Horace’s passage carm. 1.6.17–20 has raised numerous debates among scholars, especially as regards the interpretation of the phrase sectis . . . unguibus in line 18:

* nos convivia, nos proelia virginum
sectis in iuvenes unguibus acrium
cantamus vacui, sive quid urimur,
non praeter solitum leves.*

This is the final stanza of an ode that addresses Agrippa, functions as a recusatio1 and thus contains a number of programmatic elements.2 Horace refuses to praise the military feats of Augustus’ general and by extension the emperor himself, considers himself unsuitable to compose an epic or a tragedy, and unqualified for the demands of the genus grande. He refers to himself as tenuis,3 his Muse as peaceful (imbellis) and states that he sings banquets4 and

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*) I would like to thank the Editor, Prof. Dr. Bernd Manuwald, and the referees for this journal for their comments on a previous version of this article.


4) For the programmatic value of the reference to convivia here, see N. Mindt, Die meta-symptotischen Oden und Epoden des Horaz, Göttingen 2007, 32–34.
conflicts of love lightheartedly. The reference to his literary preference for amatory themes is made by the use of the militia amoris motif in which fierce maidens with cut nails are presented in warlike conflicts (proelia) with young men.\(^5\)

In this confrontation, the virgines are referred to as acres and are seen to be attacking the young men sectis ... unguibus. There have been a number of attempts so far to interpret the reference to ‘cut nails’. The most common interpretations are those of the ancient Scholiasts who claim that the image points to bloodless battle and thus to a parody of military confrontation (Porphyrio), or that the poet is implying that the nails were sharpened to a point (Pseudo-Acro), while there has been no shortage of attempts to correct the text, such as that of Bentley’s, who proposed strictis.\(^6\)

All the above attempts give a satisfactory interpretation to the phrase sectis ... unguibus; however, since the particular ode is programmatic, revealing many facets of Horace’s poetology, it is possible that some readers could here suspect a second, poetological, level of interpretation, which would allow Horace, along with his other intentions in the passage, to imply the slenderness (λεπτότης) of his poetry, a notion central to the particular ode.

Commenting on Horace’s passage ars 291–294: vos, o / Pompilius sanguis, carmen reprehendite, quod non / multa dies et multa litura coercuit atque / praesectum deciens non castigavit ad unguem, D’Angour\(^7\) has convincingly demonstrated that the expression ad /

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7) A. J. D’Angour, Ad Unguem, AJPh 120 (1999) 411–427. As he successfully proves, the participle praesectum at ars 294 modifies carmen and not unguem and thus “ad unguem remains as a self-contained expression, to be understood in its own right” (412). Although in this case the above passage does not offer a verbal parallel for the phrase sectis ... unguibus at carm. 1.6.18, it offers a proof for the possible implications of unguis in a poetological context. For the various opinions as regards the syntax of the passage and the meaning of the phrase ad unguem at ars 294, cf. also C. O. Brink, Horace on Poetry: The ‘Ars Poetica’, Cambridge 1971, 323–325; N. Rudd, Horace, Epistles, Book II and the Epistle to the Pisones (‘Ars
in unguem reflects the Greek expression εἰς ὄνυχα / ἐν ὄνυχι and is a metaphor from sculpture which refers not to the artisan’s critical finger, but to “the hands and feet of his sculpted figure”, thus visualizing “a sculpted creation which must be pruned and whittled down to the point where its precise details are finely perfected within the framework of the whole”; consequently, it “encapsulates without superfluity the result of careful attention to the execution of final detail in the most demanding corners of a total composition” and denotes the “diligently perfected opus”. Thus in some passages the emphasis on nails could easily recall the connotations of this expression and act as an indication of attention to detail, with the implications of accuracy, refinement, perfection and flawlessness.8

Based on D’Angour’s remarks and the possibility of ad unguem and / or unguis to imply an elaborated and sophisticated work of art in a poetological context, I suggest that in Horace’s reference to nails at carm. 1.6.18 a second level of interpretation could appeal to some of his contemporary readers, who were acquainted with the significance of the particular expression and the possible implications of the relevant imagery. Thus, they could surmise that a poetological reading of the phrase sectis . . . unguibus is also possible, which would indicate preference for an elaborated poetic form and perfection, interest in ars and stylistic diligentia, as well as commitment to the central principles of Hellenistic poetry, such as the celebrated τορόν poem of Callimachus,9 in which the notion of chiseling or filing constitutes a central poetological metaphor.

