

## *Ars Poetica*

By Horace

### Introduction

Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus is best known for his satires, epistles, and odes. He wrote his most influential critical work around the year 15 BC, towards the end of his long career as a poet. Horace's *Ars Poetica* is an epistle presented as an informal letter to members of the Piso family. Originally written in dactylic hexameter, the piece is typically translated into prose.

Offering a list of advice to beginning poets, Horace maintains an intimate tone while sharing many of the notions that continue to frame our approach to poetry, including *ut pictura poesis*. As Horace explains, "As is painting, so is poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance: one loves the dark; another, which is not afraid of the critic's subtle judgment, chooses to be seen in the light; the one has pleased once the other will give pleasure if ten times repeated . . . ."

Horace places particular emphasis on the importance of decorum in poetry, and on the necessity of "join[ing] the instructive with the agreeable." He urges poets to keep their audience in mind at all times, and he advises that writers "either follow tradition, or invent such fables as are congruous to themselves."

Horace's advice in the *Ars Poetica* is consistently practical and addresses a wide range of issues of craft regarding translation, emotional affect, playwriting, the dangers of publishing ("a word once sent abroad can never return"), engaging critical feedback, and the comportment of a poet.

The following text has been adapted from translations by C. Smart and by E. H. Blakeney (Horace on the Art of Poetry, [London: Scholartis Press, 1928]). Bracketed text is the translators' interpolations.

### (EPISTLE TO THE PISOS)

If a painter should wish to unite a horse's neck to a human head, and spread a variety of plumage over limbs [of different animals] taken from every part [of nature], so that what is a beautiful woman in the upper part terminates unsightly in an ugly fish below; could you, my friends, refrain from laughter, were you admitted to such a sight. Believe, ye Pisos, the book will be perfectly like such a

picture, the ideas of which, like a sick man's dreams, are all vain and fictitious: so that neither head nor foot can correspond to any one form. "Poets and painters [you will say] have ever had equal authority for attempting any thing." We are conscious of this, and this privilege we demand and allow in turn but not to such a degree, that the tame should associate with the savage; nor that serpents should be coupled with birds, lambs with tigers.

In pompous introductions, and such as promise a great deal, it generally happens that one or two verses of purple patch-work, that may make a great show, are tagged on; as when the grove and the altar of Diana and the meandering of a current hastening through pleasant fields, or the river Rhine, or the rainbow is described. But here there was no room for these [fine things]: perhaps, too, you know how to draw a cypress [used for funerals]: but what is that to the purpose, if he, who is painted for the given price, is [to be represented as] swimming hopeless out of a shipwreck? A large vase at first was designed: why, as the wheel revolves, turns out a little pitcher? In a word, be your subject what it will, let it be merely simple and uniform.

The great majority of us poets, father, and youths worthy such a father, are misled by the appearance of right. I labour to be concise, I become obscure: nerves and spirit fail him, that aims at the easy: one, that pretends to be sublime, proves bombastical: he who is too cautious and fearful of the storm, crawls along the ground: he who wants to vary his subject in a marvelous manner, paints the dolphin in the woods, the boar in the sea. The avoiding of an error leads to a fault, if it lack skill.

A statuary about the Aemilian school shall of himself, with singular skill, both express the nails, and imitate in brass the flexible hair; unhappy yet in the main, because he knows not how to finish a complete piece. I would no more choose to be such a one as this, had I a mind to compose any thing, than to live with a distorted nose, [though] remarkable for black eyes and jetty hair.

Ye who write, make choice of a subject suitable to your abilities; and revolve in your thoughts a considerable time what your strength declines, and what it is able to support. Neither elegance of style, nor a perspicuous disposition, shall desert the man, by whom the subject matter is chosen judiciously.

This, or I am mistaken, will constitute the merit and beauty of arrangement, that the poet just now say what ought just now to be said, put off most of his thoughts, and waive them for the present.

