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Death By Water, Horace, "Odes 1.28"

William Turpin
Swarthmore College, wturpin1@swarthmore.edu

ARETHUSA

DEATH BY WATER: HORACE, *ODES* 1.28

WILLIAM N. TURPIN

"Te maris et terrae numeroque carentis arenae
    Mensorem cohibent, Archyta,
Pulveris exigui prope litus parva Matinum
    Munera, nec quicquam tibi prodest
Aerias temptasse domos animoque rotundum   5
    Percurrisse polum morituro.
Occidit et Pelopis genitor, conviva deorum,
    Tithonusque remotus in auras
Et Iovis arcanis Minos admissus, habentque
    Tartara Panthoiden iterum Orco   10
Demissum, quamvis clipeo Troiana refixo
    Tempora testatus nihil ultra
Nervos atque cutem morti concesserat atrae,
    Iudice te non sordidus auctor
Naturae verique. Sed omnes una manet nox   15
    Et calcanda semel via leti:
Dant alios Furiae torvo spectacula Marti,
    Exitio est avidum mare nautis;
Mixta senum ac iuvenum densentur funera; nullum
    Saeva caput Proserpina fugit."   20

"Me quoque devexi rapidus comes Orionis
    Illyricis Notus obruit undis.
At tu, nauta, vagae ne parce malignus arenae
    Ossibus et capiti inhumato
Particulam dare: sic, quodcumque minabitur Eurus   25
    Fluctibus Hesperiis, Venusinae
Plectantur silvae te sospite, multaque merces,
    Unde potest, tibi defluat aequo
Ab Iove Neptunoque sacri custode Tarenti.

79

Neglegis immeritis nocituram   30
Postmodo te natis fraudem committere? Fors et
    Debita iura vicesque superbae
Te maneant ipsum: precibus non linquar inultis,
    Teque piacula nulla resolvent.
Quamquam festinas, non est mora longa: licebit   35
    Iniecto ter pulvere curras.”

"You, who once measured sea, land, and the num-
berless sands, are held, Archytas, by the small requirement
of a little dust; and it's no help at all that you once explored
the airy realms, and traversed the vault of the world in your
mind.

    "Even Tantalus died eventually, despite his dinners
with the gods, and so did Tithonus, though taken up by the
winds, and Minos, who gave even Jove his advice; and Hell
holds Euphorbus, sent down there one more time, even
though he did pick out his old shield, to prove he'd been in
the Trojan war, and maintained that dark death relates
only to skin and sinews — and was one of your favorite
philosophers.

    "Everyone, in fact, comes to a common end; at some
point we all have to walk the road to death. Some folk end
up as toys for savage Mars, and sailors perish in a hungry
sea; the deaths of young and old alike crowd one another;
cruel Proserpina always wins."

    "I, likewise, was swamped in Illyrian waves by a
stormy wind, companion to gloomy Orion. But you, O
sailor, must not fail, out of spite, to bestow a grain of drift-
ing sand on my bones and skull: do as I ask, and when the
East Wind clashes with the western waves and the Venusian
woods are assaulted, may you keep safe, and may rich
profit — as far as possible — be given you by Jove and by
Neptune, guardian of this coast.

    "Will you neglect a thing so serious for the inno-
cents who will survive you? Then may fate, right judgment,
and just consequences come upon you, too; you will not
abandon me without paying for it, and pious offerings
will not save you.

"I know your life's a busy one, but it won't take
long: three bits of dust will speed you on your way."

    Horace's Archytas ode has provoked considerable disquiet.
The poem requires the reader to understand that the speaker could
talk to Archytas' tomb about the inevitability of death (lines 1-20),
belatedly reveal that he is himself dead (21-22), and then turn to a
passing sailor to ask for burial (23-36). Despite attempts to suggest
some poetic justification for these awkward shifts,[1] many scholars
have remained unhappy with this reading of the poem, and rightly so.[2]
An uninvited monologue from a corpse is bad enough; a corpse who
chats, uninvited, with tomb and with passing sailor is almost gro-
tesque.

    Thus there are obvious attractions to reading the poem as a
dialogue, in which it is an unburied Archytas who is addressed by,
and responds to, a passing sailor.[3] This paper will argue that such a
reading not only endows the poem with an attractive dramatic con-
sistency, but also reveals a second, and much more important, level
of meaning. The text and the translation printed above are given
primarily for ease of reference, but they will also, I hope, help clarify
this reading of the poem.

    The speaker of the second part of the poem asks to be buried.
It is therefore essential, if we are to understand him to be Archytas,
that the Archytas addressed in the first part of the poem be someone
who requires burial. Thus the first part of the poem would consist of

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[1] For a spirited defense, see Nisbet and Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes 1*
(Oxford, 1970), *ad loc.,* esp. 319: "The poem is undeniably bizarre in conception, but
it is original and imaginative as few other Latin writings." See also Gordon Williams,
Figures of Thought in Roman Poetry (New Haven, 1980), 5-9.

[2] E.g., E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), 74 n. 1: "a certain immaturity."

