

# Traditions and contexts in the poetry of Horace

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ARNOLD BRADSHAW

## 1 HORACE'S BIRTHDAY AND DEATHDAY

In every human life there are two days of special significance – birthday and deathday. The first is marked with a rubric in the diary, while the second lurks unknown among all the leaves of the year. In Rome birthdays were noted and celebrated throughout life and sometimes afterwards,<sup>1</sup> but deathdays were less liable to leave a permanent mark, unless the deceased was an emperor or a Christian saint. Cases where an individual's precise dates are recorded are rare, and of all Latin authors up to the fifth century AD only five – apart from Caesars and saints with literary pretensions – appear to qualify.<sup>2</sup> Horace is one of the few, and it seems worthwhile to review the evidence for his lifespan and to examine what he himself had to say about his beginning and his end.

### THE TRADITION

The dates commonly quoted in modern biographical notices are derived from the *Vita* which is ascribed with plausibility to Suetonius and which ends with the following passage (unamended):

Natus est VI Idus Decembris L. Cotta et L. Torquato consulibus [8.12.65], decessit V Kal. Decembris C. Marcio Censorino et C. Asinio Gallo consulibus [27.11.8] post nonum et quinquagesimum annum herede Augusto palam nuncupato, cum urgente ui ualetudinis non sufficeret ad obsignandas testamenti tabulas. humatus et conditus est extremis Esquiliis iuxta Maecenatis tumulum.<sup>3</sup>

Centuries ago critics pointed out that the interval between birth and death amounts, not to 59, but to 57 years (counting by the *fasti*, not by the stars); they ascribed the error in the text either to Suetonius or (more often) to the copyist. How this arithmetical problem is to be resolved, whether by emendation or other means, will be considered later.

## YEAR OF BIRTH

The year at least is confirmed by Horace's own statements, of which there are three:

- (a) tu uina Torquato moue consule pressa meo (Epod. 13.6)  
 (b) O nata mecum consule Manlio (Carm. 3.21.1)  
 (c) forte meum siquis te percontabitur aeuum  
 me quater undenos sciat impleuisse Decembris  
 collegam Lepidum quo duxit Lollius anno [21 BC].

28 *v.l.* dixit

(Epist. 1.20.26–8)

The third of these, the final lines of Book 1 of the *Epistles*, signalling his age at the point of writing, is valuable as giving an approximate date for the publication of that book as well as an indication of when Horace, for the first time, abandoned lyric. The other two references, in *Epod.* 13 and *Carm.* 3.21, are more specifically references to his birth-year and they merit particular attention.

The two poems were probably separated by some years, but they share certain characteristics. First of all their excellence has been widely recognised. Epode 13 in particular is a great favourite, being often described as the best, the most elegant, the most ode-like of the epodes.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly it has received a good measure of critical attention;<sup>5</sup> it has also raised considerable controversy, in particular over its supposed relation to early Greek lyric models and its date.<sup>6</sup>

A more insistent question which can hardly be ignored, however wary we may be of 'the autobiographical fallacy', is whether the poem is related to some episode in the author's life. The arguments threaten to be interminable, but many commentators do at least agree that the storm appears to be symbolic as well as real; that Horace and his friends<sup>7</sup> are dismayed by some historical crisis; that the poem proclaims the power of wine and song to mitigate misery. The message is given added authority by repeating it in the words of a semi-divine teacher of heroes and strengthening it by contrast, for, if these sweet alloquies of the sick heart relieve one who is doomed, how much more must they lighten the spirit of those whose fortunes may yet be restored!

The lesson both in its content and expression suits Horace's role as a poet in the sympotic tradition, but has the poem anything to do with the events of his own life? Poets live by their imagination; they can people their poems with invented characters taken from life or literature; they are actors who can put on any masks and play any part they wish. But, if *persona* and wearer are revealed as identical, it is fair to assume that

we are face to face with the real man. That is precisely what happens in line 6, for, when a character speaks of his birthday (such is the implication of *meo*) and it is the birthday of the author, pretence is at an end. It is this detail which encourages us to take Epode 13 seriously as part of Horace's life. Claims that the poem is based on a Greek model do not deprive it of personal significance, for the poet would be likely to imitate an original which matched his own experience.