In the choice of his words, too, the author of the projected poem must be delicate and cautious, he must embrace one and reject another: you will express yourself eminently well, if a dexterous combination should give an air of novelty to a well-known word. If it happen to be necessary to explain some abstruse subjects by new invented terms; it will follow that you must frame words never heard of by the old-fashioned Cethegi: and the license will be granted, if modestly used: and new and lately-formed words will have authority, if they descend from a Greek source, with a slight deviation. But why should the Romans grant to Plutus and Caecilius a privilege denied to Virgil and Varius? Why should I be envied, if I have it in my power to acquire a few words, when the language of Cato and Ennius has enriched our native tongue, and produced new names of things. It has been, and ever will be, allowable to coin a word marked with the stamp in present request. As leaves in the woods are changed with the fleeting years; the earliest fall off first: in this manner words perish with old age, and those lately invented flourish and thrive, like men in the time of youth. We, and our works, are doomed to death: whether Neptune, admitted into the continent, defends our fleet from the north winds, a kingly work; or the lake, for a long time unfertile and fit for oars, now maintains its neighboring cities and feels the heavy plow; or the river, taught to run in a more convenient channel, has changed its course which was so destructive to the fruits. Mortal works must perish: much less can the honor and elegance of language be long-lived. Many words shall revive, which now have fallen off; and many which are now in esteem shall fall off, if it be the will of custom, in whose power is the decision and right and standard of language.

Homer has instructed us in what measure the achievements of kings, and chiefs, and direful war might be written.

Plaintive strains originally were appropriated to the unequal numbers [of the elegiac]: afterward [love and] successful desires were included. Yet what author first published humble [i.e., pentameter] elegies, the critics dispute, and the controversy still waits the determination of a judge.

Rage armed Archilochus with the iambic of his own invention. The sock and the majestic buskin assumed this measure as adapted for dialogue, and to silence the noise of the populace, and calculated for action.

To celebrate gods, and the sons of gods, and the victorious wrestler, and the steed foremost in the race, and the inclination of youths, and the free joys of wine, the muse has allotted to the lyre.

If I am incapable and unskillful to observe the distinction described, and the complexions of works [of genius], why am I accosted by the name of "Poet?" Why, out of false modesty, do I prefer being ignorant to being learned?

A comic subject will not be handled in tragic verse: in like manner the banquet of Thyestes will not bear to be held in familiar verses, and such as almost suit the sock. Let each peculiar species [of writing] fill with decorum its proper place. Nevertheless sometimes even comedy exalts her voice, and passionate Chremes rails in a tumid strain: and a tragic writer generally expresses grief in a prosaic style. Telephus and Peleus, when they are both in poverty and exile, throw aside their rants and gigantic expressions if they have a mind to move the heart of the spectator with their complaint.

It is not enough that poems be beautiful; let them be tender and affecting, and bear away the soul of the auditor whithersoever they please. As the human countenance smiles on those that smile, so does it sympathize with those that weep. If you would have me weep you must first express the passion of grief yourself; then, Telephus or Peleus, your misfortunes hurt me: if you pronounce the parts assigned you ill, I shall either fall asleep or laugh.

Pathetic accents suit a melancholy countenance; words full of menace, an angry one; wanton expressions, a sportive look; and serious matter, an austere one. For nature forms us first within to every modification of circumstances; she delights or impels us to anger, or depresses us to the earth and afflicts us with heavy sorrow: then expresses those emotions of the mind by the tongue, its interpreter. If the words be discordant to the station of the speaker, the Roman knights and plebeians will raise an immoderate laugh. It will make a wide difference, whether it be Davus that speaks, or a hero; a man well-stricken in years, or a hot young fellow in his bloom; and a matron of distinction, or an officious nurse; a roaming merchant, or the cultivator of a verdant little farm; a Colchian, or an Assyrian; one educated at Thebes, or one at Argos.