[3] This was the view of the ancient commentators, see O. Keller, *Pseudoacronis scholia
in Horatium vetustiora* 1 (Leipzig, 1902), 105 and esp. 109, on line 23: "Hic quasi
Architam ponit nautam precari, ne remaneat insepultus, sed iam harenam iniciat,"
etc. The most recent advocates of this view are R. S. Kilpatrick, "Archytas at the
Styx (Horace, *Carm.* 1.28)," *CP* 63 (1968), 201-206, with *idem,* "Two Notes on Horace
Carm. 1.28.21-23," *CP* 64 (1969), 237; G. Petrone, "Rivisitando l'ode di Archita
(Hor. *Carm.* 1, 28)," *Pan* 2 (1974), 55-65; J. J. Iso Echegoyen, "Notas para un co-
mentario a Horacio, *Carm.* 1, 28," *Estudios Clásicos* 20 (1976), 73-91. Kilpatrick
usefully shows that Horace's language owes much to the *nekuia* of *Odyssey* XI, but
this does not convince me that the sailor is to be seen as an Odysseus figure or that
the dialogue is set in the underworld.

lines addressed by a passing sailor to the corpse of Archytas, while the second part would simply be Archytas' reply: he naturally asks the sailor to bury him. The poem begins with the words *"Te . . . cohibent, Archyta, pulveris exigui prope litus parva Matinum munera"* (lines 1-4). This is normally taken to mean that Archytas is dead, and confined by dust to his grave.[4] It is crucial to the dialogue theory, on the other hand, to show that these words can mean virtually the opposite — that in fact Archytas has not yet been buried.

One of the problems with lines 1-4 is that two important words are ambiguous. First, *cohibere* can mean "confine" in two different ways; it can mean both "enclose" and "detain."[5] Secondly, and more important, *munera* can mean "funeral rites" (and therefore "burial" in general), but it can also retain its original sense of "duties" or "obligations"; in the case of an exposed corpse this would obviously mean "the funeral rites which are now required."[6]

Scholars who understand Horace to mean that Archytas is already in his grave take each of these difficult words in the first of the senses given here. I translate literally, to emphasize that this rendering, though possible, is not an easy one: "small funeral rites [already performed] consisting of slight dust enclose you, Archytas, on the *litus Matinum*."[7] The alternative is to understand that when Horace talks of burial, he means *lack* of burial. Nisbett and Hubbard regard this as intolerably obscure.[8] But it is much less difficult if we understand *cohibent* to mean "detain" and construe it closely with

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[4] Nisbet and Hubbard, 318 and 321-322.

[5] Contrast OLD, s.v., 3.b, "poet., of a prison, dwelling," with 3.a, "To keep (in a place)" ("*in portibus,*" "*intra limen,*" "*domi,*" etc.). See also Orelli-Hirschfelder, *Odae, Carmen Saeculare, Epodi* (Berlin, 1886), *ad loc.*

[6] For *munera* as funeral rites already performed see esp. Orelli-Hirschfelder, *ad loc.*, citing Ovid, *Fast.* 2.533: "est honor et tumulis; animas placare paternas parvaque in extructas munera ferre pyras." For the original sense of something required of someone else, see Festus, ed. Lindsay, 125.18: "Munus significat <officium> cum dicitur quis munere fungi. Item donum, quod officii causa datur;" see also TLL, s.v., *munus* 1666.70 ff. Cp. Statius, *Thebaid* 2.370-1: "Audax ea munera Tydeus / sponte subit;" Val. Fl. 3.313: "date debita caesis / munera;" Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.623-4: "cinerique haec mittite nostro / munera."

[7] Nisbet and Hubbard, 318, translate simply "a little dust confines you."

[8] Nisbet and Hubbard, 322; see, *contra*, Kilpatrick, *CP* 63 (1968), 202 n. 8.

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prope litus Matinum,[9] if we give due weight to the adjectives which stress that the *munera* as well as the *pulvis* are small, and if we remember, above all, that *munera* were not only things offered, but things owed: "Small obligations consisting of a little dust keep you near the Matine shore, Archytas."

This last reading of lines 1-4 gives dramatic coherence to the poem as a whole: an unburied Archytas, addressed by a passing sailor, responds with his request for burial. At this point we must decide exactly where the sailor's lines end and those of Archytas begin. The language itself is less than helpful; the change of speaker could reasonably be assigned to the middle of line 15, to the end of 16, the end of 18, the end of 20, or the end of 22.[10] To my mind the most attractive place for the break is at the end of line 20. The *"Me quoque"* of line 21 seems to me an attractive way for Archytas to begin his reply, and it is reinforced by the *"At tu, nauta"* of line 23. Moreover it has been observed that after line 21 Horace's language is significantly more lively: "Dem lebhafteren Ethos des zweiten Teiles entspricht der fast durchweg (ausser v. 36) rein daktylische Bau des Epoden, der im ersten Teile zahlreiche Spondeen aufweist, sowie der Verzicht auf Zusammenfall von Satz- und Versschluss."[11] But perhaps the most significant argument comes from a reading of the poem as a whole; lines 17-20, when attributed to a sailor in dialogue with Archytas, take on a second layer of significance which is, I think, crucial to what Horace is trying to achieve.