If the voice is Horace's own, where is he speaking from and when? What predicament could have produced anxieties so dreadful and literally monstrous (*sollicitudinibus*) in the lives of Horace and his companions, and how could their situation be analogous to that of Achilles? The simple answers which satisfy many are: we don't know and the convivial cure is analogue enough. But there is at least one point of resemblance between Horace's company and the Homeric hero which is emphasised: youth. For the former *dumque uirent genua | et decet* (4–5) is a conventional phrase, but an adolescent Achilles is something of a novelty.<sup>8</sup> For all who had been brought up on Homer, Achilles was the supreme warrior and the model of bravery in battle. The Achilles of Epode 13 is nothing of the kind: he is not yet a man of war; he is a boy still under tutelage, and no school-leaver was ever given a final report with grimmer prognostics. His teacher with supernatural perception gives him no promise of glory but only the prospect of death in an unpleasant-sounding foreign land. Could this remarkable picture have any relevance to Horace and his friends? It certainly could if they were young soldiers fearful at the prospect of going into battle for the first time.<sup>9</sup>

Now the only military phase in Horace's career for which there is unquestionable evidence occurred when, at the age of 22, he followed his fellow-student at the Academy in Athens, Marcus Junius Brutus, and took up arms against Octavian and Antony in the campaign which ended at Philippi in 42 BC.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that since at least the sixteenth century Epode 13 has been linked with that experience.<sup>11</sup> Acceptance of that link does not however allow any safe conclusion about the date of composition, for the sensations of a young man going off to war do not quickly fade from his mind; he might have written the poem long after the event.

Claims have, however, been made that he may also have been involved in other military service at a later date, and, if any of these were justified, we should have to consider whether the epode could relate to the action concerned. The evidence depends upon the interpretation of four passages, two identified with specific campaigns (the war against Sextus Pompeius and Actium), and two of general import. In *Carm.* 3.4.26–8 Horace says he was saved from death on three occasions: *non me Philippis*

*uersa acies retro, | deuota non exstinxit arbos, | nec Sicula Palinurus unda.* We know about Philippi and the falling tree but the third adventure is mysterious. The explanation of Ps.-Acro is: *Promuncturium est Siciliae, non a Palimuro Aeneae gubernatore dictum, sed [ab] Hannibalis, ubi redeuntem se Horatius de Macedonia periclitatum dixit, qui est et nauibus periculosus locus.* Clearly there is confusion here between Pelorus and Palinurus (both capes and helmsmen),<sup>12</sup> while the statement that Horace's misadventure occurred when he was returning from Greece may be merely a guess.<sup>13</sup> Some commentators believe that Horace is referring to the occasion in 36 when the greater part of Octavian's fleet was destroyed in two storms off Cape Palinurus on the Lucanian coast between Velia and Buxentum. Maecenas must have been present on this occasion, as it is recorded that he was later sent back to Rome to prevent panic, and Horace, by now accepted as *comes* and *amicus*, might well have been in his patron's entourage.<sup>14</sup> Whether this solution is more plausible than the explanation of the scholiast is a matter of opinion.

The belief that Horace was present at Actium is based on Epode 9. This poem has generated an enormous controversy among scholars determined to extract from it all – and sometimes more than all – that it can yield because, by an unfortunate accident, it has been given a role for which it was neither intended nor suited as a contemporary historical record of a momentous battle.

Here it is best to concentrate on asking whether Horace was present, but this in turn depends on Maecenas' movements, for, if Maecenas was there, as in the case of the naval mishap in 36, Horace might have been expected to accompany him. On the likelihood of Maecenas' presence at Actium learned opinion is divided, the choice depending to some extent on the credence attached to some halting verses of dubious date, the first *Elegia in Maecenatem*.<sup>15</sup> Some critics have even argued that Epode 9 is a vivid eye-witness account, virtually 'a running commentary' of what the poet saw.<sup>16</sup> The assertion that the narrative indicates autopsy is attractive but it is open to obvious objections. First, it must be admitted that an imaginative writer is capable of picturing a scene vividly as if he had been there. Second, any description of the battle of Actium composed shortly after the event was bound to be based on the accounts of participants, for the circle in which Horace moved must have been full of men who were eager to say, 'I was there and I'll tell you all about the great deeds *quorum pars magna fui*'. More specific doubts are raised by details of the ten lines (11–20) relating to the battle. The first six of these present what is hardly the description of an eye-witness; it is more like an emotive portrayal of the enemy designed to stimulate anger and disgust. This is not a war-correspondent's snapshot but a grand dramatic painting.