You, that write, either follow tradition, or invent such fables as are congruous to themselves. If as poet you have to represent the renowned Achilles; let him be indefatigable, wrathful, inexorable, courageous, let him deny that laws were made for him, let him arrogate every thing to force of arms. Let Medea be fierce and intractable, Ino an object of pity, Ixion perfidious, Io wandering, Orestes in distress.

If you offer to the stage any thing unattempted, and venture to form a new character; let it be preserved to the last such as it set out at the beginning, and be consistent with itself. It is difficult to write with propriety on subjects to which all writers have a common claim; and you with more prudence will reduce the Iliad into acts, than if you first introduce arguments unknown and never treated of before. A public story will become your own property, if you do not dwell upon the whole circle of events, which is paltry and open to every one; nor must you be so faithful a translator, as to take the pains of rendering [the original] word for word; nor by imitating throw yourself into straits, whence either shame or the rules of your work may forbid you to retreat. Nor must you make such an exordium, as the Cyclic writer of old: "I will sing the fate of Priam, and the noble war." What will this boaster produce worthy of all this gaping? The mountains are in labor, a ridiculous mouse will be brought forth. How much more to the purpose he, who attempts nothing improperly: "Sing for me, my muse, the man who, after the time of the destruction of Troy, surveyed the manners and cities of many men." He meditates not [to produce] smoke from a flash, but out of smoke to elicit fire, that he may thence bring forth his instances of the marvelous with beauty, [such as] Antiphates, Scylla, the Cyclops, and Charybdis. Nor does he date Diomedes's return from Meleager's death, nor trace the rise of the Trojan war from [Leda's] eggs: he always hastens on to the event; and hurries away his reader in the midst of interesting circumstances, no otherwise than as if they were [already] known; and what he despairs of, as to receiving a polish from his touch, he omits; and in such a manner forms his fictions, so intermingles the false with the true, that the middle is not inconsistent with the beginning, nor the end with the middle. Do you attend to what I, and the public in my opinion, expect from you [as a dramatic writer]. If you are desirous of an applauding spectator, who will wait for [the falling of] the curtain, and till the chorus calls out "your plaudits"; the manners of every age must be marked by you, and a proper decorum assigned to men's varying dispositions and years. The boy, who is just able to pronounce his words, and prints the ground with a firm tread, delights to play with his fellows, and contracts and lays aside anger without reason, and is subject to change every hour. The beardless youth, his guardian being at length discharged, joys in horses, and dogs, and the verdure of the sunny Campus Martius; pliable as wax to the bent of vice, rough to advisers, a slow provider of useful things, prodigal of his money, high-spirited, and amorous, and hasty in deserting the objects of his passion. [After this,] our inclinations being changed, the age and spirit of manhood seeks after wealth, and [high] connections, is subservient to points of honor; and is cautious of committing any action, which he would subsequently be industrious to correct. Many inconveniences encompass a man in years; either because he seeks [eagerly] for gain, and abstains from what he has gotten, and is afraid to make use of it; or because he transacts every thing in

a timorous and dispassionate manner, dilatory, slow in hope, remiss, and greedy of futurity. Peevish, querulous, a panegyrist of former times when he was a boy, a chastiser and censurer of his juniors. Our advancing years bring many advantages along with them. Many our declining ones take away. That the parts [therefore] belonging to age may not be given to youth, and those of a man to a boy, we must dwell upon those qualities which are joined and adapted to each person's age.

An action is either represented on the stage, or being done elsewhere is there related. The things which enter by the ear affect the mind more languidly, than such as are submitted to the faithful eyes, and what a spectator presents to himself. You must not, however, bring upon the stage things fit only to be acted behind the scenes: and you must take away from view many actions, which elegant description may soon after deliver in presence [of the spectators]. Let not Medea murder her sons before the people; nor the execrable Atreus openly dress human entrails: nor let Progne be metamorphosed into a bird, Cadmus into a serpent. Whatever you show to me in this manner, not able to give credit to, I detest.

