Ephemeris

Volume 3 Article 4

2003

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Recommended Citation
Mong, Derek (2003) "Glorifying the Captive at Caesar's Expensive: Horace's Odes 1.37 and Ovid's Amores 1.2," *Ephemeris*: Vol. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris/vol3/iss1/4

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Glorifying the Captive at Caesar's Expense: Horace's Odes I.37 and Ovid's Amores I.2

By Derek Mong

> Then came the day of the great conflict, on which Caesar and Anthony led out their fleets and fought, the one for the safety of the world, the other for its ruin.... When the conflict began, on the one side was everything— commander, rowers, and soldiers; on the other side, soldiers alone. Cleopatra took the initiative in the flight; Anthony chose to be the companion of the fleeing queen rather than of his fighting soldiers.... The following year Caesar followed Cleopatra and Anthony to Alexandria and there put the finishing touch to the civil wars. Anthony promptly ended his life, thus by his death redeeming himself from the many charges of lack of manliness. As for Cleopatra, eluding the vigilance of her guards she caused an asp to be smuggled in to her, and ended her life by its venemous sting. (Naphtali and Reinhold 328)

Despite his unadulterated support for Octavian, historical inaccuracies, and propagandist style, Vellius Paterculus does capture the storybook zeal surrounding the battle of Actium (31 BCE). Octavian probably didn't pursue his enemies in person, and Cleopatra's asps might well be apocryphal. Some authors claim she "tried to kill herself first by a dagger, then by hunger strike," and could have, in the end, simply been murdered by Roman guards (Nisbet and Hubbard 409-10). Nevertheless, Actium marks a historical turning point: Octavian fights his way to the throne and the title "Caesar Augustus," the snakes find their way into Western lore, and poets mark the occasion in song. A veritable hit list of Golden age *vates* mention either Cleopatra, Actium, or its aftermath; most exhalt the victory. In the eleventh poem from his third book, Propertius honors the battle's four-year anniversary with a nod to soldiers and sailors alike. He speaks in patriotic tones, noting Cleopatra's death, slandering her life, before asking the reader to remember Caesar. Similarly, Vergil commemorates Actium on Aeneas' shield in the eighth book of *The Aeneid* (about lines 675-715). These examples, however, do little to question Actium or its outcome. As is the case in America today, dissenting parties were not judged kindly. Thus many lowered their voices, but some did not go silent. Two subversive perspectives exist, from one likely, and one unlikely source. They are Ovid's *Amores* I.2 and Horace's *Odes* I.37, respectively. Both poems undercut Caesar's might, and each time a captured victim does the undercutting. Horace uses Cleopatra and her stoic death to imply a *limena* to Caesar's power. When she dies nobly (*nec muliebriter*) his parade loses its main attraction. Ovid too, having witnessed the *pompae* of the day, writes himself as Cupid's latest victim (*tua sum nova praeda,Cupido,* line 19) paraded through the streets. A final couplet, some creative genealogy, and the military diction inform us that the poem's as much about conquest as it is about Amor. Thus Ovid also questions Rome's recent power shift. That his technique is both similar to and utterly different from Horace's reflects the poets' similar skills and different approaches.

We begin with Horace, whose *Odes* likely preceded the *Amores*, published in three books around 23 BCE (Ferry ix). Poem I.37 sits one slot from the end of book one, and thus suffers from being less positionally significant than some scholars

would like. There is, naturally, critical disagreement as to Horace's intentions with I.37. Should one read it plainly as Roman propaganda or subversively as un-Augustan? Lyne writes that, "Some of us do not regard this as Horace at his best. In fact the lines demonstrate some of the faults which direct celebratory narrative leads one into" (42). That *Odes* I.37 would be dismissed as "celebratory" or narrowly triumphant ignores the shift Horace makes three stanzas from the end. From that point on, the emotional weight resides in *vultu sereno,* Cleopatra's stoic (and thus masculine) demeanor, as opposed to the *bibendum.* It is this drinking that Lyne reads, and though it's certainly a celebration, Horace does not write of celebration alone. On the contrary, he uses the initial *convivia* and *bibendum* to contrast Cleopatra's final drink: *atrum corpore combiberet venenum* (lines. 27-28). He treats the latter with a solemnity that rivals the former's festivity. Horace begins:

> Nunc est bibendum, nunc
> pede libero pulsanda tellus,
> nunc Saliaribus ornare
> pulvinar deorum tempus erat
> dapibus, sodales.
> Antehac nefas depromere
> Caecubum rellis avitis, dum
> Capitolio
> regina dementis ruinas,
> funus et imperio parabat
> (lines 1-8)

At first the poem seems a continuation of I.36. Both include drinking, dancing, and friends. The collections of people even share a common noun, *sodalis*: mates, fellows, comrades (line 5 in I.36, line 4 in I.37). Horace also implies anticipation, as if a long wait has finally ended. Thus the reason that *Caecubum* wine, "regarded by some conoisseurs as the best wine of all," has left its *cellis avitis* (Nisbet and Hubbard 412). The storage is not coincidental. Cleopatra's defeat is a special occasion. Time to drink and roll out the *pulvinar.* However, with a poet who's often labelled *ebrius* himself, who connects *vina liques* with *carpe diem* (I.11.6-8), it's likely the drinking's both literal *and* metaphoric. For instance, if one examines the list of modifiers Horace applies to Cleopatra we find her just as drunk as the *sodales*, drunk with power. They are *dementis* (7), *inpotens* (10), *furorem* (12), and *lymphatam Mareotico* (14) (Commager 91) as well as *fortunaque dulci ebria* (11-12). The final adjective and ablative seal the comparison, showing the cause of Cleopatra's anger: inebriation, though not of good wine "from Fundi in a reassuring countryside in Latium" but instead her own "vile Mareotic" (Nisbet and Hubbard 412). Only Horace would make such a distinction. If charted in three parts, I.37 would now look like this: 1) happy drunken revelers celebrating the defeat of 2) angry drunken enemies, followed by... what? This, I would contend, is where Lyne misreads I.37. This is where "We move from Cleopatra's drunken illusions to her steady-eyed draught of reality, from a public Roman triumph to an individual Egyptian one" (Commanger 91). The third step is stoic defiance, suicide, and a stand against Caesar.

The shift occurs on line 21, the caesura and sentences separating the angry Cleopatra from the stoic Cleopatra. The line itself contains two drastically dissimilar descriptions applied to one person. Horace uses *fatale monstrum,* followed by *quae generosius.* The former combines "'fateful portent,' 'deadly monster,' and *femme fatale*" (Oliensis 138). The latter sounds almost aristocratic or Roman: "well-born" or "of good stock". What has changed? Simply this, that she's decided to kill herself, which, judging from its popularity among the accused and condemned, was regarded as noble. By highlighting the *fortis* of this act (though it may be a singularly

masculine and Roman *fortis*), Horace undercuts Caesar's power to control others. Even in defeat Cleopatra maintains an autonomy and *ferocior* nature that Caesar cannot steal. This last gesture and defiance only appears greater in the face of 1) the *sodales* drunkeness and 2) Cleopatra's initial drunken power. Again Horace uses diction to draw the three under a mutual lens. He writes "fortis et asperas/ tractare serpentes, ut atrum/ corpore conbiberet venenum," (26-28). Not only does the alcaic meter draw out the long syllables of *serpentes,* emphasizing the snake-like sibilants, but the word *conbiberet* echoes the *bibendum* of line one. It is, of course an unusual word to use for an asp's poison (she's not really drinking it), but that's precisely the point, an intentional look-back to the prior stages of drinking. Now Cleopatra's drunk on her own defiance, her final contempt for Caesar. This is precisely how Horace wants her judged. Thus the final *superbo... triumpho* doesn't merely invoke the victory parade she avoids, but the triumph she herself attains. As Commager writes, "She celebrates a triumph as surely as do the Romans, and her drink to yesterday is no less splendid than their toast to tomorrow" (91).