Elucidation of the next four lines which contain *the only elements of action* is made difficult by the crux at the beginning of 17 and uncertainty about the precise significance of 19–20. However these problems are resolved, arguments that this short passage must have been written by a man on the spot are tendentious.

There remain the two passages of general import which have been thought to refer to Horace's military service after Philippi: *Epist.* 1.20.23 and *Carm.* 2.6.5–8.<sup>17</sup>

In the final epistle of Book 1 Horace proudly declares *me primis urbis belli placuisse domique*. It has been asserted that Horace is referring to his own performance in the field but would not have dared to include the tyrannicide Brutus among *primis urbis*. Unfortunately the line is doubly ambiguous and may have been intended to be so. Though it is preferable to take *belli domique* with *placuisse* it cannot be shown that it would be absolutely wrong to take it with *primis*. Even in the former case the statement that he was a favourite of leading men in wartime is not the same thing as saying he was a soldier; moreover the assumption that the Republican leaders must be excluded from *primis urbis* is questionable and historically false; the army in which Horace served was not a rabble led by a Spartacus. It is to the point that in none of his references to this episode in his life does Horace express shame or repentance for having been on the losing side.

On *Carm.* 2.6.5–8 Wistrand observed: 'Now if Horace's only personal experience of war was with Brutus' army in 43–42 BC, would it then have been possible for him to say – twenty years after he had last seen active military service – that he was now tired and wished that his military labours might finally come to an end in Tibur or Tarentum?'<sup>18</sup> But Horace is not talking about *now* in a matter-of-fact fashion; he is adopting a pose and using Homeric and possibly Alcaic language to imagine how he would like to end his days when he is an old man looking back on the adventures of a lifetime. We cannot extract a campaign-record from a daydream of a future state.

Finally, though arguments from silence are dubious, if Horace really did witness action on the winning side, it is astonishing that he never says so explicitly. As early as *Sat.* 1.6.48 he was ready to admit his involvement with the losers; we might have expected him to emphasise later presence in the train of Octavian, especially as he suffered from social carping until in the end he secured unquestionable pre-eminence as a poet.

To sum up, on the basis of his own testimony Horace definitely served in the campaign which ended at Philippi; if certain speculative interpretations are correct, he might also have been involved in a naval disaster of the Sicilian war and he could have been at Actium. We are left with

a certainty and two possibilities which are simply guesses. The choice between these three occasions as the background for the epode may be narrowed when *Carm.* 3.21 is considered.

The ode *O nata mecum consule Manlio* is a superb one (even though Fraenkel ignores it). It is in a sense a delightful adaptation of the hymn form (I wish to avoid the usual word ‘parody’, which suggests mockery of the model and is in this case misleading). The deity ostensibly addressed turns out to be a wine-jar: ‘My dear twin-sister bottle born in 65’.<sup>19</sup>

The poet invites the reader to laugh at the form, not the faith: the joke is in the structure not the content, which is sensible, even wise, and respectful of both men and gods. It is certainly not a frivolous or irresponsible poem. There are several serious aspects: first, it is addressed to one of the great aristocratic commanders and orators of the Augustan Age, M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus, and in encouraging this very distinguished man to enjoy the benefits of wine Horace recognises that he is soaked in Plato and offers him a very serious-minded exemplar – Cato, that paragon of severity, who is said often to have warmed his virtue with the juice of the grape.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, and this is a point which commonly goes unremarked, the end of the poem is cast in a genuinely religious form: in the final stanza Horace brings in Bacchus, Venus, the Graces as good companions, and Apollo to let in the light. The position of the poem may also be significant, for it is followed by two essentially religious and serious odes.<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly the wine is very special. It is Massic, which is one of the best varieties, and this is obviously an ancient vintage. Are we to take it, then, that emphasis on age is the main point in describing the wine-jar as coeval with the author? In their enthusiasm to rework Norden, commentators have tended to assume so and to hurry past the first line. But what makes it uniquely valuable is that it is an *Horatian* wine, and now that really means something; in the interval since Epode 13 was written ‘Château Horace’ has arrived – it is one of the great brand-names and so forms a significant part of the priceless compliment which Horace is paying to Messalla. The word ‘priceless’ is apt because in *Odes* 1–3 there are hints and in Book 4 incontrovertible evidence that Horace knew he had something enormously valuable to give – or more likely to sell – to anyone he names: immortality.<sup>22</sup> The tone of this ode, however, suggests a genuine friendship rather than commerce. Was there some personal reason for offering Horace’s birthday vintage to Messalla?

