Horace, *Odes* 4.1: a Contradiction Removed*

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ABSTRACT

Odes 4.1 *is difficult to understand on a literal level. At its beginning Horace is complaining that Venus, after leaving him alone for many years, is attacking him, that is, he is feeling a reawakening of sexual desire. But after suggesting that the goddess go off to visit Paullus Fabius Maximus and describing the rewards the young man will give her, he returns to himself. Now, he says, he is delighted by neither woman nor boy nor by the prospect of mutuality in love, that is, he is* not *in the grip of* eros. *Additionally, the use of* iuuare, *'delight', with a person as subject seems to be without any parallel. These problems disappear if in l.* 29 *we read* mi *for* me*: 'I no longer* have *either woman or boy (as lover) nor do I* have *the hope of mutual affection.' Horace's having no lover and no hope of one is compatible with his feeling a generalized desire for sex or a desire for someone unattainable. The tone of the last two quatrains is affected as well as the contribution of the poem to the fourth book of odes.*

Keywords: Horace; *Odes*; Venus; *eros*; Paullus Fabius Maximus

From my first acquaintance with *Odes* 4.1, I have been struck by how hard it is to reconcile the parts of its literal narrative, and the commentators I have read provide no help. There is, of course, more to the poem than its literal level, and those who write about it do well to talk about such things as the political implications of its mention of Paullus Fabius Maximus or the possibility that in complaining of a renewed attack by Venus, Horace may additionally mean that he is once again involved with love poetry. But Greek and Latin poems also have a literal sense, and this is *prima facie* worthy of explication, especially if it presents any difficulties. So I here point out a discrepancy in the plain sense of what is said. I will then suggest a small alteration to the text that removes it.

In ll. 1–2 we are told that Venus, who had for a long time discontinued (*intermissa diu*) her assaults on Horace, is attacking him once more. In ll. 2–4 he begs her for mercy, explaining that he is not the man he once was when Cinara dominated his life so many years ago. In ll. 4–7 he implores the cruel mother of the sweet Amores to stop driving him (*flectere*, as if he were a horse: see *OLD* s.v. 7) with commands unsuited to his age of fifty years. There is a delicate paradox in that the commands, which one would expect to be 'harsh', are called 'soft' or 'yielding', presumably because Venus is the mistress of tender emotions; by contrast, he himself is 'hardened' by his long life. The paradoxical turns of phrase, however, should not prevent us from recognizing that Venus is now bending him to her will. That is, he is in the grip of *eros*.

* Stephen Harrison, Stephen Kelly, and A. J. Woodman kindly read earlier versions of this article. I am grateful for their comments and suggestions.

JRS 107 (2017), pp. 140–145. © *The Author(s) 2017.*
Published by The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.
doi:10.1017/S0075435816001131

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435816001131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

After suggesting to her a different target for her attacks, the handsome and accomplished Paullus Fabius Maximus, and describing the rewards she can expect from him (ll. 9–28), he returns to himself. Now he claims that neither woman nor boy delights him (l. 29). In other words, he is *not* in the grip of *eros*.[1] Other things fail to move him as well: the hope of mutual love and the symposium with its competitive drinking and wearing of garlands. It is hard to see how Horace, who had complained in the first two quatrains that Venus was attacking him, can now claim that she is not. At any rate, I can extract no other sense from 'me nec femina nec puer … iuuat' than 'I am delighted by neither woman nor boy'. Commentators attempt to paper over the discrepancy, but their efforts, though strenuous, are unsuccessful.[2]

The next progression, from 'I love neither woman nor boy' to 'I am rendered lacrimose and tongue-tied by my unrequited passion for Ligurinus' (ll. 33–6), is aided by *sed* (l. 33), which could suggest a sudden realization. The self-correction could be regarded as charmingly dramatic, as showing Horace becoming aware, in 'real time' in the course of the poem, that he does indeed feel sexual desire. Still, the sudden dawning of the thought that he is in love would be more charming if the reader did not recall the beginning of the poem. It is also difficult to see why Horace should have forgotten the vivid experiences he describes in ll. 33–40 when he is uttering ll. 29–30. A roughly similar sequence of loving no one and suddenly being in love occurs at Ovid, *Amores* 1.1, but there Ovid's initial absence of desire is real and is changed only when Amor is provoked to shoot one of his arrows at him. In our poem there is no objective change in Horace's situation.

