates of his lady. And then he professes to make one last prayer to Venus—that she should chastise Chloe for her pride. *regina, sublimi flagello tange Chloen semel arrogantem.*

'Lift on high o'er that arrogant Chloe thy scourge,
And by one smarting touch fright her into submission.'¹⁵

Between the Venus Horace invokes in this ode and the Venus he brings on the stage in the closing scene of his Europē ode, there is a world of difference. In juxtaposing the one with the other, could his purpose have been to point the contrast? The real distinction is perhaps not so much between two Venuses as between two Horaces—the one playfully serious, the other magnificently eccentric.

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13. Op. cit., page 5.

14. *Odes*, III, 26.

15. Lord Lytton's translation.

I am grateful to Professor C. W. Amerasinghe for having drawn my attention to a most interesting and valuable book, *Horace and his Lyric Poetry* by L. P. Wilkinson (Cambridge at the University Press, 1946). On the three odes cited in my paper as instances of Horace's 'eccentricity' Wilson has noteworthy comments, though he does not go so far as to suggest that Horace may have aimed at compassing, in each of the three, the pattern of an Aeschylean trilogy and, in one of the three, the gift to Galatea, a story of romantic love happily rescued from tragedy. Were I to find some day that these suggestions have been anticipated, I would neither weep for joy with Porson like an angel nor 'curse more humanly with Donatus'.

My belief is that Renaissance writers, by working on these suggestions rather than by propounding them, have indeed anticipated them. Seeing the gleam, they paused not to theorize but followed. 'The great mass of our common knowledge about Horace', says Wilkinson in his admirable preface, 'is due to Renaissance scholars.' And in this context it may be pertinent to quote an extract from a letter of 23-11-1951 which I had from Mr. S. L. Bethell, Lecturer in English Language and Literature, University College of South Wales :—

'Is it possible that Horace's ode supplied a hint to the Renaissance which caused them to interpret Plutarch in this "romantic" way? It would be interesting to know what Renaissance commentators made of this ode.'

Mr. Bethell's reference was to the Cleopatra ode (I, 37)—the one that opens as 'an orthodox song of triumph' but in which Cleopatra steals both the poem and the triumph. In writing me that letter he had in view an article entitled *Horace's Cleopatra* published in the July 1951 issue (Vol. IX, No. 3) of *University of Ceylon Review*.

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