The sailor, throughout his long speech to Archytas, really has only two things to say. He begins by pointing out that Archytas is unburied (lines 1-4). But his real interest is in developing his second point, that even for Archytas death was inevitable. The transition makes sense dramatically; the sailor first notices Archytas' corpse, then proceeds to reflect on death in general. But the sailor's preoccupations are surprising, since we would normally expect lack of burial to receive more attention than the mere fact of death. The point is, of course, that Archytas is a special case; as a Pythagorean he had expected reincarnation.

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[9] OLD, s.v., *cohibeo* 3.a gives examples of the word with *in, intra,* and the simple ablative of place where.

[10] Punctuation may have made things easier for Horace's original readers, see E. Otha Wingo, *Latin Punctuation in the Classical Age* (The Hague, 1972), esp. 105 and 108.

[11] Kiessling-Heinze, *Q. Horatius Flaccus: Oden und Epoden* (Berlin, 1955), 142.

Thus the irony merely latent in lines 1-4 (*"numeroque carentis arenae/ mensorem"* is opposed to *"pulveris exigui . . . parva . . . / munera"*) becomes more marked even by the end of the sentence (lines 5-6): "nor did it profit you to have assaulted the airy homes and the vaulted dome with a mortal soul." This irony — which remains, I think, quite gentle — is absolutely clear by the time he has finished with his *exempla* (7-15). His point about Tantalus, Tithonus, Minos and Euphorbus/Pythagoras is surely that despite their various and bizarre claims to immortality they are in fact all utterly dead.[12]

In what follows (lines 15-18) the sailor begins by summing up: everyone — even a Pythagorean — has to die. He then goes on to provide specific examples: some men die in war, and some sailors die at sea. It is impossible, I think, to read this in the lighthearted spirit evoked by the previous lines; by shifting from mythological examples to real ones, however conventional,[13] the sailor has introduced a more somber mood. Moreover, death at sea, though apparently introduced simply as a parallel to death in war, has immediate relevance: if Archytas is lying unburied *"prope litus Matinum"* (line 3) it is presumably because he has been drowned, and as we are soon to learn (line 23), the speaker is himself a sailor.

The sailor continues with what looks at first like mere Homeric embroidery: "the deaths of the young and the old crowd in on one another" (line 19).[14] But these words also introduce an issue which will become important in the second half of the poem. The young and the old do not, in fact, stand in an identical relationship with death, and line 19 raises the question of whose views we are given. Archytas died at sea, but it is nevertheless difficult not to think of the dead philosopher as an old man. And when we learn in line 23 that his interlocutor is a sailor, it is equally difficult not to think of the sailor as being young.

The sailor's remarks are therefore dramatically appropriate; it is characteristic of the young that they can discuss the inevitability

of death with a lightheartedness denied to their elders. Archytas' reply is equally appropriate; he is in complete agreement with everything the sailor has said, but much less cheerful about it.

But Horace is not simply interested in verisimilitude; Archytas' speech, which is outwardly a simply request for burial, is in fact much more ominous. By saying that he has drowned (lines 21-22), Archytas focuses attention on something about which no sailor can be frivolous for long; Archytas' *"quoque"* suggests that drowning is something in which the sailor, too, has an interest. There are similar undertones even in the polite part of Archytas' request (lines 25-29); Archytas, in promising to hope for the sailor's safety and prosperity, in fact simply emphasizes the dangers of his calling.

Moreover it is not just the sailor for whom Archytas has sobering thoughts; he uses language which, although ostensibly intended for the sailor, also has a more general application. If the sailor refuses to bury him, Archytas will call for "just deserts and stern reversals" (line 32). This threat, aimed originally only at the sailor and only in certain circumstances, in fact reminds us of the inevitability of death in general: Archytas speaks of *"fors"* and *"debita iura"* (lines 31-32). Even more pointed is the climactic last couplet, which clearly transcends the relatively uninteresting problem of Archytas' burial, and formulates a more universal truth: *"Quamquam festinas, non est mora longa."*

Horace's delicate *double entendre* receives its full force only if the poem is read as a dialogue. The sailor's unarguable but tactless observations about death set up a request for burial which is also a reproof. But Archytas' reproaches are not intended for the sailor alone; by the end of the poem Horace has in effect turned Archytas' attention to his readers, who may require a similar reminder. A similar shift occurs, with similar effect, in the section of "The Wasteland" which gives this paper its title, and which perhaps offers the best introduction to Horace's poem:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
And the profit and the loss.

          A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

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[12] For the tone of the first part of the poem see Williams, (*supra*, n. 1), 6-8.

[13] Nisbet and Hubbard on 2.13.15.

[14] For the Homeric reminiscences here and elsewhere in the second half of the poem see Kilpatrick, *CP* 63 (1968), 208 and Nisbet and Hubbard *ad loc*. Notice, however, that only here is the motif restricted to young men and old men.

> Gentile or Jew
> O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
> Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.
>
> (lines 312-321)

Swarthmore College