Let a play which would be inquired after, and though seen, represented anew, be neither shorter nor longer than the fifth act. Neither let a god interfere, unless a difficulty worthy a god's unraveling should happen; nor let a fourth person be officious to speak.

Let the chorus sustain the part and manly character of an actor: nor let them sing any thing between the acts which is not conducive to, and fitly coherent with, the main design. Let them both patronize the good, and give them friendly advice, and regulate the passionate, and love to appease thou who swell [with rage]: let them praise the repast of a short meal, the salutary effects of justice, laws, and peace with her open gates; let them conceal what is told to them in confidence, and supplicate and implore the gods that prosperity may return to the wretched, and abandon the haughty.

The flute, (not as now, begirt with brass and emulous of the trumpet, but) slender and of simple form, with few stops, was of service to accompany and assist the chorus, and with its tone was sufficient to fill the rows that were not as yet too crowded, where an audience, easily numbered, as being small and sober, chaste and modest, met together. But when the victorious Romans began to extend their territories, and an ampler wall encompassed the city, and their genius was indulged on festivals by drinking wine in the day-time without censure; a greater freedom

arose both to the numbers [of poetry], and the measure [of music]. For what taste could an unlettered clown and one just dismissed from labors have, when in company with the polite; the base, with the man of honor? Thus the musician added new movements and a luxuriance to the ancient art, and strutting backward and forward, drew a length of train over the stage; thus likewise new notes were added to the severity of the lyre, and precipitate eloquence produced an unusual language [in the theater]: and the sentiments [of the chorus, then] expert in teaching useful things and prescient of futurity, differ hardly from the oracular Delphi.

The poet, who first tried his skill in tragic verse for the paltry [prize of a] goat, soon after exposed to view wild satyrs naked, and attempted raillery with severity, still preserving the gravity [of tragedy]: because the spectator on festivals, when heated with wine and disorderly, was to be amused with captivating shows and agreeable novelty. But it will be expedient so to recommend the bantering, so the rallying satyrs, so to turn earnest into jest; that none who shall be exhibited as a god, none who is introduced as a hero lately conspicuous in regal purple and gold, may deviate into the low style of obscure, mechanical shops; or, [on the contrary,] while he avoids the ground, affect cloudy mist and empty jargon. Tragedy disdaining to prate forth trivial verses, like a matron commanded to dance on the festival days, will assume an air of modesty, even in the midst of wanton satyrs. As a writer of satire, ye Pisos, I shall never be fond of unornamented and reigning terms: nor shall I labor to differ so widely from the complexion of tragedy, as to make no distinction, whether Davus be the speaker. And the bold Pythias, who gained a talent by gulling Simo; or Silenus, the guardian and attendant of his pupil-god [Bacchus]. I would so execute a fiction taken from a well-known story, that any body might entertain hopes of doing the same thing; but, on trial, should sweat and labor in vain. Such power has a just arrangement and connection of the parts: such grace may be added to subjects merely common. In my judgment the Fauns, that are brought out of the woods, should not be too gamesome with their tender strains, as if they were educated in the city, and almost at the bar; nor, on the other hand, should blunder out their obscene and scandalous speeches. For [at such stuff] all are offended, who have a horse, a father, or an estate: nor will they receive with approbation, nor give the laurel crown, as the purchasers of parched peas and nuts are delighted with.

A long syllable put after a short one is termed an iambus, a lively measure, whence also it commanded the name of trimeters to be added to iambics, though it yielded

six beats of time, being similar to itself from first to last. Not long ago, that it might come somewhat slower and with more majesty to the ear, it obligingly and contentedly admitted into its paternal heritage the steadfast spondees; agreeing however, by social league, that it was not to depart from the second and fourth place. But this [kind of measure] rarely makes its appearance in the notable trimeters of Accius, and brands the verse of Ennius brought upon the stage with a clumsy weight of spondees, with the imputation of being too precipitate and careless, or disgracefully accuses him of ignorance in his art.