One possibility is that Messalla too was born in 65. There is general agreement that Jerome’s date for his birth, 59 (linked incidentally with Livy), is too late, and 64 has been preferred because the similarity of the names of the consuls of the two years provides an explanation of the confusion in Jerome’s *tumultuarium opus* – Caesar and Figulus (64)

and Caesar and Bibulus (59).<sup>23</sup> While a birthdate in 65 cannot be entirely excluded there are objections: the explanation for Jerome's error disappears and the description *nata mecum* stresses the birthdate of the author not the addressee. One thing is clear and that is that Horace begins *Carm.* 3.21 with a back-reference to his earlier poem, Epode 13. It can hardly be accidental that these two poems contain the only two references to the poet's year of birth and that those references are in the form of a precious vintage. Did this have special significance for Messalla?

Although they achieved eminence in very different fields Horace and Messalla shared one notable experience in that both fought for the tyrannicides against Octavian.<sup>24</sup> They had been *commilitones* in the camp of Cassius and there is at least a strong presumption that they knew each other there and that their friendship dated from that period. If, as I have argued, Epode 13 is linked with Philippi, there is a good case for suggesting that, when Horace came to write *Carm.* 3.21 as a complimentary poem to his former companion in arms, he repeated the reference to the wine of the year of the consul L. Manlius L. f. Torquatus to remind his friend of the earlier poem which poignantly expressed their feelings at that critical moment in their lives. Horace's coeval wine is the Massic of remembrance.<sup>25</sup> Like many of Horace's hints this one is subtle and tactful and in no way compromises the public figure to whom it is addressed.

It is of course conceivable that Messalla and Horace were together in a later campaign – in the Sicilian War or at Actium – and that we simply lack the evidence to connect them, in which case Epode 13 could be taken to refer to that event, but the claim that *Carm.* 3.21 contains a reminder is no less valid. Once again the choice is between a probable association based on testimony and two possibilities which are purely speculative.

#### BIRTHDAY

Horace wrote many 'occasional' poems and he might have been expected to use his birthday – as distinct from his birth year – as an occasion. It is suggested here that he did exploit it in a fashion which has not hitherto been recognised.

To approach the matter indirectly I point to one undoubted birthday poem, the ode in Book 4 centred on Maecenas' birthday, *Carm.* 4.11, *Est mihi nonum superantis annum*. It is the ode in which Horace addresses Phyllis, the last of his loves, the girl with the irresistible singing voice, of which the final stanza is a clear signal that his career as a lyric poet is drawing to its ultimate close.

Like many elements in Book 4 the poem is reminiscent of earlier work, and the obvious precursor is *Carm.* 3.28, *Festo quid potius die*. This ode is short and apparently simple, but it is by no means trivial; it is a very important poem, if for no other reason than that it was the last love poem and the last religious lyric Horace intended to write – or more accurately to present to his readers, for I have no doubt that at the time he considered his lyric work to be complete.<sup>26</sup>

Its position points to its significance. It is enclosed between two massive odes, the first of which is the longest of the odes concerned with love and the second is the longest ode to Maecenas, the whole group being followed by the monumental final poem of the lyric collection. Place alone does not of course prove the importance of *Festo quid potius die*, for the insertion of a frivolous piece might be defended as a cushion between two heavy poems, but the prominent position invites the reader to look closely in case there is a deeper meaning beneath the smooth and glittering surface.<sup>27</sup>

The key has been provided by Viktor Pöschl, who pointed out that in this poem Horace is using one of the oldest poetical metaphors, which is based on the analogy between transient day and passing life and especially between evening and old age.<sup>28</sup> For the ageing Horace the sun is already past the zenith, and he feels a desperate urgency as his own evening approaches; prudence must be thrown to the winds and, before it is too late, the precious old wine must be snatched from store; it is time to sing the final hymns to the gods, the last ode to love, and at the end a dirge to darkness.<sup>29</sup> The message is plain: soon the lyre and the songs which accompany it will be heard no more.

