

HORACE, *EPISTLES* 1.2.42–3\*

Rusticus expectat dum defluat amnis: at ille  
labitur et labetur in omne volubilis aevum.

‘One of Horace’s fables remembered or invented. It is not found elsewhere’ (E. C. Wickham). Not elsewhere in classical literature, certainly. But a story illustrating precisely this absurd ignorance of the natural world is attested later, in circumstances which make it highly unlikely that it derives from Horace’s brief reference, and I think we may safely assume that he did not invent the tale.

Under the (apparently unpromising) heading ‘Numskull bales out the stream’ the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* gives the following summary:<sup>1</sup> ‘He comes to a stream but not wishing to get his feet wet he sits to wait for the stream to run down. He helps to bale the stream out with a hazelnut shell and keeps it up for months.’ The *Motif-Index* gives two references; the first leads to a sixteenth-century collection of jokes, anecdotes, apophthegms, etc., *L’Hore di Ricreatione* of Lodovico Guicciardini.<sup>2</sup> Here we find the following story. A peasant’s son was brought up at home by his mother, who mollycoddled him, so that he grew up quite lacking in experience. One day he was sent to town by his father with produce to sell. He came to an easily forded stream, and stayed there the whole day, waiting for it to stop flowing. At last he returned home, extremely annoyed that the stream just went on flowing.<sup>3</sup>

This tale fits Horace’s reference very nicely. Its appeal is indicated by its incorporation, in a more elaborate form (corresponding to the *Motif-Index*’s précis),<sup>4</sup> in the well-constructed feminist narrative ‘Von dem klugen Mädchen’ recorded by Laura Gonzenbach in Sicily in the last century.<sup>5</sup>

Polygenesis is surely unlikely in this case, and it seems fair to infer that this tale of rustic naiveté was already in Horace’s time part of Italian traditional lore.

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<sup>1</sup> Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, iv (Copenhagen, 1957), J. 1967; cf. A. Aarne-Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*<sup>2</sup> (Helsinki, 1961), no. 1273 A.

<sup>2</sup> *L’Hore di Ricreatione di M. Lodovico Guicciardini patritio Fiorentino* (Antwerp, 1583), i.48 (d).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Vn’ figliuolo d’vn contadino alleuato in casa letiosamente dalla madre, senza esperienza alcuna, fu mandato vn’ giorno dal padre alla città con frutta a vendere; costui arriuato a vn’ fiumicello, che si guadaua da ognuno a piacere, si fermo aspettando tutto il giorno, che quel’ Rio finisse di correre. In fine non ne veggendo alcun’ segno, torno a casa pieno disdegno, dolendosi forte della sua fortuna, e di quelle acque, che non fussero mai cessate, e corressero ancora.’

<sup>4</sup> Here, as often, the *Motif-Index* offers an invaluable guide to literature which may throw light on a particular theme, but its précis corresponds to only one of the items listed. A surprising number of peculiar Herodotean stories have been claimed as ‘widespread folktales’ by scholars who evidently thought it wasted labour to pursue the *Motif-Index*’s far-flung citations.

<sup>5</sup> *Sicilianische Märchen, aus dem Volksmund gesammelt*, i (Leipzig, 1870), 114–18, no. 17.

HORACE, *EPISTLES* 2.2.89

At *Epistles* 2.2.87–9 Horace introduces an argument against writing poetry based on the unpleasant mutual admiration required in poetic society with an anecdote about an orator and a juriconsult:

†frater erat Romae† consulti rhetor, ut alter  
alterius sermone meros audiret honores,  
Gracchus ut hic illi, foret huic ut Mucius ille.