

SECTIS... UNGUIBUS (HOR. CARM. 1.6.18)*

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 convivias, 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 *recusatio*¹ 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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1) For Horace's lyric *recusationes*, with special reference to his ode 1.6, see e.g. P.L. Smith, Poetic Tensions in the Horatian *Recusatio*, *AJPh* 89 (1968) 56–65; G.D'Anna, La *recusatio* nella poesia oraziana, *Sileno* 5–6 (1979–1980) 209–225; E. Lefèvre, Waren horazische Gedichte zum 'öffentlichen' Vortrag bestimmt?, in: G. Vogt-Spira (ed.), Beiträge zur mündlichen Kultur der Römer, Tübingen 1993, 145–148; R. A. Smith, Horace Odes 1.6: *Mutatis Mutandis*, a Most Virgilian *Recusatio*, *Gymnasium* 101 (1994) 502–505; D. Voisin, Horace, Agrippa et les *recusationes*, *Latomus* 61 (2002) 352–361.

2) Its implications for Horace's poetics and technique are sufficiently investigated by M. Lowrie, Horace's Narrative *Odes*, Oxford 1997, 55–70 and 97–101.

3) For the Callimachean background in Horace's stylistic polarity of *tenuis* / *grande* here, see e.g. W. Wimmel, Kallimachos in Rom: Die Nachfolge seines apologetischen Dichtens in der Augusteerkzeit, Wiesbaden 1960, 187–192; J. V. Cody, Horace and Callimachean Aesthetics, Brussels 1976, 10, 36–37 and 91–92; R. O. A. M. Lyne, Horace: Behind the Public Poetry, New Haven / London 1995, 77; R. Thomas, Horace and Hellenistic Poetry, in: S. Harrison (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Horace, Cambridge 2007, 52–53. For more bibliography on Horace's adherence to the principles of Roman Callimacheanism in the particular ode, see Lowrie (n. 2 above) 56 n. 20.

4) For the programmatic value of the reference to *convivia* here, see N. Mindt, Die meta-symptomatischen *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 war-like 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 / Pom-pilius sanguis, carmen reprehendite, quod non / multa dies et multa litura coercuit atque / praesectum deciens non castigavit ad unguem*, D'Angour⁷ has convincingly demonstrated that the expression *ad /*

5) Thus, the literal military action the poet refuses to praise is metaphorically transferred to the erotic level; cf., for instance, H. P. Syndikus, *Die Lyrik des Horaz: Eine Interpretation der Oden*, Vol. I: Erstes und zweites Buch, Darmstadt 1989, 94; G. Davis, *Polyhymnia: The Rhetoric of Horatian Lyric Discourse*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / Oxford 1991, 33–34 and 36–39; Lyne (n. 3 above) 77–78.

6) For the various interpretations here, see e. g. R. G. M. Nisbet / M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace, Odes*, Book I, Oxford 1970, 89–90. According to P. Connor, *Horace's Lyric Poetry: The Force of Humour*, Berwick 1987, 191, this scene suggests "a central fact of love poetry: love is never smooth".

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 ὄνυχια / 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 *τόρον* 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:

*fuert Lucilius, inquam,
comis et urbanus, fuert limatior idem
quam rudis et Graecis intacti carminis auctor
quamque poetarum seniorum turba; sed ille,*

Poetica'), Cambridge 1989, 199; more recently C. Schubert, *Praeseptum oder perfectum? Ein neuer Vorschlag zu Horaz, ars poetica 294*, *GFA* 12 (2009) 17–19.

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

9) Callim. *Epigr.* fr. 398 Pf.: Λύδη καὶ παχὺ γράμμα καὶ οὐ τόρον.

*si foret hoc nostrum fato delapsus in aevum,
detereret sibi multa, recideret omne quod ultra
perfectum traheretur, et in versu faciendo
saepe caput scaberet vivos et roderet unguis.*

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 girl¹⁰ often reflects the poetic composition.¹¹ 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,¹² the particular phrase

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*.

11) See e.g. J. C. McKeown, *Ovid. Amores. Text, Proleg. and Comm.*, vol. II, Leeds 1989, on 1.1.20; M. Wyke, *Written Women: Propertius' Scripta Puella*, *JRS* 77 (1987) 47–61; ead., *Reading Female Flesh: Amores* 3.1, in: A. Cameron (ed.), *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, London 1989, 111–143; L. T. Percy, *The Personification of the Text and Augustan Poetics in Epistles* 1.20, *CW* 87 (1993–1994) 457–464, esp. 459–460; A. M. Keith, *Corpus Eroticum: Elegiac Poetics and Elegiac Puellae in Ovid's Amores*, *CW* 88 (1994–1995) 27–40; C. A. Perkins, *The Figure of Elegy in Amores* 3.1: *Elegy as Puella, Elegy as Poeta, Puella as Poeta*, *CW* (2010–2011) 313–331.

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,¹³ 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,¹⁴ though his 'lightness' is not beyond the norm.

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13) On the generic implications of the word *acrium* here, see M. C. J. Putnam, Design and Allusion in Horace, *Odes* 1.6, in: S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Homage to Horace: A Bimillenary Celebration*, Oxford 1995, 57–58.

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 nesci* 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. Nummerger, *Horaz, Lyrische Gedichte, Kommentar für Lehrer der Gymnasien und für Studierende*, Münster³1997, 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 levioris plectro*.