It is not every judge that discerns inharmonious verses, and an undeserved indulgence is [in this case] granted to the Roman poets. But shall I on this account run riot and write licentiously? Or should not I rather suppose, that all the world are to see my faults; secure, and cautious [never to err] but with hope of being pardoned? Though, perhaps, I have merited no praise, I have escaped censure.

Ye [who are desirous to excel,] turn over the Grecian models by night, turn them by day. But our ancestors commended both the numbers of Plautus, and his strokes of pleasantry; too tamely, I will not say foolishly, admiring each of them; if you and I but know how to distinguish a coarse joke from a smart repartee, and understand the proper cadence, by [using] our fingers and ears.

Thespis is said to have invented a new kind of tragedy, and to have carried his pieces about in carts, which [certain strollers], who had their faces besmeared with lees of wine, sang and acted. After him Aeschylus, the inventor of the vizard mask and decent robe, laid the stage over with boards of a tolerable size, and taught to speak in lofty tone, and strut in the buskin. To these succeeded the old comedy, not without considerable praise: but its personal freedom degenerated into excess and violence, worthy to be regulated by law; a law was made accordingly, and the chorus, the right of abusing being taken away, disgracefully became silent.

Our poets have left no species [of the art] unattempted; nor have those of them merited the least honor, who dared to forsake the footsteps of the Greeks, and celebrate domestic facts; whether they have instructed us in tragedy, or comedy. Nor would Italy be raised higher by valor and feats of arms, than by its language, did not the fatigue and tediousness of using the file disgust every one of our poets. Do you, the descendants of Pompilius, reject that poem, which many days and many a blot have not ten times subdued to the most perfect accuracy. Because Democritus believes that genius is more successful than wretched art, and excludes



from Helicon all poets who are in their senses, a great number do not care to part with their nails or beard, frequent places of solitude, shun the baths. For he will acquire, [he thinks,] the esteem and title of a poet, if he neither submits his head, which is not to be cured by even three Anticyras, to Licinius the barber. What an unlucky fellow am I, who am purged for the bile in spring-time! Else nobody would compose better poems; but the purchase is not worth the expense. Therefore I will serve instead of a whetstone, which though not able of itself to cut, can make steel sharp: so I, who can write no poetry myself, will teach the duty and business [of an author]; whence he may be stocked with rich materials; what nourishes and forms the poet; what gives grace, what not; what is the tendency of excellence, what that of error.

To have good sense, is the first principle and fountain of writing well. The Socratic papers will direct you in the choice of your subjects; and words will spontaneously accompany the subject, when it is well conceived. He who has learned what he owes to his country, and what to his friends; with what affection a parent, a brother, and a stranger, are to be loved; what is the duty of a senator, what of a judge; what the duties of a general sent out to war; he, [I say,] certainly knows how to give suitable attributes to every character. I should direct the learned imitator to have a regard to the mode of nature and manners, and thence draw his expressions to the life. Sometimes a play, that is showy with common-places, and where the manners are well marked, though of no elegance, without force or art, gives the people much higher delight and more effectually commands their attention, than verse void of matter, and tuneful trifles. To the Greeks, covetous of nothing but praise, the muse gave genius; to the Greeks the power of expressing themselves in round periods. The Roman youth learn by long computation to subdivide a pound into an hundred parts. Let the son of Albinus tell me, if from five ounces one be subtracted, what remains? He would have said the third of a pound. Bravely done! you will be able to take care of your own affairs. An ounce is added: what will that be? Half a pound.

When this sordid rust and hankering after wealth has once tainted their minds, can we expect that such verses should be made as are worthy of being anointed with the oil of cedar, and kept in the well-polished cypress?