Ovid's *Amores* I.2 both chronologically and thematically begins where Horace leaves off. We are told by Ovid himself that he began the *Amores* when he'd cut his beard once or twice, and continued composition "from about the age of eighteen to perhaps his late twenties" (Barsby 14). This follows the *Odes,* published in the year of Ovid's twentieth birthday. Considering Ovid's extensive *Amores* revisions, its safe to say I.2, as we know it today, followed and was influenced by *Odes* I.37. Similarly, Ovid's captured lover (i.e. "himself" or *nova praeda*), marches the streets in subjugation, the exact fate Cleopatra avoided. If Caesar really did promise her and her armies "pardon and their lives before they could bring themselves to sue for these," as Paterculus writes, then they'd occupy the same position that Ovid as lover does in I.2 (Naphtali and Reinhold 328). By not surrendering they undermine Caesar, and yet in a parade of surrendered lovers Ovid also undermines Caesar. How?

We look to the poem for an answer, beginning where it ends:

> Ergo cum possim sacri pars esse triumphi,
> Parce tuas in me perdere victor opes.
> aspice cognati felicia Caesaris arma:
> qua vicit, victos protegit ille manu. (48-52)

Already diction alludes to Cleopatra and Caesar's treatment of prisoners. The *sacri pars... triumphi* recalls the *triumpho* of I.37, while the *victos protegit ille manu* refers to a trick of the Emperor's supposed good favor: "protect" the defeated enemy and you've an ally/puppet for life. This was the role Cleopatra denied Octavian and Ovid embraced for Cupid. As he says in line ten: "cedamus: leve fit, quod bene fertur, onus" (let us surrender, a weight which is endured well becomes light). However, I wouldn't be writing this paper if Cleopatra's nobility and Ovid's surrender were mutually exclusive. In the second to last line of the poem Ovid instructs Cupid to *aspice cognati felicia Caesaris arma*, or behold the fair armies of kinsman Caesar. This instruction asks Cupid to follow the example of the new Emperor, and in essence equates Cupid to Caesar. A little geneology makes this more apparent.

According to Vergil, Trojan Aeneas sprang from his father Anchises and mother Venus. Thus his blood is half deity and his race something greater. Caesar is supposed to trace his blood back to the Julian *gens,* from Iulus, the son of Aeneas. Cupid's

mother is Venus. That Ovid has heard the *Aeneid* is readily apparent from the *Amores.* The first line is, of course, reminiscent of Vergil's invocation to the muse: "Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam" (I.1.1). Further connections to Vergil may exist. Hofstaedter argues that the last couplet of I.1 that begins, "*cingere litorea flaventia tempora myrto*" alludes to Vergil's *Georgics* I.28, "*accipat cingens materna tempora myrto*" (55). This seems particularly important considering the context of the Vergil line:

> The line from the Georgics occurs near the end of the proem where the poet addresses Caesar Augustus (v.25) and says that the earth shall receive Caesar and bind his head with his maternal myrtle.... The maternal myrtle refers to the myrtle which was sacred to Venus who was the ancestress of the Julian *gens.* (55-56)

This similarity makes it clear that Ovid's 1) conscious of Vergil while writing the *Amores,* 2) linking, through blood, Cupid's actions in I.2 to Caesar's actions throughout the empire, and 3) perhaps not as staunch a patriot and aristocrat as Vergil. Ovid will always mock before he will march, unless of course, that march involves mocking (i.e. I.2). As Hofstaedter writes, "These reminiscences of Vergil at the two emphatic positions on the poem [*Amores* I.1], the beginning and end, might be the poet's declaration that he is not going to write the "official" type of poetry of a Vergil" (footnote, 55).