The conclusion seems hard to avoid that ll. 29–32 are inconsistent with what Horace says to begin with.

> me nec femina nec puer
> iam nec spes animi credula mutui
> nec certare iuuat mero
> nec uincire nouis tempora floribus.

The consensus of scholars interprets thus: 'Neither woman nor boy any longer delights me nor am I delighted by any naïve hope of mutual affection or by taking part in drinking contests or tying fresh garlands about my brow.' But in addition to the contradiction

[1] In theory one could reconcile l. 29 with the rest of the poem by saying that it means that his love for Ligurinus gives him no pleasure but only pain. But this does not seem a promising defence: if Horace felt no pleasure in seeing Ligurinus, the boy would have no hold on him. His relation to Ligurinus is far from the indifference implied by 'me nec femina nec puer … iuuat'. Thomas 2011: 93 correctly interprets l. 29: Horace is 'moved by neither woman nor boy' and is a 'denier of erotic feeling'. See also Fedeli and Ciccarelli 2008: 107: 'un Orazio che sostiene di non provare più alcuno slancio passionale e di non credere più a un affetto ricambiato.' Neither commentary notes the discrepancy with ll. 1–8.

[2] The introduction to the poem in Kiessling and Heinze 1917 resorts to vague paraphrase: the celebration of Venus in ll. 17–28 'führt ihn [Horaz] dazu, von neuem zu betonen, wie fremd er sich dem allen fühle'. But the two passages are quite different: the statement that he is delighted by neither woman nor boy is in no way a repetition (*von neuem*) of his earlier complaint that Venus is driving him hard, and it obfuscates matters to say that both ll. 1–16 and 29–32 express 'how removed he feels from all this'. A similar tack is taken by Fraenkel 1957: 412: 'he can but repeat what he has said at the beginning: the time is past when love-making and drinking and revelling could tempt him (29–32)'. This is an inaccurate paraphrase of ll. 1–8. See also Hills 1999: 47, who speaks of Horace's 'restatement of his rejection of Venus'. Similar fuzziness is to be found in Commager 1962: 292–4 and Putnam 1986: 37 (the paragraph beginning 'From the vivid center' and the next). Tarrant 1995: 45 interprets ll. 1–8 as the poet's claim that he is unsuitable for love. He says that they show 'the protective crust of indifference to love that Horace is attempting to sustain'. But a man who addresses Venus with 'parce, precor, precor', can hardly be described as indifferent to love. Among earlier commentators, Page 1883 and Shorey and Laing 1919 seem too embarrassed by the homoerotic theme to say anything about the emotions Horace expresses.

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there are two further problems. (1) In the transmitted text *femina* and *puer* are subjects of *iuuat*. But according to the *OLD* s.v. 5 the verb in the sense 'delight' is used 'usu[ally] of things', with no example given of a person (our passage is not cited). This is confirmed by *TLL* 7.2.746–7, s.v. *iuvo* I.A.a.γ: the section labelled *praevalente colore delectandi* cites no passage where a person is the subject of the verb. (Our passage is cited only for *iuuat* plus infinitive.) This means that 'me iuuat nec femina nec puer', 'I am delighted by neither woman nor boy', is apparently without parallel. (2) The third noun, *spes*, is also not problem-free, for it seems unnatural for Horace to say that he is not *delighted* by the hope of mutual affection and much more natural to say that he does not *have* such a hope. We could invoke zeugma, of course. But when neither of the yoked items is used in a way that seems normal (*femina* and *puer* appear to give unexampled Latin and *spes* gives slightly unnatural sense), invoking zeugma fails to reassure. The zeugma explanation also leaves untouched the contradiction with the opening.

All three problems disappear if we alter a single letter and set a comma at the end of l. 30:

> *mi* nec femina nec puer
> iam nec spes animi credula mutui, 30
> nec certare iuuat mero
> nec uincire nouis tempora floribus.

