

RICHARD TARRANT, *Horace's Odes*, Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature, Oxford-New York: OUP, 2020, xxii+239 pp., \$99.00, ISBN 978-0-19-515675-1.

The series *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* (edited by Kathleen Coleman and Richard Rutherford) offers guidance to non-expert readers on core works of the classical canon; earlier volumes consider, for example, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plato's *Symposium*. Richard Tarrant's (T.) new introduction to Horace's *Odes* is, as he himself states, unusual within the series in that it contains significant discussion of the *Satires*, *Epodes*, and *Epistles* in addition to its target text. This is desirable (and probably unavoidable), as it is difficult to extricate individual works from the overall arc of the poet's output: Horace comments on his lyric poetry in his hexametrical poems, and his *Epodes* are of course relevant to the formation of his *Odes*. However, T. certainly sticks to the series' aim of covering the main features of Horace's *Odes* and detailing them clearly for new readers. Drawing on his extensive experience in reading and teaching Horace's four books of lyric, T. discusses an impressive range of examples. In his Preface, T. notes how transformative he found his early reading of Steele Commager's *The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study*; T. does not aim to replace that work (the envisioned readerships are quite different), but he replicates the elegance of Commager's prose and the penetration of his observations. T.'s contribution is highly recommended to students of Augustan literature, to the casually interested reader of Horace, and to the scholar seeking to read the *Odes* afresh.

In his Introduction, T. discusses the fortunes of Horace and the *Odes* – from the prestige they held in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the current lull, where Horace “remains a ghostly presence as a source of Latin mottos” (xix). As he later notes, even the word “ode” is hardly used today without irony (25). Despite Horace's diminished ubiquity, T. remains upbeat – the thinning crowd of admirers means that the poetry can be appreciated in its own right. Naturally, one must face up to the occasional curate's egg among the *Odes*: T. follows his doctoral advisor Robin Nisbet's willingness to confront less successful poems with critical candor. This is T.'s Horace, an invitation to his readers to create their own versions of the poet, but it will be reassuring for newcomers to learn the opinions of an expert.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to Horace's life – the nub of many controversies about the *Odes*. Both Horace's own statements and the Suetonian biography are suspect. T. points out the difficulties and especially the poet's tendency

to construct elements of his life. Still, T. is forthright about what he thinks of Maecenas' circle:

“[Maecenas] functioned as a go-between for Octavian, enlisting talents who might side with him in the propaganda war then being waged against Mark Antony and who might voice support for his rule once he had prevailed” (3).

The picture that we get of Horace in this chapter is not entirely flattering; T. uses phrases such as “a carefully edited account”, “yielded benefits”, and “quick to exploit” (3). The gradual sidelining of Maecenas in Horace's later poetry is ascribed to the poet's growing closeness to Augustus – the center of all power. T. wryly comments on the irony of Augustus' question to Horace (relayed by Suetonius),

“Are you afraid that being seen as a friend of mine will harm your reputation with posterity?” (5).

T.'s evaluation of Horace's political positioning thus seems very clear; nevertheless, I wondered at the end of the chapter as to whether T. could have dwelt on these issues slightly longer, given that they make Horace a problematic figure for many modern readers. T. sticks to the facts and allows the evidence to speak for itself, and this is no doubt the best move in an introductory book; it does not stop the reader from wishing, however, that T. might take an explicit stance and discuss this aspect of Horace directly.

Chapter 2, which deals with Horace's poetry before the *Odes*, economically sets Horace in his literary context in the first century BC with reference to Cicero's speech *In Defense of Archias*, the neoterics, and Callimachus in particular. T. notes the conventionality of Horace's programmatic statements in his earliest poetry (9-10): the appearance of Quirinus forbidding Horace to write in Greek (*Satires* 1.10.31-5) is reminiscent of Callimachus' experience with Apollo at the beginning of the *Aetia*. The chapter begins with the *Satires*, T. addressing Horace's complex relationship to Lucilius and introducing notions such as William Anderson's *doctor ineptus* before finding a uniting factor for *Satires* 1 in the theme of selectivity (i.e., knowing what to choose in life). As for the muted presence of Octavian in the first book of *Satires* (in comparison with *Satires* 2), T. remains open-minded about a matter that is incapable of proof:

“Horace may have been hedging his bets in the unsettled years before the final showdown [Actium]. A more creditable explanation is that he was reluctant to lend his talent to partisan political poetry” (22).

