

# ILIA'S EXCESSIVE COMPLAINT AND THE FLOOD IN HORACE, *ODES* 1.2

uidimus flauum Tiberim retortis  
litore Etrusco uiolenter undis  
ire deiectum monumenta regis  
templaque Vestae,

Iliae dum se nimium querenti  
iactat ultorem, uagus et sinistra  
labitur ripa loue non probante ux-  
orius amnis.

(1.2.13–20)

19 non *Porphyron*] *anne* num (= *fortasse*)? Shackleton Bailey (Lipsiae, 2001)

We saw the sandy Tiber with waves violently hurled back from the Etruscan bank set off to overthrow the king's monuments and temple of Vesta, all the while throwing himself around as the avenger of his over-complaining Ilia and charging over the left bank without the approval of Jupiter, uxorious river that he is.

This note offers a solution to a debate crystallized when Fraenkel detected what he thought was the unwarranted opinion of a long line of commentators,<sup>1</sup> who affirmed that verses 13–20 from *Odes* 1.2 were Horace's response to the same major flood that the later historian Dio Cassius describes at 53.20.1.<sup>2</sup> This flood, the only one in Rome that Dio bothers to mention between 54 and 23 B.C., occurred on 16–17 January 27 B.C. during the very night after Octavian received the name Augustus. Dio reports not only the occasion and the severity of the event, but also its interpretation by soothsayers, who, with what is surely perverse logic, saw in that historic night's cataclysmic calamity<sup>3</sup> a portent of Augustus' future greatness.<sup>4</sup> Fraenkel argued that to celebrate the new constitution of 27 B.C. with a refer-

<sup>1</sup> E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957 repr. 1966), 246–7, commended the criticism by C. Franke of those surveyed in *Fasti Horatiani* (Berlin, 1839), 140–1 (their names) and 146–7 (the criticism), and cited C. Gallavotti, 'Il secondo carme di Orazio', *PP* 4:12 (1949), 220 for perpetuating the same opinion without attempting to answer Franke's criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Without taking a position on Horace, J.W. Rich, *Cassius Dio: The Augustan Settlement (Roman History 53–55.9)* (Warminster, 1990), 153, offers this comment on Dio: 'Since Tiber floods were usually held to be unfavourable portents (cf. 39.61.3; 53.33.5–54.1.1–2), it was an embarrassment for Aug[ustus].'

<sup>3</sup> In superstitious Rome, inundations caused by the Tiber were portents of warning; see Plin. *HN* 3.55. Instances reported by Dio in the previous note will have been recorded in his sources: e.g. Cic. *QFr* 3.7.1, as well as Dio 39.61.3–62, associated the foreboding induced by the flood of 54 B.C. with the scandalous acquittal of the proconsul Gabinius. The inundation of A.D. 15 too was termed an omen by Dio 57.14.7, but he missed a pertinent episode in Tac. *Ann.* 1.76, namely: the quindecimvir Asinius Gallus urged the senate to consult the Sibylline Books, 'perhaps aware that nothing propitious for a new reign was likely to emerge', as R. Syme, *CQ* 35 (1985), 181–2, shrewdly surmises. Tiberius objected. A suitable comparison in Tac. *Hist.* 1.86 adduces the Tiber's later flooding as an omen against Otho. Floods elsewhere were read as negative omens too, e.g. against the Romans capturing Veii (Cic. *Div.* 1.100; Livy 5.15–21), before Pharsalus in 48 B.C. (Luc. 1.554–5), and manifesting cosmic displeasure after Julius Caesar's assassination (Verg. *G.* 1.482).

<sup>4</sup> Rich (n. 2), 153, supposes that this interpretation 'must have come from private soothsayers (Augustus' rule was popularly supposed to have been foretold by numerous portents: [Dio] 45.1–2; Suet. 94–5).'

ence to this ill-omened flood on top of terrifying phenomena connected with the thunderstorms at the beginning of the ode 'would have shown deplorable lack of tact' on Horace's part, and he concluded that 27 B.C. was a *terminus ante quem* for this ode.<sup>5</sup>

The issue, then, to be examined is whether these verses do in fact show the 'deplorable lack of tact' which Fraenkel thought was inevitable if Horace was referring to Dio's flood. It is my contention that Horace negotiated the awkward fact of this flood – one which he and his contemporaries at Rome alike witnessed, *uidimus* at 13 – both artfully and tactfully with very different implications from those commonly alleged and in a manner which has so far eluded scholars.