Once the underlying meaning of the ode is seen to be a moving valediction to lyric and to life, it becomes clear that it must have been specially composed for its position at the close of the lyric corpus and was not an earlier piece placed there when the poet was arranging his poems for final publication. But why on earth did Horace choose Neptune as the god to celebrate in his last lyric party? Apart from anything else, he was the one god who had no sense of humour, hardly likely to attract Horace's devotion. Surely Phoebus, Bacchus, Venus, Mercury, or the Muses would have been more appropriate.

The usual answer is that the festival of Neptune was on 23 July, a hot time of year, so it provides an excuse for boozing – *adduxere sitim tempora*. This is weak to the point of inanity, considering the position and grave implications of the ode, for it invites us to believe that this twilight lyric arose from an incidental occasion which had no personal or political significance. Besides, Caecuban is a most precious wine, preserved for celebrating Battles of Actium and the suicide of lewd Egyptian queens; it is not lemonade for summer picnics.<sup>30</sup>

Why Neptune? The question is never asked because the answer given above has seemed so obvious: summer heat is at its height and Horace felt thirsty, so he calls urgently for drink in a simple sympotic-erotic piece; there were, after all, Lesbian precedents.<sup>31</sup> This is a case where the wrong answer has suppressed the right question. Why Neptune?

Neptune is a mysterious god in the Roman pantheon and almost nothing is known about the July festival of Neptune – rather less in fact than the notes of commentators suggest. Ovid's account of the junketings in honour of Anna Perenna have nothing to do with the case.<sup>32</sup> One might speculate that the reference is to another festival at which Neptune was honoured, associated perhaps with Actium or Augustus' birthday, but this is essentially a personal poem:<sup>33</sup> Horace is playing his own lyre not blowing the trumpet of state.

In religion above all *Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit* and Horace is pre-eminent among Latin poets in avowedly writing Greek poems in Latin. His Neptune is Poseidon, and the place to look for our answer is in Greece, and particularly in Athens, where, like many educated men of means, Horace spent some time in higher studies. There is no evidence of the length of his stay at the Academy but it is probable that he was there for a considerable period, learning to *want* to distinguish true from false – *scilicet ut uellem curuo dinoscere rectum* (*Epist.* 2.2.44). He may have had a Roman diary in his luggage, but it is reasonable to assume that when in Athens he had to do as the Athenians did and used the local calendar; in which case he must have recognised that the month of the winter solstice, corresponding roughly to his birthday month of December, was called the month of Poseidon. He would also have observed that Poseidon was honoured on the eighth day of every month and, as all the surviving evidence indicates, in 'Poseideon' the festival of the god occurred on the eighth day of the month, the day of his birth.<sup>34</sup> It should not cause surprise that, when he came to write what he intended to be his last love lyric, the follower of Sappho and Alcaeus and the other seven Greek lyric poets of the canon, was thinking half in Greek, and mixing his drinks, so to speak – Falernian with Chian.

A birthday is a time to look back, a time to pause, a time to change. To which of Horace's birthdays should we attach this poem? I surmise his 43rd. In antiquity there were many more ways of distinguishing the ages of man than the simple threefold division of the sphinx.<sup>35</sup> Horace himself once described four ages (*Ars P.* 153–78), but stricter, more sophisticated systems were in vogue. Several of the most popular among Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans were based upon the number seven, the magical, sacred, astronomical number seven.<sup>36</sup> For example, Hippocrates, according to Censorinus, divided life into seven phases of seven years, which



## DEATHDAY

Hidden in the calendar lies a date which the individual does not know – and may never know: the date of death. Apprehension about death and morbid curiosity about its timing have nourished many forms of superstitious practice and in particular the dismal science of astrology, which, in spite of attempts to control its practitioners, had become popular in Rome by Horace's time.<sup>42</sup> On estimating the time of death, his own or another's, Horace was unequivocal. *Carm.* 1.11 is one of the best known odes and it contains what is certainly Horace's best known phrase – *carpe diem*. It is a short and simple poem, but it has had a very odd effect upon commentators. Again and again they assert that this poem proves Horace was not interested in astrology, was too sensible to believe in astrology, made fun of astrology. As often happens in literary criticism, what prevails is not what the author said but what the critics tell the reader to believe.

