Horace: *Epodes*

- 17 short poems
- written between 41 and 30 BC

Our previous poems have been *dactylic hexameter*: each line is the same length, made of 12 beats using whole and half beats. Translators sometimes try to imitate meter, but because of differences in the way the languages sound, the Roman form does not carry over into English well.

The *Epodes* take their name from their metrical form. An “epode” is the name of the shorter verse that follows a longer verse. You’ll notice the translator of our text, David West, maintained these couplets, but the number of beats per line is not carried over.

Horace didn’t call these poems “epodes;” he called the “iambi” (iambics). The “iamb,” like a “dactyl” is a metrical unit (a *measure*)—named arrangements of whole and half beats.

A dactyl is a measure made of two beats: whole-half-half. *Dactylic hexameter* is one meter they’re found in. This meter is a set of six (Greek: *hex*) dactyls per line, with whole-whole metrically equivalent and used in place of the whole-half-half sometimes.

An “iamb” is half-whole measure.

The dactyl is associated with grand and serious subject matter, like what epic and didactic poetry deals with. It’s what both Lucretius and Vergil used.

The iamb is an aggressive measure as far back as the seventh century Greek poet, Archilochus. (Lucretius talked about Archilochus briefly. Where?) We have mere fragments of his poetry (check it out, if you like: http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/archiloch.shtml), but Horace was well acquainted with his work.

Horace’s *Epodes* take on a variety of styles:
- not easily categorized (2, 13),
- invective (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 17),
- civil (7, 9, 16),
- erotic (11, 14, 15).

**Epode 1 – Preface**
The stage: It’s 31 BC. Octavian has called for Maecenas and other powerful Romans to go to Brindisi to help him do something about Antony and Cleopatra’s 500 ships waiting to attack him.
Stanza 2 is playful and loving. Horace seems to mock deep and showy displays of sentimentality while at the same time expressing sincere feeling for a man he loves and appreciates.

According to the poem, Maecenas appears to have asked his writers’ club to stay home and “pursue a life of ease.” Horace wonders whether it wouldn’t be better to be brave and follow Maecenas. He decides that yes, of course it is better to be brave, and he’ll be right there—oh! Except there’s the plowing to see to, and the flocks (they need to be moved, you know). And then there’s the villa... it requires so much....

1. In stanza 4, there’s a simile comparing the fear an absent person feels with the fear a mother bird feels about her eggs getting swiped by a snake when she’s not around. Who is the mother bird? Horace or Maecenas?
2. Think about what a “hero” is. Is the narrator of poem 1 heroic? Explain.

**Epode 5 – Witches**

A scared young Roman boy is surrounded by witches who intend to do him harm. He beseeches them by their children—if they even have any; by his toga which he thought would mean something since it marks him as a Roman citizen but apparently didn’t because he’s been stripped of it; and by Jupiter’s disgust at what they’re doing to tell him why they’re leering at him.

The head witch, Canidia, calls for a variety of dreadful things to be burnt.

Sagana, with sea-urchin hair, sprinkles underworld water on everything.

Veia dug the hole where the boy was to be buried (all but his face). Once he was dead, they’ll dry his liver and bone marrow to make an aphrodisiac. (Are there any clues how long it will take?)

It’s not clear exactly what Folia’s doing, but we might note that she’s into women and has power over the moon and stars.

Subura is a crowded, busy, dirty and poor district of Rome. Trades (shoemakers, hardware stores, wool merchants, etc.), manufacturing, crime and prostitution were the ways people earned their livings here.

1. What is Canidia’s explanation for why her previous attempts at keeping her husband faithful have failed? What will she try next? Is she likely to give up?
2. What does the helpless boy do? Do you suppose his threats made any difference? (Do you suppose his dried liver and bone marrow made any difference?)
Epode 7 – Civil war

1. Rewrite this poem, making it shorter, but keeping what you think is relevant. If you find the directions “rewrite this poem” to be daunting, you may summarize the lines.

Epode 8 – Impotence

The narrator can’t get it up. With the abusive invective that typifies iambic poetry, he blames it on his prostitute. Though Horace is a master of the word-as-weapon method, there’s a gentleness found by the poet’s abuse being misplaced. His fault is not really with the woman, but with his own inability to get an erection. He’s embarrassed.

I kept trying to look for a deeper meaning for the 2nd and 3rd stanzas in West’s translation. When I looked at Horace’s actual words, I began to think I’m overthinking it: it really should be taken at face value. I find this 2004 translation/paraphrase (Loeb) by Niall Rudd to capture it more clearly.

To think that you, who have rotted away with the long passage of time, should ask what unstrings my virility, when your teeth are black, and extreme decrepitude ploughs furrows on your forehead, and your disgusting anus gapes between your shrivelled buttocks like that of a cow with diarrhea! I suppose I am excited by your bosom with its withered breasts like the udders of a mare, your flabby belly, and your scrawny thighs perched on top of your swollen ankles! Be as rich as you like. May the masks of triumphal ancestors escort your cortege! Let no wife be weighed down with fatter pearls as she walks proudly by! What of the fact that slim Stoic volumes nestle on your cushions of Chinese silk? Does that make my organ (which can’t read) any stiffer, or my phallic charm less limp? To call it forth from my proud crotch you must go to work with your mouth.

1. Does “invective” live as a genre? Where? When? Or, why not?

Epode 11 – The new boyfriend

This poem, along with 8 (above) and 12 (next) were not included (not accurately, anyway) in translations or commentaries of Horace until about the 1960s. 8 and 12 are both more sexually provocative than (publishers thought) audiences could handle previously. This poem, however, is not graphic in any way.

It had been three years since things ended between the narrator and his girlfriend Inachia, with whom he’d been madly in love. He cried and cried to the friend he’s addressing in the poem about why he’s not good enough for her. Then he’d decide to
stop tormenting himself but go to her door, not his own. (What broke his hips and ribs?)

The poem is an announcement of the narrator’s new love: a beautiful boy named Lyciscus. (Paraphrase) “And don’t try persuading me from him because nothing can. Except maybe lust for a new girl or boy.”

Romans were not particularly concerned with sexuality. Femininity was mocked, but having sex with someone of the same gender was not at all disgraceful.

1. Notice the lines are reversed in this poem—the shorter is first and longer is second. Can you think of any reasons why Horace may have done this? What could be the desired effect?

Epode 15 – Love lost/You laugh now
1. Summarize the sentences of this poem of love lost.

Epode 17 – Plea to Canidia
This is the only non-epodic poem (all the lines are the same length, not in couplets with lines of alternating length) in the Epodes.

The first half is the narrator begging Canidia to knock off the curse she’s got on him. (Paraphrase) “Achilles, Circe, Castor and Pollux all showed mercy (because of the words of their victims), so you should too, Canidia, because you’re really great and you don’t do these specific horrible things I mention, and you really do have a son and you never fake childbirth just so you appear virtuous.”

Canidia is unmoved. (Paraphrase) “I can hear you no better than the rocks hear the sailors shipwrecked in a storm. Things are just going to get worse for you; you’re going to wish to die.” She gives some examples of people who were not shown mercy: Tantalus, Prometheus and Sisyphus, who were punished by Jupiter for not conforming to his new laws.

1. Examine the examples each speaker gives. How do the speakers characterize the nature of the crime?
2. What does it mean for Canidia to be a ride on the narrator’s “loathsome” back? Why is it loathsome? What kind of message does that action send?