

The Ironic Meaning of the Lollius Ode

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H. W. Fowler has defined irony as "a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension."¹ For the existence of irony, there are usually external factors which motivate a poet to disguise his real intent from the reader at large, from those not familiar with his personal values. Horace's close association with the Augustan regime often gave rise to a conflict between political commitment and personal integrity. As poet laureate of Rome, he was either commanded or commissioned by Augustus to amplify the praises of the principate and of the imperial retinue in a fourth book of *Odes*.² Herein was a dilemma, for it appears that many of the political subjects upon which Horace was importuned to write were repugnant to or irreconcilable with his political credo.³ The poet was confronted by a choice between integrity (*honestum*) and expediency (*utile*).⁴

This is not to imply that Horace was disenchanted with the principate. He simply found some of the themes which Augustus

¹ *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford 1957) 295.

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² Suet., *Vita Horati*: eumque coegerit propter hoc tribus carminum libris ex longo intervallo quartum addere.

³ For a full treatment of this subject, see my unpublished dissertation, "Irony in Book IV of Horace's *Odes*," Brown University, 1962. The idea that Horace never surrendered his judgment entirely in favor of Augustus but was often critical of his regime is not a novel one. For example, the belief that "Horace did not transfer his allegiance to Augustus, at least not immediately and at no time unreservedly" is the thesis of "The Political Views of Horace" by E. T. Salmon in *Phoenix* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1946-47) 7-14.

⁴ See below, page 8.

proposed objectionable, personally and politically. A renunciation of the *princeps*' requests seems to have been an impractical alternative. On the other hand, either an unqualified and enthusiastic response or a supine acceptance would have represented a betrayal of his own values and beliefs.

The literary artistry of Horace was equal to the pressure of these circumstances. There comes into existence, for the first time in Latin literature, a literary and moral *tour de force*, irony of inversion. "Irony of inversion ordinarily compels the reader to convert apparent praise into blame. Its shocking power is greatest when it is thus used to shatter complacent truisms and unthinking optimism. . . . It is in the mock encomium that irony of inversion reaches its greatest concentration and brilliance."⁵ The purpose of this paper is to show that in the Lollius Ode (4.9) Horace intends a mock encomium: the impetus of this ode is not praise of Lollius, but censure ironically disguised as praise.

M. Lollius was a powerful friend of Augustus. Consul in 21 B.C., he saw service in Galatia and Macedonia before emerging as imperial governor of Gallia Comata in 17–16. In 16 he suffered not only a defeat at the hands of roving German tribes but also the ignominy of leaving the eagle of the fifth legion in the possession of the victors. It is the impression of most scholars that Horace took this occasion to rush "to the rescue of a friend of his own and of the emperor's against whom, in the moment of what may have seemed a single and undeserved failure, the world had begun to breathe graver charges."⁶ Traditional criticism sees Horace supporting Lollius' position with an ode of praise.

A close examination of the poem, however, seems to suggest otherwise. In the introduction of the ode, stanzas 1–3, Horace

⁵ David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (New York 1960) 80–81.

⁶ E. C. Wickham in *The Works of Horace* (Oxford 1877) 1.294. It is true that some recent critical studies—Steele Commager, *The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study* (New Haven 1962) 321–22; Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 423 ff.; Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1960) 429—demonstrate varying degrees of awareness that (as Fraenkel puts it) "*laudes Lollii* did not prove a congenial topic to Horace." Their views, however, do not go beyond the belief that Horace felt a distaste for his subject. Most editors of texts used in the classroom today, historical evidence about Lollius' life to the contrary, present this poem as a tribute to the virtues of Lollius. Cf. T. E. Page ed., *Q. Horatii Flacci: Carminum Libri IV, Epodon Liber* (London 1895) 432–33; Charles E. Bennett et al., ed., *Horace: The Complete Works* (Boston 1947) 394; Clement Lawrence Smith ed., *The Odes and Epodes of Horace* (Boston 1898) 303.

repeats a commonplace of lyric poetry, that is, the power of the poet to confer immortality. He then passes on in stanzas 4-7 to a list of legendary persons whom literature has given lasting fame. The characters from Greek legend are at once identifiable as leading actors from the Homeric epic. They are clearly selected to furnish continuing evidence of the power of poetry to immortalize. But it must be emphasized that they are also selected to provide a subsequent comparison of the "hero" of the ode, Lollius, with the heroes and heroines of the Homeric epic. How these paradigms actually compare with Lollius reveals another and quite unexpected purpose. For Horace uses myth as a literary vehicle to introduce a discordant strain into the poem.