What Horace tells the simple-minded Leuconoe in *Tu ne quaesieris* is not to try to ascertain how long he or she will live – for this is a moral and religious offence – and not to meddle with astrological calculations. This certainly does not imply that Horace regarded astrology as nonsense; it could indeed signify the opposite: astrology is a hazardous craft, not a plaything for the ignorant, and there are some secrets it is better not to know. If someone tells a child not to play with matches, it does not imply a contempt for fire. The analogy is not as far-fetched as it sounds, for there is plenty of evidence that at this time astrology was regarded as dangerous. For reasons which are not far to seek in a society where legacy-hunting was rife (*Sat.* 2.5, *Epist.* 1.1.77–9), attempts to calculate the expected time of death were especially suspect. What Horace declared to be *nefas* was actually made illegal a generation later by a law repeatedly renewed – and broken sometimes with dire consequences – for centuries. The poet is proclaiming a contemporary official Roman attitude, not just an Epicurean principle.<sup>43</sup>

A peculiar feature of this ode was pointed out by Professor Dilke: it consists of 56 words – and Horace died at the age of 56.<sup>44</sup> Numerical coincidences are all too easily found in poetry, and many wonderful theories have been based on them. The abuse of numerology as a mind-bending drug goes back to antiquity, so it is just conceivable that an ancient biographer, not knowing the truth and seeking clues to Horace's date of death, might have resorted to this desperate solution. Few critics will want to give house room to a *larua* of this kind.

When Horace comes to speak of his own death in *Carm.* 2.6 he adopts a light-hearted, even frivolous tone. This is a jocular, tongue-in-cheek

poem in which he calls the bluff of a younger friend who has pledged his loyalty in extravagant terms. Part of the fun is based on two obvious literary echoes, first of Catullus 11 and then of Virgil, *G.* 4.116–48. Septimius, it seems, has made the conventional loyal friend's offer to accompany Horace to the ends of the earth. In fact, says the poet, I'd like to retire in Tibur when I'm old and have completed my Odyssey; or, if the Fates are too mean to allow that (Tibur was a rich man's resort), I'll settle for a Virgilian rural idyll as a bucolic Sybarite. You must come with me and see me safely to the crematorium.

If Septimius – and we have no reason to doubt it – was the Septimius of *Epist.* 1.9 and the *Vita*, he was a young man on the make, and the last place he would want to remain for any length of time would be 300 miles from Rome. Tibur would certainly be preferable, from his as well as Horace's point of view.<sup>45</sup> The poet who makes such bold claims to immortality enjoys making a joke about his actual demise. He is a man who takes life as it comes, day by day, in accordance with a philosophy which he expresses seriously and with incomparable force in his penultimate ode of the main collection – *Carm.* 3.29.29–48.<sup>46</sup>

While *Carm.* 2.6 is a humorous poem about a friend keeping Horace company till he dies, *Carm.* 2.17 is a serious one about Horace accompanying his patron to the grave. The nature of Maecenas' complaints is obscure and is in a sense irrelevant: they merely provide the excuse for a passionate declaration. Horace makes a fervent statement of loyalty (for that is what the first four stanzas represent), adapting the *topos* which was displayed in *Carm.* 2.6 and swearing to accompany Maecenas, not to the world's end but to life's end: he will play Pylades to Maecenas' Orestes.

The poem begins with a metaphor – colloquial maybe but still powerful – *exanimas*, 'you are killing me with your complaints'. In fact the whole of the first half of the ode is a metaphorical way of saying, 'you are my patron and my friend and we are bound indissolubly together'. The language is hyperbolic and is crammed with literary echoes, but is not on that account insincere. The second half of the ode complements the first and says in effect, 'our fates are linked and we are under heaven's protection, as our lucky escapes from death prove'.