Poets wish either to profit or to delight; or to deliver at once both the pleasures and the necessities of life. Whatever precepts you give, be concise; that docile minds may soon comprehend what is said, and faithfully retain it. All superfluous

instructions flow from the too full memory. Let whatever is imagined for the sake of entertainment, have as much likeness to truth as possible; let not your play demand belief for whatever [absurdities] it is inclinable [to exhibit]: nor take out of a witch's belly a living child that she had dined upon. The tribes of the senior rail against every thing that is void of edification: the exalted knights disregard poems which are austere. He who joins the instructive with the agreeable, carries off every vote, by delighting and at the same time admonishing the reader. This book gains money for the Sosii; this crosses the sea, and continues to its renowned author a lasting duration.

Yet there are faults, which we should be ready to pardon: for neither does the string [always] form the sound which the hand and conception [of the performer] intends, but very often returns a sharp note when he demands a flat; nor will the bow always hit whatever mark it threatens. But when there is a great majority of beauties in a poem, I will not be offended with a few blemishes, which either inattention has dropped, or human nature has not sufficiently provided against. What therefore [is to be determined in this matter]? As a transcriber, if he still commits the same fault though he has been reprov'd, is without excuse; and the harper who always blunders on the same string, is sure to be laugh'd at; so he who is excessively deficient becomes another Choerilus; whom, when I find him tolerable in two or three places, I wonder at with laughter; and at the same time am I griev'd whenever honest Homer grows drowsy But it is allowable, that sleep should steal upon [the progress of] a long work.

As is painting, so is poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance: one loves the dark; another, which is not afraid of the critic's subtle judgment, chooses to be seen in the light; the one has pleas'd once the other will give pleasure if ten times repeated, ye elder of the youths, though you are fram'd to a right judgment by your father's instructions, and are wise in yourself, yet take this truth along with you, [and] remember it; that in certain things a medium and tolerable degree of eminence may be admitted: a counselor and pleader at the bar of the middle rate is far removed from the merit of eloquent Messala, nor has so much knowledge of the law as Cassellius Aulus, but yet he is in request; [but] a mediocrity in poets neither gods, nor men, nor [even] the booksellers' shops have endured. As at an agreeable entertainment discordant music, and muddy perfume, and poppies mixed with Sardinian honey give offense, because the supper might have pass'd without them; so poetry, created and

invented for the delight of our souls, if it comes short ever so little of the summit, sinks to the bottom.

He who does not understand the game, abstains from the weapons of the Campus Martius: and the unskillful in the tennis-ball, the quoit, and the torques keeps himself quiet; lest the crowded ring should raise a laugh at his expense: notwithstanding this, he who knows nothing of verses presumes to compose. Why not! He is free-born, and of a good family; above all, he is registered at an equestrian sum of moneys, and clear from every vice. You, [I am persuaded,] will neither say nor do any thing in opposition to Minerva: such is your judgment, such your disposition. But if ever you shall write any thing, let it be submitted to the ears of Metius [Tarpa], who is a judge, and your father's, and mine; and let it be suppressed till the ninth year, your papers being laid up within your own custody. You will have it in your power to blot out what you have not made public: a word once sent abroad can never return.

Orpheus, the priest and interpreter of the gods, deterred the savage race of men from slaughters and inhuman diet; hence said to tame tigers and furious lions: Amphion too, the builder of the Theban wall, was said to give the stones motion with the sound of his lyre, and to lead them whithersoever he would, by engaging persuasion. This was deemed wisdom of yore, to distinguish the public from private weal; things sacred from things profane; to prohibit a promiscuous commerce between the sexes; to give laws to married people; to plan out cities; to engrave laws on [tables of] wood. Thus honor accrued to divine poets, and their songs. After these, excellent Homer and Tyrtæus animated the manly mind to martial achievements with their verses. Oracles were delivered in poetry, and the economy of life pointed out, and the favor of sovereign princes was solicited by Pierian strains, games were instituted, and a [cheerful] period put to the tedious labors of the day; [this I remind you of,] lest haply you should be ashamed of the lyric muse, and Apollo the god of song.