The first pair of names on Horace's list belongs to Paris and Helen. When Lollius is included with them, he is truly walking amid the number of poetic immortals. Yet, even if this paradigm is intended to be merely poetic and not topical, the question must be asked: what point of comparison does Lollius have with that notorious pair, whose misconduct brought about the fall of a great city?

Teucer is the second figure of Homeric epic whom Horace treats. The most memorable incident from his life is the event described in *Odes* 1.7, which relates the story of the return of the bowman Teucer from Troy to his native Salamis. He had left behind his brother Ajax, who had perished in the Troad by his own hand. Because their father had enjoined the brothers that neither of them should return without the other, Teucer, at his arrival, was driven into exile. In the contemporary situation—and Horace rarely wrote without an awareness of the present—Lollius, like Teucer, had returned home without his trust and responsibility, namely, the legions or at least the eagle of the fifth legion. Is it implausible to suggest that Horace is advising banishment for Lollius?⁷

⁷ It is true that Teucer as presented in *Odes* 1.7 is not an unsympathetic figure, but this is not necessarily relevant to the point at issue. More important is Horace's intention to compare Teucer with Plancus, as in 4.9 he compares Teucer with Lollius. J. P. Elder, "Horace *Carmen* 1.7," *CP* 48 (1953) 1-8, has commented pertinently on this point. In discussing the cause of Plancus' *tristitia* after Actium, Elder remarks: "May it not have been that Octavian was purposely keeping Plancus [described by Velleius Paterculus as *morbo proditor* (2.83.1)] out in the field? Not only would the man merit such chastisement—an understatement—but men like him who turned so easily might not have been the right sort to have back in Rome in the days after the

The phrase *non semel Ilios vexata* (if it has allegorical significance) could allude to the gravity of Lollius' defeat. The roll-call resumes, thereupon, with mention of Idomeneus, leader of the Cretans. It is part of the legend of Idomeneus, interestingly enough, that he, like Teucer, survived the Trojan war but suffered banishment when he returned home.⁸ The repetition of allusions to exile can be viewed solely as circumstantial evidence. But the allusion is there, and the recurrence of the motif reinforces the idea of exile for Lollius.

The vignette in lines 21-24 describes the heroic death of Hector below the walls of Troy before the eyes of his wife and young son. Yet the inclusion of Deiphobus adds a touch of cynicism; for it evokes a less heroic image. The reader recalls the panic-stricken Hector, thrice pursued by Achilles around the walls of Troy. Not until he was deceived by Pallas Athene in the guise of Deiphobus did Hector find the courage to stop his flight and encounter Achilles.

If Horace intended this as a mythical paradigm of Lollius' behavior, is there a parallel between Lollius' actions in Germany and the actions of Hector when dominated by fear of death? In the end the Trojan found courage in desperation and died bravely in the defense of his city, family, and friends. Lollius did not; but perhaps the Stoic Roman conception of duty would have advised that he should.⁹

The last person on Horace's list is Agamemnon. The argument may be posed that this character is more like Lollius than those already treated, for both were leaders of hosts. Although leader of the Grecian army, Agamemnon is not the ideal example of the *fortis vir*; his greed and pride, for instance, which caused him to take from Achilles his concubine, Briseis, is not the action of a selfless leader of men. As the final name in Horace's catalogue, Agamemnon might well stand out as the supreme example for a Roman general to follow. In the last analysis, he does not. He is not, either in Greek epic or later Greek tragedy, a stalwart or manly figure.

victory." In other words, Elder suggests that Plancus, like Teucer, had been exiled from his home city and, like Teucer, he must learn to accept courageously the prospect of a life away from home. It is only a short step then from the analogue of Teucer in both odes to the suggestion of banishment for Lollius.

⁸ Cf. Vergil, *Aen.* 3.121 ff.; Servius on *Aen.* 3.121; Apollodorus, *Epitome* 6.10.

⁹ See below, pages 9-10.