The first lines of the second half (17ff.) plunge the reader into an astrological conundrum which has bedevilled criticism. Until recently the favourite form of interpretation was to take this passage as evidence that (a) Horace did not know or care what his horoscope was and (b) he was gently mocking Maecenas as a devotee of astrology. In a paper in which he threw doubt on assumptions of Maecenas' hypochondria David West also questioned the first of these inferences and suggested two ways in



which the details given here could fit a horoscope.<sup>47</sup> No doubt an adept could invent many more, but lines 17–20 can be interpreted in a different fashion altogether.

The stanza presents a list of signs of the zodiac – three signs in the correct order but not in uninterrupted sequence (Sagittarius comes between Scorpio and Capricorn). Horace was partial to lists, as the following examples show.

- 1 *Sat.* 2.1.57: three pairs of life – long/short, rich/poor, at Rome/in exile
- 2 *Carm.* 1.22.5–8: three wild parts of the world
- 3 *Carm.* 3.4.22–4: four holiday resorts
- 4 *Carm.* 3.21: five effects of wine
- 5 *Carm.* 4.2.10ff.: four kinds of Pindar's poems
- 6 *Epist.* 1.3.23–4: three professions
- 7 *Ars P.* 63ff.: three types of engineering work.

While the choices in 1 and 4 may be regarded as exhaustive, the remainder are certainly not; they are exemplary selections suggesting a wider range. The same principle may be applied to Libra, Scorpio, and Capricorn, specimen signs of the zodiac. In effect Horace is saying that whatever sign may be dominant at any time, his fortune and Maecenas' are amazingly alike, and the proof is that at a critical juncture Jupiter protected Maecenas and Faunus (= Pan, son of Mercury) saved Horace.

According to this thesis Horace could have named any signs at random. Did the three he listed have special significance? Some have suspected a reference to the horoscope of the poet or Maecenas, but there is another intriguing possibility. Two of the signs were certainly important in the horoscope of Augustus and the third may have been.<sup>48</sup> Octavian was born under Libra (i.e. the ascendant) and he selected Capricorn as his emblem either because the moon was in Capricorn when he was born or because at his conception (conventionally 273 days before birth and in this case coincidentally with the winter solstice) sun, moon and Mercury were in Capricorn.<sup>49</sup> Horace's display of *sideralis scientia* in the second half of the ode may be another metaphor meaning 'you and I, Maecenas, are both under the protection of the Princeps' (cf. *Carm.* 1.12.49–60, where an analogy is drawn between Jupiter in heaven and Caesar on earth). Be that as it may, the significance of lines 22–5 in astrological terms is plain: Maecenas passed through a critical phase in life when he was rescued from the malefic Saturn by benefic Jupiter. Here it seems necessary to point out that *uolucrisque Fati | tardauit alas* only makes sense in 'soft' astrology, the popular system of the period which combined genethliology with calculation of celestial conditions at a given moment.

We cannot assess the precise significance of the astrological references, but they suggest knowledge rather than ignorance. We are the ignorant ones, as can be simply illustrated by considering the obstacles to finding out the horoscope of Horace himself. We do not know the time or even the day he was born (uncertainties about intercalation make it impossible to place his birthday in the Julian calendar); even if we did, we do not have contemporary ephemerids or reliable information about the methods which contemporary astrologers might have used – and it is probable that there were nearly as many methods as there were practitioners.

Before leaving this troublesome poem we must glance at two awkward questions which have been raised by it. Is it possible that biographers, not knowing the date of Horace's death, either used the astrological details to calculate it or linked his death with that of Maecenas? The first suggestion is made in a note of Syndikus' valuable commentary, and it must be admitted that he is right in saying that the possibility cannot be completely excluded.<sup>50</sup> With astrology all things are possible – for a fee. But let us not waste our money on this offer. The other proposition is to be taken more seriously.