'I no longer have either woman or boy (as lover) or the hope of finding mutual affection, nor am I delighted any more by drinking contests or tying fresh flowers about my brow.' Grammar is improved in that *femina, puer*, and *spes* are no longer subjects of *iuuat* and thus either unexampled (*femina, puer*) or not quite convincing (*spes*). Sense is improved in several ways. (1) Horace's having no lover and no prospect of having his love returned is perfectly compatible with his feeling either a generalized *eros* or a desire for someone unattainable. There is thus no contradiction with ll. 1–8. (2) With transmitted *me* the implicit contrast is between Horace, who does not feel *eros* (contrary to the poem's beginning), and Maximus, who does. The emended text makes two implicit contrasts, one with himself at an earlier age and the other with Maximus. Horace's younger self had a girlfriend called Cinara, who was not only the object of Horace's *eros* but loved him back. Now there is no one nor any hope of such mutuality in love. As regards Maximus, though we are not explicitly informed about his present situation, Horace thinks that his future prospects for mutuality in love are good and that with Venus' help he will defeat his free-spending rival and win the girl for himself, whereas Horace has no such hope. (3) In ll. 31–2 a further contrast is made: unlike both his younger self and Maximus, Horace is now too old for the parties at which he might meet someone to return his love.

The immediate sequel is also altered by this same change:

> sed cur heu, Ligurine, cur
> manat rara meas lacrima per genas, …

'And yet, Ligurinus, why, oh why does the stray tear run down my cheek, …' The *sed* now has a different function from before: it does not introduce a sudden realization that Horace is in love but continues the argument with which he began. He is under siege by Venus, who should be visiting a younger man like Maximus. He has no hope of a satisfying amour. *And yet* he is troubled by an unrequited passion for the cruel and indifferent Ligurinus, who appears to him in dreams of sexual frustration. The lines, though formally addressed to Ligurinus, now function as a reproach to Venus for afflicting him with a passion that can have no good result given his age

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and circumstances. The poem now has one argument, and Horace cannot be accused of forgetting what he said earlier.[3]

It might be objected that elsewhere in the *Odes* there is no instance of the contracted dative *mi*, which occurs seven times in the hexameter poems. But this is hardly fatal: 4.6.21 gives us the only instance of *ni* in the *Odes* (seven times in the hexameter poems and once in *Epodes*); and 4.11.8 has the *Odes*' only instance of the archaic passive or deponent infinitive in *-arier, -erier* or *-ier* (eight times in the hexameter poems). So if I here introduce by conjecture a word that is ἅπαξ λεγόμενον in the *Odes*, it is not the only *unicum* in Book 4. For *mi* as dative of possessor, see Catullus 10.21 and, with *est* understood, Catullus 37.11 and Verg., *Aen.* 6.123, 'et mi genus ab Ioue summo'. There is a similar subaudition of *est* with dative of possessor at *Odes* 4.8.9, 'sed non haec mihi uis', 'I do not have this ability' or 'I have no such supply (of *objets d'art*)'.

There is a further benefit. The removal of inconsistency not only makes the narrative less baffling but also renders the poem a more effective introduction to the book at whose head it stands. What does the poem contribute? Fraenkel points out several ways in which it is an overture announcing themes that will appear in the rest of the book.[4] The theme of love, of course, is to be seen in 4.10 and 4.11. Old age likewise figures in these same poems and in 4.13. The book will have much to say about distinguished persons of the rising generation such as Drusus and Tiberius, and the praise of Maximus introduces this motif.

But there is an obvious purpose that the fourth book wears on its forehead, praise of Augustus and his family, visible principally — though not solely — in the two long odes, 4.4 and 4.14. In those poems Horace takes up the rôle of a national *uates*, one who can express the greatness of Rome and the recovery of its ancient ways under the leadership of Augustus. Some imagine that Horace's response to Augustus' request for a hymn to adorn the *ludi saeculares* and for poetry praising the Princeps' stepsons and the new political order could only have been reluctant, while others think it reasonable to believe that the poet admired what Augustus had done and was happy to supply what was wanted. We need not decide this question here, for whether he accepted the task with alacrity or was actuated primarily by a sense of obligation for the largesse he had received from Augustus and Maecenas, it is reasonable to suppose that he intended to give the impression that Book 4 was a sincere attempt to praise the new order. We might ask then about the contribution to the book's rhetoric played by those poems, like 4.1, that do not explicitly laud the new regime or do so only incidentally.