Thus Horace's seemingly disingenuous selection of myths has a deliberate design. The poet does not intend to enhance Lollius' prestige. Rather, he uses myth to affirm Lollius' moral and military failure and even to suggest the means of atonement. For Teucer and Idomeneus, upon returning home from Troy, were banished. Agamemnon, who holds the climactic position in the legendary list, arrived safely in Mycenae only to meet his death.¹⁰

If Horace means to suggest either exile or death for Lollius, he will not content himself with hinting at it in the introduction to the main body of the poem.¹¹ The second and topical part of the poem should also include allusions to the character of Lollius and recommendations for his future.

Horace prefaces the so-called *laudes Lollii* with these words (29-34):

Paulum sepultae distat inertiae
celata virtus. Non ego te meis
chartis inornatum silebo,
totve tuos patiar labores

impune, Lolli, carpere lividas
obliviones.

C. E. Bennett, in *The Loeb Classical Library*, has translated this: "In the tomb, hidden worth differs little from cowardice. Not thee, O Lollius, will I leave unsung, unhonoured by my verse; nor will I suffer envious forgetfulness to prey undisturbed upon thy many exploits."¹² This translation assumes praise of Lollius is to follow. But the lines permit a second and equivocal reading, the force of which is antithetical to Bennett's.

The terseness of the sentence, *Paulum sepultae distat inertiae/celata virtus*, makes understanding difficult. Implicit in this aphorism is the understanding that either cowardice or bravery can be forgotten if not pointed out in poetry. Because of the apparently

¹⁰ Death (see below, pages 9-10, and note 26) is an important motif in this ode. One may indeed speculate whether Horace intended to draw a parallel between what happened to Agamemnon and what should happen to Lollius.

¹¹ Fraenkel (above, note 6) 425 ff., points out that at line 28, which is beyond the midway point, the reader would not yet have realized that the *credas* of the opening line is not the impersonal second person subjunctive but that there is a subject for the verb, the *Lolli* of line 33. The significance of Horace's choice of myths would not be clear until the entire poem has been read.

¹² I shall employ Bennett's version throughout to represent the traditional view of the ode.

commendatory motif of the poem, the context advises that *virtus*, not *inertia*, should be applied to Lollius. However, the language of this sentence does not clearly demonstrate this.

Indeed, the continuance of Horace's word-play accentuates the equivocation of this passage. Is it the courage or cowardice of Lollius which the poet celebrates (30-34)?

Non ego te meis
chartis *inornatum* silebo,
totve tuos patiar labores

impune, Lolli, carpere lividas
obliviones.

In Bennett's rendering, *non* goes with *silebo* and *inornatum* is proleptic, "I will not be silent [and leave you] unhonored in my pages." But the clause is equivocal, particularly the translation of *inornatum*, and an alternate and contrasting reading may be suggested: "I will not be silent about you, but I shall leave you unhonored (without honor) in my pages."

Likewise, the second clause has a double meaning. By inverting the grammatical function of the accusatives, *labores* and *obliviones*, as subject and object of the infinitive, *carpere*, we achieve a reading opposite to that of Bennett. The ambiguous diction and syntax permit us to translate: "Nor shall I allow your so many misdeeds to gather envious forgetfulness, Lollius, without punishment."

The anaphora of the negative prefix of *inornatum* and *impune* demonstrates the emphasis which Horace wished to place on these two words. They keynote the ironic equivocation of the two clauses. The play on *inornatum* has been pointed out. In considering *impune*, most commentators have had trouble with the explicit meaning of the word in its context. Bennett strained *impune* to mean "undisturbed"; indeed, its force in this passage has been a concern to all the editors. Their supposition that the ode is meant to express *laudes Lollii* has caused them to assume what the meaning of *impune* should be. Therefore, they have proceeded to explain away the adverb.¹³ Consider, however, the

¹³ To illustrate the difficulty which commentators have had with *impune*, consider the following proposals: Wickham (above, note 6) 298, suggests "without an effort to resist it"; Caspar Orelli, *Q. Horatius Flaccus* (London 1843) 392, paraphrases the passage: "Non concedam, ut malevolorum livor et oblivione obscurer et carpat,

possibility that this poem is not meant to be a panegyric, and note the cogent and effective force of an anaphoric *inornatum* . . . *impune*.