Reverting to 27 B.C. as the ode's most attractive date of composition in the post-Actium period, to which it must belong, Nisbet and Hubbard (henceforth N-H) argued in response to Fraenkel that the 'major flood which was inevitably linked with Augustus ... by a little ingenuity could be made to represent the end of the old order and not the beginning of the new.'<sup>6</sup> This attempt to realign the focus of the cataclysm upon the old order rather than the new constitution provides an important key to understanding one aspect of this ode. However, for reasons to be presented later, it is not Tiber's flooding of Rome that 'represent[s] the end of the old order', which N-H rightly summarize as causally linked to the national guilt (*scelus* 29) of long wearying civil strife.<sup>7</sup> Rather, what is linked to the old order characterized by civil wars is the divine displeasure manifested by Jupiter's signs of hail, snow and lightning in the ode's first stanza – a linkage reiterated in the lightning sent by Jupiter in the last stanza of the very next ode<sup>8</sup> – which Horace collectively models upon the gruesome elemental portents attending Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C., as told in Virgil's First *Georgic* (466–88). So N-H's solution falls short of pinpointing Horace's ingenuity, which still therefore needs to be pointed out.

Whether in reaction to the historical flood of 27 B.C. or some other unrecorded flood in the short interval after Actium in September 31 B.C., the challenge facing Horace in creating this ode was how to harmonize the ill omen which a superstitious people might attach to the occasion, with his chosen theme introduced by the phrase *ruentis imperi rebus* at 25–6, of Octavian as the heaven-sent saviour capable of restoring orderly government in the contrasting second part of the ode.<sup>9</sup> If I am right in proposing that Horace used his ingenuity to explain away all contemporary reference in the flood, the dramatic effect of his ingenuity is all the

<sup>5</sup> Fraenkel (n. 1), 247 in n. 4.

<sup>6</sup> R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book 1* (Oxford, 1970), 19, with 17–19 devoted to various issues bearing on the date of composition.

<sup>7</sup> Others before and after N-H are similarly misleading on the flood. For example, L. MacKay, 'Horace, Augustus, and *Ode*, I,2', *AJPh* 83 (1962), 168–77, thinks the portent of the historical flood of January 27 B.C. is a warning 'against further excesses of civil strife.' More elaborately, D. West, *Horace Odes I* (Oxford, 1995), 11–13, supposes that Ilia persuaded 'her husband to give warning of danger to Rome' as though the river god Tiber parallels and complements Jupiter's own warning, instead of, as Horace implies, acting destructively contrary to Jupiter's will for his own private purpose.

<sup>8</sup> Observed by West (n. 7), 17–18, with my 'Horace on Vergil's sea-crossing in *Ode* 1.3', *Vergilius* 50 (2004), 4–34, at 12–15 and 23–6 for the further observation that Horace portrays the Romans' engagement in civil war as an act of criminal stupidity reminiscent of the Gigantomachy waged against Jupiter.

<sup>9</sup> On the Latin phrase *ruentis imperi rebus*, see my Appendix.

more remarkable if he is reacting to the known calamity of 27 B.C., which had the greatest potential to reflect adversely upon Augustus' inauguration.

Allegations of the ode's multiple imperfections which permeate N-H's commentary are conceived through not seeing that Tiber's flooding is separately motivated from Jupiter's wrath, on which more below. Despite the ancient commentator Porphyrio's sensible remark that Jupiter had wanted his Romans 'terrified, not destroyed' as a way of reconciling the weather prodigies sent by Jupiter with Jupiter's own disapproval (*Ioue non probante*, 19) of the inundation of the Tiber, which the bad weather itself enabled, N-H regard the supreme god's disapproval of the Tiber's activity as, if not 'inconsistent with Jove's thunderbolt in the first stanza', then a 'minor incoherence' possibly overlooked by Horace.<sup>10</sup> Similarly N-H deem the prodigies of snow and hail signalling divine displeasure at the Romans' national sin to be 'incompatible' with the mythological reference to Ilia because of 'inconsistent forms of motivation,'<sup>11</sup> while Ilia's 'whining to her uxorious river-husband' is further characterized as 'frivolous' in comparison with Virgil's portrayal of 'vast cosmic processes.'<sup>12</sup> As a cure for the perceived incoherence Shackleton Bailey suggests replacing *non* in 19 with *num* in the meaning of *fortasse*, which all but reverses the meaning. All of this misses the point of verses 13–20, which is actually to isolate the flood from the cosmic significance underlying the prodigies sent by the supreme god Jupiter.

