

Is Horace *Ode* 1.37 pro-Augustan, anti-Augustan, both, or neither?

Horace's *Ode* XXXVII, or the 'Cleopatra Ode' is a celebration of the defeat of Cleopatra VII by Octavian and Agrippa, and is considered the height of Horace's literary works in the way in which he combines both political themes and Alcaeus' style of Greek writings. The question as to whether this Ode is pro-Augustan, anti-Augustan, both or neither has been widely discussed. Personally, I think that Horace is writing an anti-Augustan Ode, not as a political dissident, but as a way of expressing literary freedoms, as he demonstrates in other Odes as well. Horace does this not out of a lack of respect, but to show that his work will not be used as 'propaganda' (if the term is applicable), but as a work of creativity.

Horace does this mostly by changing the tone in the sixth stanza from a distinctly pro-Augustan tone of the first half of the Ode to one of admiration for Cleopatra who 'did not have a woman's fear' and was a 'humble woman in a proud triumph'. This should not be interpreted as a factual admiration for Cleopatra, but rather that Horace is exercising his literary freedoms, and that Augustus cannot influence Horace's workings.¹ This refusal of Horace is not only indicated in this Ode, but throughout his workings, as he continually declines to write the epic poetry that Augustus and Maecenas want, as will be demonstrated.

Horace's most alarming, and perhaps most subtle, criticism of Augustus is the simple fact that Mark Antony, Augustus' sworn rival in the civil war, is not mentioned by name once throughout the Ode. Cleopatra is not mentioned by name either, but we can infer that Horace meant to mention her through descriptions of 'the mad Queen' and that 'she flew from Italy; and Caesar'. We know that Horace fought against Augustus in Mark Antony's army, so does Horace feel admiration for Cleopatra, and in turn Mark Anthony because of this fact? This view would have been almost treasonous if true, and Augustus' ruthlessness against political

¹ Reid (2015).

opponents is well documented, as Virgil was made (almost purposefully) seriously ill by constant travelling to meet Augustus to discuss the *Aeneid*. Even after Virgil's death, it was published on Augustus' death, despite Virgil's wishes for the whole works to be burnt, and never published for public consumption. Knowing how ruthless Augustus was against those who 'failed' him, it is highly unlikely that Horace would openly want to criticise Augustus in an endeavour to anger him, but rather to show that literary freedom (to some extent) existed, and was something to be valued as a Roman citizen. It is important to differentiate that Horace's 'criticisms' of Augustus are not viewed in the same sense as in the twenty-first century, but from a historical perspective. Whether Horace was in fact an actual admirer of Cleopatra is highly unlikely; what is more likely is that Horace is defying the wish of Augustus of Maecenas to show them how the content of his poetry will not be decided by anyone else but Horace.² This is echoed by other odes, such as *Ode XX*, in which Horace tells Maecenas that 'You can drink your Caecuban... no Falerian vines or Formian hills soften my wine,' and *Ode XIV* in which Horace tells of how he will be drinking 'a cask of wine that remembers the Marsian war' whilst the rest of Rome celebrates. As there is a precedent in Horace's *Odes* for this boldness against Augustus, this better explains why the Cleopatra Ode can be interpreted as an anti-Augustan Ode.

Firstly, Horace's criticism seems to be directed at how Cleopatra would have been a prize of war, to be put on show in Rome at a victory parade, referring to how 'she looked for a nobler death'. This can be inferred not only as a death in a sense of mortality, but rather the death of her dynasty (of which she was indeed the last of the Ptolemaic dynasty), and of Egypt being independent from the Roman Empire. It is very unusual that Horace would choose to refer to it as a 'nobler' death, as outside influences of Rome were often viewed with suspicion and blamed for the moral decline of the Roman empire. As Egypt was ruled by Greeks in the Hellenistic period after the death of Alexander the Great, it is especially odd

² Lowrie (2013).

to choose to refer to a Greek ruler as preferring a 'nobler death,' as Greeks seemed to be the polar opposite of Roman ideals. However, we know that Horace was widely affected by the growing Greek influences of the period: his style of writing is directly attributable to the Greek poet Alcaeus; and his symposiums have had great influence for hundreds of years. In this choice of style, Horace is again choosing to model his poetry on Alcaeus, rather than a uniform Roman style, which Augustus would have preferred. Horace again shows an admiration for Mark Antony and Cleopatra, although they are Rome's enemies, not because he is a supporter of their rebellion against Octavian, but rather for the bookish freedom that it brings Horace, and shows his *Ode* is anti-Augustan, as it again refuses to be part of the Augustan propaganda program (architecture etc.).

Another way in which Horace attempts to defy Augustus is by using Augustus' slander of Mark Antony to constantly remind the reader of him, although he is not mentioned by name.³ The references to 'taking the Caecuban down from its ancient rack' and how her mind 'deranged by Mareotic wine' are in fact the same slanders that Octavian, Cicero and Agrippa used before the Battle of Actium 31 B.C.⁴ It was, although historically inaccurate, believed for a long deal of time that Cleopatra was drunk when she led her army to war against Octavian. By mentioning this, Horace is not only suggesting that he sees through Octavian's attempt to slander Cleopatra, and in turn Mark Antony, but also signifying that he is further refusing the kind of historical inaccuracy that Augustus would have him write. Instead he argues he will write the kind of poetry that invites Romans to drink to the memory of a worthy opponent in Cleopatra and Mark Antony and commemorate their challenge to the Roman republic, rather than have their slander recorded forever in Horace's work, if he were to write how Augustus wants him too.

³ Reid (2015).

⁴ Horace, p.155.

Finally, I believe that Horace shows a demonstration of admiration for Cleopatra by using the imagery of the hunter and the prey, as a kind of noble sport, to show her bravery in not accepting her death by Roman hands, but meeting it at a time of her choosing, which as I have already mentioned, Horace describes as a 'nobler death'. As hunting was widely considered a noble sport for the aristocracy, it is my belief that Horace is using this to describe the hunt of Cleopatra by Octavian as both noble for the hunter and the prey, as he describes it as 'a hawk after gentle doves'. This particular reference is interesting not only because it is kind in the sense of Cleopatra being a gentle dove, whereas Horace could have chosen to describe her as something slanderous or insulting. The iconography of a 'gentle dove' has a simplistic nobility and beauty. By doing this, I believe that Horace does not mean to literally describe Cleopatra as beautiful, but rather that the challenge to authority, the natural order of Rome being challenged has a simplistic beauty as well to Horace. This is particularly prevalent as Horace was known to be, as previously mentioned, an enthusiast of Greek poetry and style (although some of his more political poetry suggests otherwise).

In conclusion, I believe that Horace wrote this ode as a clear statement to Augustus that his literary freedoms, however much it threatens him, will not be encroached by Augustus or Maecenas.⁵ I do not believe that Horace is in actual fact an admirer of Cleopatra or Mark Antony, rather that they are the examples to which Horace uses to show his anti-Augustan views on how Augustus would influence his work, if he had his way. By referring to the slanderous misinformation provided by Octavian in reference to her, Horace is defying Augustus, but only in a sense that his literary independence will not be decided by them, but by Horace himself.

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⁵ Lowrie (2013).

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