Another Horatian passage of literary criticism, not mentioned by D’Angour, that could be helpful here is that at Hor. sat. 1.10.64–71:

\[
\textit{fuerit Lucilius, inquam,} \\
\textit{comis et urbanus, fuerit limatior idem} \\
\textit{quam rudis et Graecis intacti carminis auctor} \\
\textit{quamque poeta\textsuperscript{r}}\textsuperscript{um} \textit{seniorum turba; sed ille,}
\]


8) Cf. also E. Gowers, Horace, \textit{Satires}, Book I, Cambridge 2012, 194–195, who follows D’Angour’s remarks and notes that the phrase \textit{ad unguem} at Hor. sat. 1.5.31–33 “denotes a perfect state of finish, precision in the smallest detail”.

In this poem Horace criticizes Lucilius and his rough versification. He asserts that, although Lucilius was a very good poet judged according to the criteria of his age, had he lived in Horace’s times, he would be more careful as to the refinement of his text, would be filing away much of his work, would aim at perfectionism; he would attempt to polish his verses and thus scratch his head and gnaw his fingernails to the quick. Although these images effectively portray the painstaking task and the labor involved in composing a polished work, it is worth noting here that nails appear in a poetological context associated with the notions of ars and refinement, while the phrase recideret omne (sat. 1.10.69) could be regarded as a parallel in thought, albeit not in wording, with the phrase sectis . . . unguibus at carm. 1.6.18.

As is well known, in the erotic poetry of the Augustan period the figure of the beloved girl often reflects the poetic composition. Within this framework, Horace’s poetic preference for the virgines who attack young men with cut nails could be interpreted by some readers as a programmatic poetological statement suggesting the presence of refinement, slenderness (λεπτότης), stylistic subtlety and ars in his lyric poetry. Furthermore, given Horace’s poetic interest in details and small themes, the particular phrase

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10) It is worth noting that in his Odes Horace uses virgo more frequently than puella, which is preferred in the ‘lower’ Satires and Epistles; cf. P. Watson, Puella and Virgo, Glotta 61 (1983) 139. Since carm. 1.6 is a recusatio and Horace parodies the epic diction throughout this poem, it is reasonable that at this instance he would prefer the more elevated word virgo instead of the synonym puella.


12) For this interest, cf. e.g. D. Esser, Untersuchungen zu den Oden-schlüssen bei Horaz, Meisenheim am Glan 1976, 36; Connor (n. 6 above) 191.
appears all the more evocative. Thus his reference here would be in accordance with the Hellenistic, especially Callimachean, stylistic principles, where special emphasis is placed on the elaboration of a poem, its stylistic perfection and its reduction to the appropriate proportions. At the same time he skilfully implies that his poetry should not be considered artificial and nerveless. By modifying the *virgines* with *acres*, a word frequently used by Horace to describe the epic and grandiose poetry, he implies that his own poetry does not lack power either. As for himself, as is revealed in the last words of the ode (*non praeter solitum leves*), he prefers lighter themes to the heavy ones found in the heroic epics, though his ‘lightness’ is not beyond the norm.

Nicosia

Spyridon Tzounakas

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14) It is worth noting that the word *leves* here is contrasted with the adjective *gravem* at lines 5–6: *nos, Agrippa, neque haec dicere nec gravem / Pelidae stomachum cedere nescii* and more generally with the *gravitas* of epos and tragedy. On the stylistic and generic implications of this contrast, see e.g. Putnam (n. 13 above) 58–59; K. Numberger, Horaz, Lyrische Gedichte, Kommentar für Lehrer der Gymnasien und für Studierende, Münster 1997, 109; J.-Y. Maleuvre, Petite stéréoscopie des *Odes et Epodes* d’Horace, Vol. II: Les *Odes*, Paris 1997, 34–36. For Horace’s predilection for *levitas*, cf. also Hor. *carm.* 2.1.39–40: *mecum Dionaeo sub antro / quaere modos leviore plectro.*