To understand the second of the two stanzas quoted above, we need to grasp why Ilia complained, why her complaint was excessive, and why the river Tiber acted as an avenger on her behalf. Known also as Rhea Silvia, Ilia of the Trojan Ilus-Iulus family, which gave its name to Julius Caesar and the Julian house into which Octavian had been adopted, was the daughter of Numitor, king of Alba Longa, whom his usurping brother Amulius deposed. To prevent revenge from Numitor's sons and Ilia's potential offspring, Amulius killed the sons and made Ilia a Vestal Virgin. She was, however, coerced into breaking her vestal vow of chastity when she was raped by the god Mars, giving birth to Romulus and Remus. When she and her twin sons were thrown into the Tiber, as narrated by Ennius and other pre-Horatian sources, the twins survived to found Rome, but she drowned and became the wife of the river god Tiber, a substitution by Horace for her marriage to the river Anio in earlier sources.<sup>13</sup> Horace needed Ilia to be married to Tiber rather than Anio in order to motivate his version of events.

From a modern reader's perspective, Ilia's cruel fate surely gave her ample reason to complain. But from Horace's perspective – and here the poet is speaking on behalf of the whole Roman people, as Fraenkel adroitly observes<sup>14</sup> – she complained 'too much', *nimum*, doubtless because she should have realized that it

<sup>10</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 6), 27 on 19, *non probante*.

<sup>11</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 6), 26 on 17, *nimum querenti*.

<sup>12</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 6), 21 and 27 on 19, *uxorius*.

<sup>13</sup> Horace's innovation is pointed out by Porphyrio with discussions by Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 6), 26 on 17 and O. Skutsch, *The Annals of Quintus Ennius* (Oxford, 1985), 212–13. Horace's parentage of Ilia too differs from that of Ennius, who, as Skutsch observes both here and on Ilia's dream (*Annals* 1.34–50) at 195, made Ilia Aeneas' daughter and Amulius her contemporary in the generation after Aeneas. Ilia became Numitor's daughter when the Alban king list was fabricated to fill the 400 years between the Fall of Troy and the traditional foundation of Rome.

<sup>14</sup> Fraenkel (n. 1), 250–1, discusses Horace's use of the first-person plural to adopt this remarkable stance (under Sibylline influence? – see my Appendix) in *Epode* 16, our ode at 13, 30 and 47, and not again until the political odes in Book 4 at 2.50, 5.38 and 15.32.

was her role to be the mother of Mars' children and so should have accepted her untimely death by drowning as unavoidable in the circumstances for the common good of the foundation of Rome. We can compare subsequently Virgil's Creusa (*Aen.* 2.776–89), who accepted that it had been her fate to be cruelly killed at Troy after she had given birth to Aeneas' son Ascanius, later called Iulus, in order that her husband should fulfil his destiny for the future of Rome.

Horace's postponement of the subject *uxorius amnis* to the end of the sentence beside *Ioue non probante* in 19–20 artfully juxtaposes the contrasting purposes of the two gods: Jupiter sent furious hail and snow and lightning sufficient to terrify the people into thinking that another cataclysm like Pyrrha's flood might return, as a public warning that they should desist from the recent past atrocities of civil war. The Tiber, by contrast, was motivated by purely personal considerations for his wife, whom he so loved that he was willing to act on his own authority as her 'avenger', *ultorem* 18. Without bothering to seek and obtain the permission of Jupiter, he threw his weight about (*se ... iactat* 17–18) until he burst his banks in deliberate pursuit (supine *deiectum*) of Vesta, whom, to judge from his wilful seeking her out, he held responsible for not having saved her priestess from drowning. The river god must have nursed the wrong done to his wife for hundreds of years before seizing the opportunity of the high-flowing water resulting from Jupiter's prodigies to achieve his own purpose, that of avenging the wrong done to his beloved. So the river god made actual what Jupiter intended as a threat, but in order to avenge a wrong done in a bygone age, not in contemporary Rome. Horace thereby skilfully unites the present with the past in a manner that differentiates both the purpose that motivated each god and the political disorder that offended each of them. There is contrast but no inconsistency of motivation here.