If you hide them in the tomb, bravery and cowardice differ little. I shall not keep quiet about you, but I shall leave you unhonored (stripped of honor) in these pages; and, Lollius, I shall not allow your misdeeds to gather envious forgetfulness without punishment.¹⁴

Lines 34–44 are those which deal directly with the addressee and have formed the basis for the traditional thesis that this poem is a eulogy. In regard to these lines, it is a curious fact that of all the ancients whose writings touched upon the life of Lollius it is Horace alone who has seemed to sound a note of praise. Roman historians of the Augustan period have accused Lollius of corruption, extortion, and cowardice in the face of the enemy.¹⁵ This conflicting historical testimony combines with the pattern of irony, established by the mythical examples and linguistic ambiguities of earlier stanzas, to render suspect the sincerity of Horace's compliments. To my mind, an inspection of these "praises" demonstrates that Horace continues to write tongue in cheek.

The catalogue of Lollius' *virtutes* reaches its climax in the poet's final commendation: *per obstantis catervas / explicuit sua victor arma*. As we have pointed out, there is general agreement that the purpose of this ode is to give Lollius a vote of confidence, to provide consolation to him, following the failure of his German campaign. Yet, if the obvious reason that he is being consoled is his military shortcomings, so fresh in the minds of his contemporaries, the incongruity of Horace's compliment ought to be clear. In truth, Lollius had utterly failed to bear his arms as victor through the blocking hordes (of the enemy).

Again, Velleius Paterculus (2.102) reports that Lollius committed suicide when his greed and rapacity, practices long kept

obtrectando extenuet, praeclara tua facta;" Page (above, note 6) 434, translates "at its pleasure;" A. Kiessling and R. Heinze, *Q. Horatius Flaccus: Oden und Epoden* (Berlin 1958) 435, perceive the figure of personification in *impune*: "So oft die *obliviones* einen solchen Uebergreif wagen, wird das Lied sie zurechtweisen."

¹⁴ Note that the adjective *lividas* is barbed with double meaning; for it may signify either that forgetfulness would deprive the achievements of Lollius of the praise which is their due, or conversely, that the labors (misdeeds) of Lollius desire, or, more literally, are envious of, sweet oblivion. In the varying contexts of the passage the indifferent *labores* has the equivocal meanings "achievements" or "misdeeds".

¹⁵ Testimony unfavorable to Lollius is provided by Velleius Paterculus 2.9; Pliny, *HN* 9.35.58; Suetonius, *Tib.* 8; and Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.48.

hidden, had at last been discovered. In addition, Pliny the Elder's description (*HN* 9.35.58) of the wealth of Lollius' granddaughter indicates the great fortune that Lollius left behind. Page points out that the amount of Lollius' inheritance in no way proves a life of dishonesty and dissimulation, stating that "it was the practice of great Romans to amass fortunes by plundering provinces."¹⁶ The historical evidence, however, makes it quite clear that Lollius was greatly, even excessively, devoted to the accumulation of wealth. In the light of this testimony, Horace's discordant tribute to Lollius in lines 37–38 as "an avenger of greedy deceit and a spurner of money which draws all things to itself" appears sarcastic. This sarcasm is reinforced, moreover, by the biting *double entendre* in the noun *vindex* which can describe Lollius either as "an avenger" or, quite ironically, as "a champion (protector) of greedy deceit."

The ironic treatment is then continued by the Stoic terminology in lines 39–41, which also ties in closely with Horace's *tour de force* at the conclusion of the poem: *consulque non unius anni / sed quotiens bonus atque fidus / iudex honestum praetulit utili* (39–41). Certainly the subject of choice in a conflict between moral worth (*honestum*) and expediency (*utile*) was a common topic of discussion among Stoic philosophers of the Augustan world.¹⁷ These men maintained that there can be no real conflict between integrity and expediency, because no material or personal advantage can compensate for loss of honor. When compared with such high philosophical ideals and principles as Horace brings to mind in this reference, the personal failures in the life of Lollius stand out in bold relief.

Horace's conclusions generally take two forms: there is the "off" ending designed to provide a quiet close to his lyrics, and there is the strong ending, the purpose of which is to provide a climax.¹⁸ Eduard Fraenkel would include the ending of this ode within the former classification.

