

THE CURSE ON THE ROMANS

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Sic est: acerba fata Romanos agunt
 scelusque fraternae necis,
ut immerentis fluxit in terram Remi
 sacer nepotibus cruor.

This is the sum: bitter fate and the crime
of a brother's murder are driving the Romans,
ever since the blood of innocent Remus flowed
upon the earth, a curse upon his descendants.

In these last four lines of Epode 7, Horace has clearly presented his interpretation of the causal factors of Roman civil strife. For the poet, the death of Remus was nothing short of murder, and more than that it was the crime of fratricide. As is the case in any number of Greek tragedies, an original crime or sin committed by the founder or later head of some great house does not go unavenged. The power of justice must be dealt with, and its usual consequence is a divinely sanctioned, if not divinely inspired, curse on the descendants of the offender's household. The curse, in one familiar form, instills in the descendants an unnatural inclination to commit or repeat the very same sin of the house's founder or head. This is the pattern in Epode 7. Horace is saying that Romulus' consciously evil murder of his innocent brother, as the action of one founding father upon another, brought upon the Romans, their descendants, a bitter fate which drives them to repeat this fratricide. Their guilt is hereditary and unconscious; that of Romulus is original and wilful. The crime is fratricide; its penalty is the repetition of fratricide.

Such an interpretation of lines 17-20 is by no means novel or elusive; on the contrary it is both standard and obvious. Modern commentators¹ suggest as much and Porphyry long ago said quite plainly: "Sic

¹ See E. C. Wickham, *The Works of Horace*³ 1 (Oxford 1896) 374.

enim est sensus: sine dubio hoc est: fato agimur ad hoc bellum supplicium pendentes ob caedem Romuli in fratrem admissam." The scholium of pseudo-Acron maintains the same position and quotes a line of Lucan (1.95) by way of illustration: "Fraterno primi maduerunt sanguine muri." What then is the point here at issue? It is simply that the epode's last four lines are the explanation of lines 13-14 which have so troubled the commentators:

furore caecus, an rapit vis acrior,
an culpa?

Let us, first of all, place these lines in context. The epode is bipartite in structure: 1-14 and 15-20.² In 1-14 Horace has in mind some fictional gathering of the Romans whom he initially questions in the second person plural (*ruitis*, 1) and from whom he demands an answer (*responsum date*, 14). No answer is forthcoming. Horace then abruptly changes verb forms to the third person with the first word of line 15, *tacent*. The dramatic form of 1-14 gives way in 15-16 to description and narration, where the poet's reader becomes the second party "overhearing" the poet talking to himself, while previously the reader had been a distant third party "overhearing" Horace's address to the Romans.

The three main subdivisions of 1-14 are readily apparent. In 1-2 the rush to arms, the given situation on which the poem hangs, is quickly laid down in question form:

Quo, quo scelesti ruitis? aut cur dexteris
aptantur enses conditi?

In 3-10 both the interrogative elements (*quo* and *cur*) of 1-2 are treated by reference to place and reason. Horace inquires into the possible motivation, asking (again in the interrogative form) whether too little Latin blood has been shed thus far, and he lists three purposes. This roll call of foes takes us away from the European continent, first to Carthage and the south, then to Britain and the north, and finally to Parthia and the east. The first two are stated as rejected purposes:

² C. Giarratano, *Il libro degli Epodi* (Turin 1930) 61, as well as E. Turolla, *Q. Orazio Flacco: I Giambi* (Turin 1957) 44, who quotes him with approval, accept the bipartite structure at line 15. T. Plüss, *Das Jambenbuch des Horaz* (Leipzig 1904) 43, gives: A 1-2; B 1 3-12, II 13-14; C 15-20.

not to burn proud Carthage, nor that the Briton might be enchained. The third and positively stated purpose is conveyed *παρὰ προσδοκίαν*—to fulfill the prayers of the Parthians that Rome might perish by her own hand. In 11–14 Horace does not wait but presumes an affirmative answer and immediately reacts with a judgment of this conduct as sub-animal (11–12). Then he asks what can cause Romans to behave so (the interrogative form resumed), and demands an answer. At line 15, together with the change of addressee comes the change of form. The interrogative is no longer employed. Horace merely describes the mute reaction of the throng (15–16), with *tacent* reminiscent of the Ciceronian *cum tacent clamant*, and by an argument of admission from silence he concludes: *sic est*.

Let us now sample major and divergent opinions of the commentators. Kiessling-Heinze explain the terms:

furor caecus Wahnsinn, der blindlings gegen das eigene Fleisch und Blut wütet . . . *vis acrior*, natürlich *vestra*, wie es die Zwischenstellung zwischen *furor* und *culpa* verlangt: *vis* kommt hier *violentia* nahe. . . . Dem *morbus* und der *indoles*, beides unverschuldet, wird die *culpa* = *vitium* gegenübergestellt, für die der Mensch verantwortlich ist.³

The chief objection to the Kiessling-Heinze commentary is that *vis acrior* is not that of the Romans nor does it approximate in meaning *violentia*. Pseudo-Acron explains it as *fatalis quaedam necessitas*, and Porphyrius says: *Quae est acrior vis quam furor? aut numquid deorum ira*. Finally, Gaius in the *Digest* (19.11.25.6) pinpoints the meaning of this phrase: “*vis maior, quam Graeci θεοῦ βίαν, id est, vim divinam appellant, non debet conductori damnosa esse.*” *Vis maior* or *vis acrior* is then some power, a divine one, above and beyond human control which can be termed a certain necessity of fate. In a legal action, a human could not be held accountable for whatever might be ascribed to *vis maior*. Further *vis acrior* may be connected with the *ira deorum*.