The internecine offences of recent history in the second part of the ode mirror the internecine offences of the distant past under Alban kings before the foundation of Rome in the first part<sup>15</sup> and cry out for a saviour at a time when Vesta's ears seem again to be deaf (26–8). Unlike the Tiber, who acted as a personal 'avenger' on his own initiative, the various saviour deities Horace calls upon in the name of the Roman people will be authorized by Jupiter to expiate the guilt of 'our' sins. Each of the deities named by Horace has a special relationship to Octavian, but Horace finally suggests that Jupiter's choice is already present on earth. He is Hermes incarnate as Octavian, who in 44 and 50–2 is at once the 'avenger of Julius Caesar', *Caesaris ultor*, and *pater* (like Jupiter himself in verse 2) and *princeps* and *Caesar*. In no way does the flood-inducing action of the *ultor* in the first half of the ode reflect 'deplorable lack of tact' upon the *ultor* chosen by Jupiter to save Rome in the second half of the ode. On the contrary, Horace has taken great pains to deflect from Octavian what superstitious Romans might have seen as an ill omen for the inauguration of his new constitutional rule.

This reappraisal of the fulcrum moment of Tiber's flood elucidates several shifts in the meaning of revenge which operate over the course of the ode. Already at the very beginning, Jupiter's punishment of the Romans is excessive: *iam satis* forcefully denotes 'enough and more than enough.' To set up this first instalment in a nexus of revenge motifs, Horace has boldly transferred to the supreme god's

<sup>15</sup> On Horace's fondness for linking a 'mythical original sin' with the contemporary crime of civil war – implying inherited guilt peculiar to the Roman nation – see M.S. Santirocco, *Unity and Design in Horace's Odes* (Chapel Hill and London, 1986), 25 and n. 42, 188.

activities the same impassioned *satis iam* that Virgil employed in the First *Georgic* at 498–504. In a fervent prayer to various gods to spare the *iuuenis* who can save Rome's war-torn world, Virgil applied the phrase to the excessive spillage of Roman blood through civil wars – 'more than enough' to have long ago atoned for the perjury committed by one of Rome's ancestors at Troy: *satis iam pridem sanguine nostro | Laomedontae luimus periuria Troiae* (501–2). Just as fervently Horace hopes Jupiter will stop his warning prodigies, no longer provoked by Rome bent on self-destruction.

Jupiter's excessive punishment of the Romans lays conditions for a shift, as Tiber's self-vaunting act of revenge in favour of his excessively complaining wife (17–18) displays merely personal motivations, and went too far even for Jupiter's excessive wrath. Here Horace develops the idea inherent in Virgil's reference to an ancestor, which, as Mynors points out, invests the civil wars with 'something of the dignity and the horror of an inherited curse ... like that which haunted the house of Atreus.'<sup>16</sup> But instead of tracing the inherited curse back to Trojan Laomedon, as Virgil does, or to the murder of Remus, as is done in *Epodes* 7.17–20, Horace traces the origins of Tiber's displeasure back to a Trojan descendant in the time of the Alban kings. The fact that the river god was motivated by an event that happened so long ago and behaved in a way that met with Jupiter's disapproval absolves the flood from any contemporary implication concerning Octavian.

Before long even the normally 'insatiable' Mars is satiated by the excessively long spectacle (37), Mercury will put up with being called *Caesaris ultor* (43–4), and in the end the urge for revenge is going to have to be directed outwards, towards the Parthians *inultos* (51). This part of Rome's imminent destiny is followed up most fully in *Odes* 3.3 by Horace convinced of the rightness of Romans shunning civil war in favour of fighting against the foreign foe.

In sum, the present paper has focussed on Tiber's revenge as separately motivated from Jupiter's wrath, with the purpose of removing Fraenkel's objection to taking *Odes* 1.2 as Horace's response to the flood of 27 B.C. By portraying Tiber as acting contrary to Jupiter's will and as the avenger of a wrong done to his wife in the time of the Alban kings, Horace, far from showing 'deplorable lack of tact', absolves the flood from any contemporary implications concerning Octavian. Horace ingeniously thereby deflects from Octavian the possibility of reading the flood as an ill omen for the inauguration of his new constitutional rule. In reaching this conclusion, the paper also shows why N-H's allegations of this ode's multiple imperfections are without merit and, in light of the new appraisal of Tiber's revenge, plots a series of shifts in the meaning of revenge which operates over the course of the poem and ties its contrasting first and second halves together.