T. emphasizes the different character of the second book of *Satires*, where Horace lets a series of unimpressive “guest lecturers” do the talking rather than speaking *in propria persona* (18). As for the *Epodes* – among numerous insights I merely mention T.’s suggestion that the positioning of the bleak *Epodes* 16 in the penultimate position in the collection may have been inspired by the similarly dark *Eclogues* 9 (likewise penultimate). There are moreover intergeneric similarities within this early poetry: in both the *Satires* and the *Epodes*, Horace’s ability to sustain his generic role is thrown into question – neither his *Satires* nor his *Epodes* fully replicate the *ethos* of their models (Lucilius and Archilochus respectively) – which T. reads as an intentional strategy influenced by Hellenistic aesthetics, a “product of a literary culture that is aware of the artificial nature of all literary genres” (24).

By contrast, lyric is a mode tailor-made for the poet (24), and he in turn radiates confidence in his craft (31). In Chapter 3, T. begins his discussion by emphasizing the artifice but also the art of the *Odes*, comparing the poetry’s metrical virtuosity and creativity to Bach’s keyboard works. Chapter 4 takes us beyond these general observations and plunges into *Odes* 1-3, beginning with a discussion of the structure of these books and their date of release; against Hutchinson, T. argues that the books were released together in 23 BC, in part because Propertius, a “highly reactive writer”, does not refer to them before his third book of elegies (published c20 BC). Additional arguments for the publication of *Odes* 1-3 as a unit include the fact that *Odes* 2.10, situated halfway through the central book, praises “moderation” (*mediocritas*). As for structure, T. offers an amount of detail that impresses on the reader the intentional nature of the books’ ordering – especially the connections between individual poems (the comments on the movement from *Odes* 3.6 to 3.7 are excellent). T. reads progression into the first three books of *Odes* in three areas: Horace’s realization of his poetic ambitions (from the conditional *feriam sidera* of *Odes* 1.1, as it were, to the perfect *exegi monumentum* of *Odes* 3.30), his treatment of civil war, and his relationship to Maecenas.

In Chapter 5, T. moves on to study three individual poems (*Odes* 1.11, 2.7, and 2.13) in depth, although I shall only discuss his comments on *Odes* 1.11 here. I am not completely convinced that, as T. and others argue (48), Leuconoe’s motive in consulting Babylonian star-tables is to establish Horace’s amorous constancy, but it is an attractive idea: Leuconoe is being advised by the Marvellian poet to give in to the moment. In any case, T.’s reading of the formal elements of *Odes* 1.11 is masterful; he explains the significance of meter in a clear way, and comments on the sense of speed that it connotes; this plays into the notion of straining the wine rather than waiting for the sediment to gather at the bottom of the jug (a distinction pointed out by Nisbet and Hubbard): speed, for Horace and Leuconoe, is of the essence.

Chapter 6 turns to poems concerning friendship (*Odes* 1.24, 2.10, 1.9, 2.3, 2.14, 1.20, 2.12, 3.29) and applies T.'s earlier observations about structure; in commenting on *Odes* 1.9, for example, "one of Horace's greatest achievements" (71), T. points out that the apparent ABC structure (winter to summer) is complemented by the injunction to enjoy life at both the opening (A) and the close (C): Horace's time in the arcades of the city is over, but that of Thaliarchus is, so T. suggests, just beginning. Incidentally, T. brings up the apparent reference to Sappho's *Brothers Poem* pointed out recently by Llewelyn Morgan and others.

Chapter 7 moves on to the amatory poems, where T. emphasizes that Horace's poetry should not be compared to the elegy of Propertius or the Lesbia poems of Catullus. He deftly illustrates the generic backdrop to the amatory *Odes*, and I found his study of the different sexual *personae* of the *Epistles*, *Epodes*, and *Satires* particularly convincing. Horace draws upon the diffuse lyric tradition to present different attitudes towards love (93). I felt that the diagram for the mimetic patterning of the opening line of *Odes* 1.5 could have been explained more clearly (96), but T.'s use of Pyrrha's lover as an instantiation of the elegiac ethos certainly does its task, and the discussion serves as a good lead-in to *Odes* 1.33 (addressed to Albius [Tibullus?]). To close the chapter, T. goes through three possible motivations for Horace's attitude to love – his Epicureanism, his sense that people and things are forever changing, and his need to protect himself from emotions to which he knows he is susceptible. Chapter 8 performs a similar analysis of the political or "public" poetry. Again, T. states things baldly:

"... as a Roman writing under the patronage of Maecenas during the first years of the Augustan principate, Horace would have been expected to engage with public themes" (117).