At the time it is probable that the death of Maecenas was a much more noteworthy event than the death of the poet, and it would not be surprising if a biographer lacking accurate information assumed that Horace must have fulfilled the promise made in *Carm.* 2.17 by dying at the same time as his patron to end life's journey buried by his side, as the last sentence of the *Vita* states. It is time to look more closely at Suetonius' testimony.

First, something must be said about the fault in the text. The arithmetic is wrong and the wording has been suspected. Nearly all editors and commentators have accepted Vahlen's improvement upon Reifferscheid's emendation:

decessit V Kal. Decembris C. Marcio Censorino et C. Asinio Gallo  
consulibus post nonum et quinquagesimum (diem quam Maecenas  
obierat aetatis agens septimum et quinquagesimum) annum.<sup>51</sup>

Parablepsy is a well known scribal error where a word has been repeated in a narrow compass, but it is hazardous to assume that a phrase involving such a repetition has been omitted unless there are clear signs of disruption. Vahlen saw evidence of a lacuna in the expression *decessit post nonum et quinquagesimum annum* which he asserted was not even Latin, but this claim is contradicted by examples in contemporary writers.<sup>52</sup> He based his solution on the practice of Suetonius of giving the length of an emperor's rule in years, months, and days. Such measurements of reigns are

unexceptionable, but precise calculation of the gap between the deaths of two *priuati*, however eminent, is extraordinary and unique. Are there not more likely explanations of the arithmetical mistake?

Briefly I suggest two preferable possibilities: (1) reliance on misleading *fasti* of consular years, or (2) corruption of numerical symbols.

(1) One of the disadvantages of the Roman system of dating was that one could not immediately calculate the difference between two given years; it was necessary to refer to lists of consuls, and probably these were sometimes misleading, especially when consuls changed in the course of a year. In this connection it may be significant that in the MSS of Suetonius' *De Viris Illustribus* there are errors of two years too many both in the life of Virgil and in the life of Persius. (2) Errors in copying numerals are very common in historical texts, and in this case it would have been easy to confuse *LVI* and *LIX*. A slight displacement of the right hand stroke of the *V* would transform *VI* into *IX*.

The *Vita* is not in fact the only testimony for the date of Horace's death. There are three others:

- 1 Jerome, *Chronica* under Olympiad 192, 4 (= 9 BC)  
Horatius LVII aetatis suae anno Romae moritur
- 2 Ps.-Acro in cod. Parisinus lat. 7900 *A*  
Septuagesimo aetatis anno periit
- 3 Ps.-Acro in codd. *M, f, j* (Keller)  
Septuagesimo septimo anno periit

The entry in Jerome is not really a separate testimony as he obviously used Suetonius' biographies when making his insertions in Eusebius' chronicle, and the fact that he is slightly adrift by one year is of no significance. Of the two other statements one may suspect that they mean no more than 'he died old', the seventy being rhetorical,<sup>53</sup> but that raises the difficult question why, if the precise date was recorded by Suetonius, it was not known to these scribblers in margins. Modern critics who are not slow to expose the faults of their ancient predecessors (though quick to quote them when they agree) will see here only one more proof of ignorance.

Earlier in this paper brief mention has been made of three conceivable ways in which a biographer short of facts might have guessed the date of Horace's death: (1) by counting words in *Carm.* 1.11; (2) from astrological indications in *Carm.* 2.17; (3) by the assumption that Horace died at the same time as Maecenas. Only the third of these should give us pause. A biographer who knew the date of Maecenas' death but not Horace's, recalling the promise made in *Carm.* 2.17, might have concluded that the

deathday of the poet coincided with that of his patron. A brief entry in Dio (55.7) indicates that Maecenas died in 8 BC.<sup>54</sup> Who is to say that the date was not *V Kal. Decembris*?<sup>55</sup>

To sum up: Horace probably died on 27 November 8 BC, as Suetonius stated, aged 56,<sup>56</sup> but we cannot be as sure of this date as we can be of the poet's birthday. Even if the doubts about his death were more substantial than they are, it should not concern us. His death, though doubtless a great grief to those who knew him personally, was of no literary or historical significance, for he had already completed the work which would survive and spread as he predicted in the final poems of *Odes* 2 and 3. His birth on the other hand was one of the most important events in Graeco-Roman history; its effects have continued through two millennia and will persist far into a third.