While most commentators pass over the problems of lines 13–14 or are content simply to translate or paraphrase the terms, Page, like Kiessling-Heinze, is a refreshing exception. His long note begins with

³ Kiessling-Heinze, *Oden und Epoden*¹⁰ (Berlin 1960) 518. But see F. Arnaldi, *Orazio: Odi ed Epodi* (Milan 1960) 328, for a partial refutation.

the remark, "A difficult passage." Page then cites Bentley's translations, "madness," "some stronger power," and "wilful crime." Bentley quoted another legal passage (*Digest* 13.7.3: "venit in hac actione dolus et culpa . . . vis maior non venit") to illustrate the distinction between *vis acrior* and *culpa*. Page argues:

But, if so, the words *sic est* must accept the *second* [*vis acrior*] of the three alternatives (for Horace clearly absolves the Romans from wilful guilt [*culpa*]), which is almost impossible, for naturally it could only express assent to the last. Hence it seems that there are only two alternatives, the latter being introduced in two parallel questions by *an . . . an*— 'Is it (1) blind madness, or (2) is it a stronger power, is it guilt that hurries you along?' Then *sic est* accepts the latter alternative: it is *vis acrior* and *culpa*, the former in the reply becoming *acerba fata*, and the latter *scelus fraternae necis*.⁴

There are several weaknesses in Page's argument. First, if one admits that there are three alternatives, *sic est* does not have to accept the second one. *Sic est*, as I suggest by my translation, "This is the sum," and as several commentators note, looks forward to the explanation offered by the poem's last four lines;⁵ it does not look back to assent to any one of the "three alternatives." Second, Page assumes that *culpa* taken alone means the wilful crime of the Roman people, whereas the poem's last four lines tell us that Horace is talking about the wilful crime of Romulus. As such, Page could only unite *vis acrior* and *culpa* into a single alternative and pair each element with *acerba fata* and *scelus fraternae necis*. The underlying difficulty of Page's analysis is that he understands Horace by the use of *ne . . . an . . . an* to be posing either three or two real alternatives. There are in fact no alternatives. All three terms belong to a pattern; they combine to form a single thought, the very thought presented in verses 17–20.

Epistles 1.3.3–5 furnishes a convenient example of how *ne . . . an . . . an* present successive stages, in this case successive points on a trip to Armenia:

Thracane vos Hebrusque nivali compede vinctus,
an freta vicinas inter currentia turris,
an pingues Asiae campi collesque morantur?

⁴ T. E. Page, *Q. Horatii Flacci: Carminum Libri IV: Epodon Liber* (London 1959) 481.

⁵ P. H. Peerlkamp, *Q. Horatii Flacci Carmina* (Amsterdam 1862) 354, on *sic est*:

Do Thrace and the Hebrus bound with snowy fetters,
or the waters racing between the neighboring towers,
or the rich plains and hills of Asia delay you?

To be sure, the contingent can only be delayed at one point in time by one obstacle, but in the course of the journey all three obstacles in turn effect delay. If we keep this example in mind and respect the epode's consistency—and we must grant Horatian poetry an inner logic—then *furor*, *vis acrior*, and *culpa* are not exclusive, but present a scheme. They are successive stages in reverse order in the bringing about of this civil war. They say precisely what 17–20 say so clearly. The *culpa* (14) is the wilful crime, the *scelus fraternae necis* (18), of Romulus (not of the Romans!) which, through the agency of *vis acrior* (13), which Horace equates with *acerba fata* (17), causes among the Romans (*agunt Romanos*, 17) a periodic blind insanity (*furor caecus*, 13) manifested in civil war. A passage from Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.1.31) partially illustrates my point: “Populum Romanum egit in furorem praetexta C. Caesaris praelata in funere cruenta.” I take Horace's *agunt Romanos* to mean *agunt Romanos in furorem*.

Such an interpretation explains the poem's numerous (astoundingly so for its length) verbal parallels and echoes:

scelesti (1)	scelus (18)
dexteris (1)	dextera (10)
campis atque Neptuno super (3)	in terram (19)
Latini sanguinis (4)	Remi cruor (19–20)
Romanus (6)	Romanos (17)
sacra (8)	sacer (20)

First, Wagenvoort notes the “logical connection” through “hereditary guilt” between *scelesti* (1) and *scelus fraternae necis* (18).⁶ Fraenkel says of *scelesti* that it possibly “retains something of its old force, ‘under a curse.’”⁷ Undoubtedly it does, its force being that of *ἐναγής* = *ἐν ἄγρῃ ὄν*, under a curse or pollution because of bloodshed.⁸ Second,

“Elegans formula, quando aliquid ita neque aliter esse, coacti et inviti agnoscimus, et, quid illud sit, in sequenti oratione explicamus.”

⁶ H. Wagenvoort, “The Crime of Fratricide,” in his *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (Leiden 1956) 175. His remarks on the broad political implications of the epode are worth reading.

⁷ E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 55, note 1.

⁸ See Herodotus 1.61, 5.70.

we may ask whether *Latini* (4) is merely "more poetical than *Romani*," as one commentator improbably notes. The parallel *campis atque Neptuno super* (3) and *in terram* (19) suggest that *fusum Latini sanguinis* (4) is intimately related to *immerentis fluxit Remi cruor* (19–20): the words *Latini* and *Remi* are chosen to reflect the Romans as the victims of a kind of slaughter of the innocent. On the other hand, *Romanus* (6) and *Romanos* (17) suggest the Romans in their national posture as the inheritors of the moral guilt of Romulus. One is more than inclined to accept this interpretation after recalling the repetition of *dexteris* (1) by *dextera* (10) in exact linear position, and the ironic contrast of *sacra* (8) with *sacer* (20). Here again, the epode demonstrates an inner consistency and parallelism, and is understandable only when so read.