This dovetails with Horace's muted support of Octavian in his early *Satires*:

"He may have declared his full support only after Octavian's preeminence was clear" (118).

There follow discussions of such important poems as *Odes* 1.37, 2.1 and 3.14, and a selective look at the Roman *Odes* (these naturally cannot be described in depth in a work of this ambit).

The final chapters take us to the end of Horace's career (post 20's BC). Chapter 9 focuses on the first book of *Epistles*, relating them to *Odes* 1-3: Horace appears more assured here, even if he stresses his advanced years. Themes such as *carpe diem* are transmuted into more discursive forms.

In Chapter 10, T. turns to the *Carmen saeculare* and the fourth book of *Odes*. T. sees a certain amount of compulsion at work – the stanzas on the marriage legislation in the *Carmen saeculare* can hardly have been Horace's idea. In other parts of the poem, however, Horace shows more nuance – while Vergil's Aeneas did not spare Turnus, Augustus will show mercy to the defeated (an idea eventually incorporated into the *Res gestae*): Augustus represents a perfected Aeneas. T. provides a similarly plausible defense of the fourth book of *Odes* – they represent the work of a different poet from the earlier books – although he does lament the loss of the former “edge”, i.e., “the sense of goals to be striven for, of obstacles to be surmounted” (155). As he later notes,

“Horace also had to deal with the fact that depictions of vice and disorder tend to be more engaging in artistic terms than descriptions of the ideal” (173).

Still, *Odes* 4 has its novelties – for instance, Horace's surrender to (elegiac) surrender in the first poem of the collection. I found T.'s comments here among the most thought-provoking of the book; he covers the amatory poems, poems about the seasons (T. sets *Odes* 1.4 and 4.7 side by side), and ones about Augustus (with a focus on 4.4 and 4.15). There follows a chapter on the literary epistles, which T. connects with the *Odes*, and a final chapter on the reception of Horace's lyric from Propertius to Heaney (the material on the medieval reception was particularly interesting for me). The book closes with suggestions for further reading.

T. always keeps his readership in mind – explaining, for example, minor but potentially confusing issues such as why the *Epodes* come after the *Odes* in Horace's collected works even though they were written first (6), or why Horace could be a Roman citizen despite his father's status as an ex-slave (1). The prose is readable and entertaining – from among T.'s expressions I single out the following:

“[Venosa,] whose other famous native son is the sixteenth-century madrigalist and murderer Carlo Gesualdo” (1).

Original observations are sprinkled about with a characteristic lack of fanfare – for instance, the linkage between *Odes* 3.1 and 3.6 by the similar lines that conclude each (*diuitias operosiores* and *progeniem uitiosiore*).

As mentioned, T.'s book is impressive; still, it is worth posing some questions that T. might return to in a subsequent book on Horace with a different focus. In some ways, for instance, I wondered if there could have been more edginess and pressing of boundaries; how might the poetry of Horace relate to the present day (there is a quiet reference to the upheavals

of 2019 on page 214)? This might not fall within the purview of the series, yet Horace is a fascinating author to study when thinking about issues such as ethics, ethnicity, and class. Although the book was written prior to the seismic changes in society that took place during the pandemic, many of the underlying issues were already visible. Moreover, at times I felt as if T. was letting the poet off the hook too easily – on *Odes* 3.6, for example, T. states “[i]f we can put aside reservations about Horace in the role of strict moralist, there is much to admire” (133). This seems somewhat hopeful, even if the poem certainly has its odd charms. As noted above, I ultimately got the sense that T.’s desire in the book is not to prejudice new readers of Horace to interpret him in a specific manner. Still, I am looking forward to further observations issuing from T.’s pen in the future.

In sum, this is an excellent new introduction to a currently underserved author. The production of the book is very good,<sup>1</sup> and its style is engaging. T.’s contribution to the series *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* is among the most ambitious and difficult of the volumes produced thus far: no other classical work is quite as mercurial and variegated as the *Odes*. This is a balanced, assured, and highly readable introduction to a poet who has much to teach the twenty-first century: T. succeeds in revealing Horace’s artistry, humanity, and ironic distance to new readers. Commager would approve.

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<sup>1</sup>Oddly, some of the internal page references remain unprocessed (on pages 31, 40, 43, 82, and 187 there is simply the placeholder “00”).