An important rôle in this rhetoric, I suggest, is played by the persona Horace adopts when he is not being Rome's official spokesman. Horace's other persona is the ordinary man, the *homme moyen sensuel*. His readers are likely to be persuaded as much by this figure as by the *uates*, for if the Horace who presents himself as like the majority of his readers regards the current regime as 'a bit of all right', that will count for a great deal with his readers. This Horace figures prominently in the fourth book. Sometimes we see him in private settings, and there he seems touchingly vulnerable. At 4.11.21–30 he does his level best to persuade Phyllis, whom he is inviting to a celebration in honour of Maecenas' birthday, to give up her desire for the young and rich Telephus and yield herself to Horace, who is neither young nor rich but has enough to provide a nice feast. We get a glimpse of the aging Horace in the poem's last lines, where the *atrae curae* are perhaps a reference to the no longer distant prospect of his death. Phyllis, he feels, is his last chance at love, and it is by no means certain that she will accept his invitation. At 4.12.13–24 Horace asks his friend for spikenard to adorn his feast and offers him in

[3] There is, one would think, a considerable difference between contradiction within a forty-line poem and the contradictions in long hexameter poems noticed by O'Hara 2007. Furthermore Horace is on record (*AP* 445–52) as being against unclarity and ambiguity. (For more on Horace's avoidance of unclarity see Kovacs 2006–7.) There is no reason to think that he would look with a kindlier eye on gratuitously puzzling self-contradiction.

[4] Fraenkel 1957: 413–14.

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exchange a good wine that will, when taken in sufficient quantity, wash away the bitterness of life's *curae*.

The non-vatic Horace thus presents himself as a man who measures his life in pleasures of a personal nature (good wine, being pointed out by passers-by as 'Romanae fidicen lyrae' in 4.3.22–3) and in personal disappointments (Ligurinus' rejection of his love in 4.10, the real possibility that Phyllis will not respond as he wishes). These glimpses of the average man are sometimes joined to explicit praise of the Princeps. At 4.2.45–52 he imagines himself as one of the crowd lining the streets to watch Augustus' triumphal procession and sing 'O sol pulcher! O laudande!' (in the demotic rhythm of the *uersus quadratus*) as he goes by. *Odes* 4.5.29–40 picture Horace as one of a group of farmers gathered after a long day's work to guzzle wine and toast the health of the emperor, who has made life in Italy much safer and more prosperous. A similar scene recurs at 4.15.25–32. Such moments arguably have a rhetorical force at least as great as the explicit praise of 4.4 and 4.14.

Horace's failures, I am suggesting, have the rhetorical function of showing him to be like the majority of his readers: he is seen to be muddling through life just like them. There is something endearing about his frank admission that he is not a great success in the field of love.[5] The theme that he is now too old for love comes out clearly in 4.10 and 4.13, and since Phyllis in 4.11 is in love with Telephus, we are entitled to doubt that Horace will be successful with her. The simple *cri de coeur* I have ventured to restore to Horace ('Venus, I have no lover and cannot bring myself, because of my age, to hope for one: so why are you afflicting me with this unbecoming passion for Ligurinus?') is of a piece with the other portrayals of the poet in this book. The transmitted text gives us a contradiction that is confusing and distracting, but it also undermines the rhetoric of the poem and its contribution to the book, for a man who can say 'I love neither woman nor boy' and is thus above the fray not only cannot be the man who beseeches Venus to leave him alone but is also not someone with whom the majority of his readers — whose lives are not likely to be free of erotic disappointment — could identify. The emended text shows a touching vulnerability intended, I suggest, to give him a point of connection with the ordinary Roman, 'street creds' that the anointed *uates*, the spokesman for *Romanitas*, could never have.

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[5] The reading of ll. 33–40 that I propose contributes to this purpose. The baffled apostrophe to Ligurinus, intended for the ears of Venus, shows Horace's lack of success more effectively than a sudden realization that he is in love.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435816001131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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