It has been made a question, whether good poetry be derived from nature or from art. For my part, I can neither conceive what study can do without a rich [natural] vein, nor what rude genius can avail of itself: so much does the one require the assistance of the other, and so amicably do they conspire [to produce the same effect]. He who is industrious to reach the wished-for goal, has done and suffered much when a boy; he has sweated and shivered with cold; he has abstained from love and wine; he who sings the Pythian strains, was first a learner, and in awe of a

master. But [in poetry] it is now enough for a man to say of himself:—"I make admirable verses: a murrain seize the hind-most: it is scandalous for me to be outstripped, and fairly to acknowledge that I am ignorant of that which I never learned."

As a crier who collects the crowd together to buy his goods, so a poet rich in land, rich in money put out at interest, invites flatterers to come [and praise his works] for a reward. But if he be one who is well able to set out an elegant table, and give security for a poor man, and relieve him when entangled in gloomy law-suits; I shall wonder if with his wealth he can distinguish a true friend from a false one. You, whether you have made, or intend to make, a present to any one, do not bring him full of joy directly to your finished verses: for then he will cry out. "Charming, excellent, judicious," he will turn pale; at some parts he will even distill the dew from his friendly eyes; he will jump about; he will beat the ground [with ecstasy]. As those who mourn at funerals for pay, do and say more than those that are afflicted from their hearts; so the sham admirer is more moved than he that praises with sincerity. Certain kings are said to ply with frequent bumpers, and by wine make trial of a man whom they are sedulous to know, whether he be worthy of their friendship or not. Thus, if you compose verses, let not the fox's concealed intentions impose upon you.

If you had recited any thing to Quintilius, he would say, "Alter, I pray, this and this." If you replied, you could do it no better, having made the experiment twice or thrice in vain; he would order you to blot out, and once more apply to the anvil your ill-formed verses: if you choose rather to defend than correct a fault, he spent not a word more nor fruitless labor, but you alone might be fond of yourself and your own works, without a rival. A good and sensible man will censure spiritless verses, he will condemn the rugged, on the incorrect he will draw across a black stroke with his pen; he will lop off ambitious [and redundant] ornaments; he will make him throw light on the parts that are not perspicuous; he will arraign what is expressed ambiguously; he will mark what should be altered; [in short,] he will be an Aristarchus: he will not say, "Why should I give my friend offense about mere trifles?" These trifles will lead into mischiefs of serious consequence, when once made an object of ridicule, and used in a sinister manner.

Like one whom an odious plague or jaundice, fanatic frenzy or lunacy, distresses; those who are wise avoid a mad poet, and are afraid to touch him; the boys jostle him, and the incautious pursue him. If, like a fowler intent upon his game, he should fall into a well or a ditch while he belches out his fustian verses and roams about, though he should cry out for a long time, "Come to my assistance, my

countrymen,” not one would give himself the trouble of taking him up. Were any one to take pains to give him aid, and let down a rope; “How do you know, but he threw himself in hither on purpose?” I shall say: and will relate the death of the Sicilian poet. Empedocles, while he was ambitious of being esteemed an immortal god, in cold blood leaped into burning Aetna. Let poets have the privilege and license to die [as they please]. He who saves a man against his will, does the same with him who kills him [against his will]. Neither is it the first time that he has behaved in this manner; nor, were he to be forced from his purposes, would he now become a man, and lay aside his desire of such a famous death. Neither does it appear sufficiently, why he makes verses: whether he has defiled his father’s ashes, or sacrilegiously removed the sad enclosure of the vindictive thunder: it is evident that he is mad, and like a bear that has burst through the gates closing his den, this unmerciful rehearser chases the learned and unlearned. And whomsoever he seizes, he fastens on and assassinates with recitation: a leech that will not quit the skin, till satiated with blood.

Originally Published: October 13th, 2009

Horace wrote poetry ranging from iambi (epodes) and sermones (satires and epistles) to carmina (lyrics). These poems paint a detailed self-portrait—laughing poet of moderation; ironic and gentle moralist; enigmatic observer of the Augustan principate; and self-deprecating lover of the Italian countryside, good wine, his friends, and, most of all, his...