It may be doubted whether Lollius was greatly pleased in reading the ode in which it takes the poet so very long to come to his addressee. He may have hoped that at least the concluding part of the poem would be solely concerned with himself and his

¹⁶ Page (above, note 6) 433.

¹⁷ See, for example, the third book of Cicero's *De Officiis*.

¹⁸ Archibald Y. Campbell, *Horace: A New Interpretation* (London 1924) 227–28.

virtutes. But if he cherished any such hope, disappointment awaited him. The last two stanzas are entirely filled with general moral maxims, fine maxims indeed, but not particularly relevant to Lollius.¹⁹

Fraenkel is correct in his conclusion that *laudes Lollii* were not a "congenial topic" to Horace. But he fails to perceive that this ode is not a eulogy, given short shrift, but rather an ironic representation of a eulogy. The moral generalizations of the two final stanzas form the climax of an ode of ironic inversion.

The connecting link between the concluding stanzas and the preceding section is the reappearance of the Stoic motif. For in discussing the *beatus ille*, Horace seems to have in mind the *Stoicorum ille sapiens perfectus*. The key to understanding these lines lies in the play on the word *beatus*, which means both "happy" and "wealthy." In the context of the poem, the word is ambiguous, double-edged. Literally, it refers to the Stoic sage described in this passage, who alone, in Stoic jargon, is "happy," *beatus*. But Lollius' happiness, Horace ironically suggests, is limited to a search for material things, which will make him "wealthy," *beatus*. That there is ethically and philosophically no reconciliation of these two meanings of *beatus* in Lollius' case is graphically pointed up by the poet when he says: "He *more rightly* has the name of *beatus* who knows how to endure harsh privation."

The contrast between Lollius and the Stoic sage culminates in the concluding lines of the ode: "And he [the Stoic *sapiens*] fears disgrace worse than death, unafraid to die for his dear friends and for his country."²⁰ The poet could present no firmer antithesis to Lollius' disgraceful return from the war than the noble thoughts of these lines. A full understanding of the ode hinges on the realization that these moral maxims were ironically intended to condemn the target of the ode. In addition, the Stoic theme of the concluding distich recalls the idea suggested in the mythical allusions to death as fitting recompense for Lollius' failure, and thereby serves to interlock the two parts of the ode.

¹⁹ Fraenkel (above, note 6) 426.

²⁰ The alliteration and assonance in the familiar phrases, *pauperiem pati* and *pro patria perire*, call to mind the patriotic sentiments of the Roman Odes, notably, *angustam amice pauperiem pati* (3.2.1) and *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (3.2.13). Such echoes of Roman patriotism could only emphasize the *inertia* of Lollius.

The poet recommends to his subject the Stoic and Roman choice of a virtuous death rather than a disgraceful and humiliating life. Certainly there is a well-known archetype for such an action, and a model for Lollius to imitate well within his memory. Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis is, throughout the *Odes*, the prototype of the Roman Republican hero.²¹ It is his glorious suicide after the battle of Thapsus that Horace appears to call upon Lollius to duplicate, following his own disaster in the West. The firmness and gravity of 50–52,

peiusque leto flagitium timet,
non ille pro caris amicis
aut patria timidus perire,

reflect well the stern character of Cato with his admixture of Stoicism and old Roman principles. Damning with ironic praise, Horace presents to the world the disgrace and failings of Lollius. The conclusion of the ode suggests the means of atonement.²²

²¹ For Horace's treatment of Cato, note *Odes* 1.12.35–36: *Catonis nobile letum*, and 2.1.24: *praeter atrocem animum Catonis*.

²² The sequence of thought in the poem presents the idea of death as a constantly recurring theme. Death pervades the early portion in the notion of poetic immortality. It appears later as a harsh retributive measure and also as a desirable end of life. Indeed, to direct attention to this dissonant note in his message, Horace has given the motif of death the most prominent positions in the ode. It stands out at the beginning of the poem (*ne forte credas interitura*) and in the striking crescendo of the conclusion. Again, the force of *pallida mors* dominates the center of the poem, as Horace introduces the second half of the ode with the allusive dictum: *paulum sepulchrae distat inertiae/celata virtus* (29–30). Now that we have completed our analysis of the poem, the implicit meaning of this pivotal sentence seems clear. Does not the poet desire that Lollius bury himself along with his cowardice?