#### APPENDIX: A SIBYLLINE ORACLE REVERSED

It has not, I think, hitherto been noticed that our ode shares with *Epode* 16 not just one (see above at n. 14) but two remarkable features: not only does Horace use in both poems the first-person plural in order to speak on behalf of the Roman people, but he lends to both a seer-like quality through twice adapting *Oracula Sibyllina* 3.363–4, ἔσται καὶ Σάμος ἄμμος, ἐσεῖται Δῆλος ἄδηλος, |

<sup>16</sup> R.A.B. Mynors, *Virgil Georgics* (Oxford, 1990), 97 on G. 1.502.

καὶ 'Ρώμη ῥύμη, where ῥύμη, a pun on Rome, more likely predicts that Rome will be a 'ruin' (a precipitous 'rush') than a 'street', its other meaning. Macleod noticed the parallel between this Sibylline prediction and *Epode* 16.2, *suis et ipsa Roma uiribus ruit*, where *ruit* corresponds to ῥύμη, anticipating Rome's ruin in the future, and *uiribus* plays upon 'Ρώμη and ῥώμη in Greek, 'a pun perhaps implicit in the passage from the Sibyllines too',<sup>17</sup> but he did not comment upon our ode. In place of the Sibyl, observe that in *Epode* 16 Horace himself is the inspired prophet (*uate me*, 66), and that the commands in *Odes* 1.2 at 30, 45, 46, 50 and 51 emanate from his own person calling upon Octavian to be the saviour sent by heaven to restore the falling empire, *ruentis imperi rebus* at 25–6. The phrase clearly echoes *Epode* 16, now in a new setting that reverses the Sibylline prediction of Rome's actual collapse.

In *Epode* 16 Horace had treated the theme of Rome's engagement in a deadly struggle with a prediction of her doom. With now a revised message, *Odes* 1.2 bears the hallmark of a particular type of oracular Sibylline prediction: confidence in the restoration of a nation by a saviour after a series of disasters due to divine wrath incurred by offences which the oracle reveals. The causes of the prodigies sent by Jupiter and Tiber are differentiated in the ode and it is predicted that the divine wrath signalled by Jupiter's prodigies will result in the eradication of the old order of Roman *scelus* at the coming of the saviour. Since Virgil's Sibylline song in the Fourth *Eclogue* has the same focus as this and is known also to have borrowed from *Or. Sib.* 3 – not only structurally, for the cycle of final restoration after destruction due to Rome's folly incurring divine wrath, but for details from 744–51 and 785–95 of the restored Golden Age and of peace among animals<sup>18</sup> – strong grounds exist for inferring that this Sibylline book influenced *Odes* 1.2 both directly and as it was mediated through Virgil.

Macleod was cautious enough to assert that Virgil, Horace and Tibullus knew 'if not the third *Sibylline Oracle* itself, prophecies like it'.<sup>19</sup> The likelihood of direct knowledge is made almost a certainty by Parke's subsequent deduction – inferred from Alexander Polyhistor's indebtedness to *Or. Sib.* 3.97–105 for some specific details in his *Chaldaean History* (*FGrH* 275 F 79) – that *Or. Sib.* 3 was indeed circulating in Rome by the mid first century B.C.<sup>20</sup> The publication date of Alexander's *History* is uncertain but Parke puts it between 44 B.C. and its author's death c. 35 B.C., suggesting that the Third *Sibylline Oracle* was circulating in Rome early enough to have enabled Virgil to consult it before composing the Fourth *Eclogue* in 40 B.C. and Horace his *Epode* 16 sometime between 41 and 31 B.C. and *Odes* 1.2 in 27 B.C.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> C.W. Macleod, 'Horace and the Sibyl (*Epode* 16.2)', *CQ*, NS 29 (1979), 220–1.

<sup>18</sup> R.G.M. Nisbet, 'Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*: easterners and westerners', *BICS* 25 (1978), 59–78, at 61 and 66–7 for the Sibylline citations.

<sup>19</sup> Macleod (n. 17), 220.

<sup>20</sup> H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*, ed. B.C. McGing (London and New York, 1988), 144 and n. 17, 150.

<sup>21</sup> I am most grateful to the anonymous reader for *CQ*, whose valuable insights have contributed greatly to this note.