This becomes increasingly plausible as we attribute Cupid's actions in I.2 to Caesar. These actions take up a large section of the poem (lines 23-48) and are "indeed disproportionate to the total length of the poem, as if for Ovid it constitutes the main interest" (Barsby 47). He begins the section with familial references to Cupid and perhaps a nod to *Odes* I.37:

> necte coman myrto, maternas iunge columbas; qui deceat, currum vitricus ipse dabit inque dato curru, populo clamante triumphum, stabis et adiunctas arte movebis aves. (23-26)

Not only does Ovid remind his captor that his stepfather must provide the victory chariot (line 24), but he then depicts that chariot as harnessed with *columbae* or doves. Though this may suit Cupid, it's hardly the parade of an Emperor, if not the opposite. Horace depicts Cleopatra, the chased one, as a dove in I.37: "accipiter velut mollis columbras" (17-18). To have the doves lead may be a conscious inversion by Ovid. The more biting jabs, however, are yet to come:

> Mens Bona ducetur manibus post terga retorti et Pudor et castris quidquid Amoris obest.
> omnia te metuent, ad te sua bracchia tendens volgus 'io' magna voce 'triumphe' canet. Blanditiae comites tibi erunt Errorque Furorque, adsidue partes turba secuta tuas. his tu militibus superas hominesque deosque;haec tibi si demas commoda, nudus eris. (31-38)

Now Ovid's insults take the form of allegory, as Cupid (i.e. Caesar) binds the positive characters traits in chains, while the negatives ones accompany the parade. Both *Mens Bona* and *Pudor* (Good Sense and Modesty/Chastity) are tied up and lead away with the other *capti iuvenes captaque puellae* (line 27). Furthermore, anyone who opposes the *castris... Amoris* finds themselves equally subjugated. Ovid's in

line 32, and throughout the rest of the poem, tightens the connection to Caesar. *Castra* are, of course, military camps, and although Latin love elegists utilize the *miles Amoris* as a common analogy (see *Amores* I.9), its use here resonates beyond the cliché. Examine lines 37-38. Here Ovid uses the *miles Amoris* to highlight where a monarch's real power rests: his or her army. If Cupid and Caesar can surpass both *homines* and *deos,* then they're inversely weak when they've lost that *commoda.* In fact they're *nudus,* and for once in Ovid that doesn't sound like a good thing. The implication's damn subversive. Caesar's power doesn't derive from the Julian *gens*, but merely from those who've been convinced to die in his name. As Ovid notes they're not in the greatest company. Both *Error* and *Furor* join Cupid/Caesar as *Blanditiae comites.* They stand as "coaxing companions" or "pandering comrades", depending on the translation; they are Caesar's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and they arrive with questionable motives. They are friends brought by fear, for as Ovid keenly points out, *omnia te metuent*: everyone fears Caesar and thus sings "Io triumphe" not out of love, but out of necessity.

What finally separates *Amores* I.2 from *Odes* I.37, making the former a far more subversive work than Horace, lies deeper below the text's surface than genealogy and philology can take us. It regards the nature of Octavian's *pompa* and the posturing Ovid does as a lover, poet, and love poet. It's obvious that the post-Actium celebrations were state sponsored events, political propaganda on the home front. "Octavian claimed, and the world believed him, that he wished to see Cleopatra paraded at is triumph. Such a petty spectacle would gratify his partisans" (Nisbet and Hubbard 409). Those "petty spectacles" were essentially constructed things, orchestrated by the state to elicit support. The similarity between this construction and the construction of a poem does not escape Ovid. As we've seen throughout the *Amores,* Ovid remains consistently conscious of his status as a poet, as an elegist, and the malleable power that entails. *Amores* I.15 testifies to this claim. Thus we do not stretch the text's limits when we credit Ovid with consciously arranging the procession of I.2, and effectively placing himself in an imperial position. In the end it is Ovid who provides the chariots, the doves, and the crowds of I.2, and he does so through writing. Granted he also plays a part in the drama, but that's precisely the short of detachment we expect from Ovid. He will be both lover and poet, and yet neither in earnest at the same time. His posturing and frivolity lead him down many paths, and in I.2 the path's lined with gold. When it's all over, Ovid is Caesar.

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