

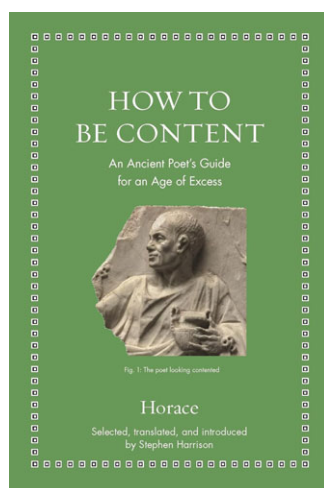
## Book Review

### Horace: How to be Content. An Ancient Poet's Guide for an Age of Excess

Harrison (S.) (ed., trans.) Pp. x+238. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. Cased, £14.99, US\$17.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-18252-0

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This book is in the Princeton University series entitled 'Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers' and follows the series format of allowing the ancient author (Horace in this case) to do most of the talking while the editor (Harrison) translates the Latin and sets it into context. The book's purpose is to show that Horace managed 'to engage constructively with issues which we still confront today' (p. 23).

The book is divided into four major chapters. In the first of these ('The Search for the Good Life') we are offered

Horace's advice on how to be content with our lives: do not think that the grass is greener elsewhere (*Satires* 1.1), *carpe that diem* (*Odes* 1.11), enjoy the peace and the pleasure of rural life (*Epistles* 1.10 and 1.18) and live within our means (*Odes* 3.1); and *Epistles* 1.11 even warns us off going on cruises.

The second chapter looks at friendship. *amicitia* to a Roman meant more than simply being pals, and Harrison explains clearly the patron-client relationship obtaining between Horace and Maecenas. Real friends need to be discerning of character rather than pedigree, and will not care if the wine offered them is not up to their usual *premier cru*, as shown in *Odes* 1.20. Harrison well shows how *Satires* 1.5 lets us see friendship operating at personal, political, and even dynastic levels, with the fate of the world resting on the restoration of the *amicitia* of Antony and Octavian alongside the theme of the poet's own health and happiness being secured by the mutual affection of his friends of more slender means.

The third chapter ('Love—the Problem of Passion') sees Horace sometimes (e.g. *Odes* 1.5, 1.9) acting as a 'Ryder Cup captain' advising a young man how to play the game of love, while

at other times (e.g. *Odes* 1.22) he shows that 'the truly wise man will in fact make light of passion' in the pursuit of 'calm and equanimity' (pp. 162–3). Jealousy is avoidable by 'a long-term monogamous and affectionate relationship, which is proof against such emotional storms' (p. 169) as is shown in *Odes* 1.13. The 'erotic square' of *Odes* 3.9 shows a man and woman engaging in amoebean banter which ends with their (temporary?) reconciliation; for Harrison, the poet is urging that 'a lifelong bond informed by resignation and pragmatism is to be preferred to high-octane but passing infatuations' (p. 175). The poet (in *Odes* 1.33) surveys his own previous 'fettering' to the freedwoman Myrtales and shows how all such pairings are the work of the mischievous goddess of love: a wise stance also shown in *Odes* 1.5 which urges good counsel to the 'boy' whom Pyrrha has enraptured and who will one day arrive at the poet's stage of a 'haven of sense and discretion'.

The final section is appropriately devoted to 'Death—the Final Frontier'. The Romans suffered appalling mortality rates, and Horace seems at least sometimes to have been on the side of the Epicureans in telling us to make the most of today as death will soon be here (and will be the end of everything). Like Sestius in *Odes* 1.4, we should 'count our achieved blessings and be grateful for the past rather than anxious about future mortality' (pp. 197–8). *Odes* 2.3 reminds us that there are no pockets in a shroud—a theme revisited in *Odes* 2.14 and 4.7—but also that riches cannot prevent death either. Suicide divided opinion then as now: but Regulus' principled self-sacrifice and Cleopatra's noble end are examples to be wondered at. Most of us live longer lives than the ancient Romans enjoyed, but we do all still die and Horace offers us poetic consolation and advice as we face our end.

This pocket-sized book does not allow Harrison much space to go into detail, and inevitably he cuts a few corners and flattens some intriguing questions in his focus on Horace's recipe for the good life. For one thing, the concept of the 'age of excess' needs interrogating since most of the people living in Horace's Rome struggled to survive and died young, while their leaders were passing sumptuary legislation to curb luxury: and many people living today also would struggle to recognise 2025 as an age of Sybaritic luxury. In contrast to other books in this series, the translation follows rather than faces the Latin text and this makes it harder for readers to enjoy the Latin if their Latin needs the help of the English. The translation is Harrison's own and there are places where he (understandably) struggles to render the terse Latin into clear English. He omits words (*non* in *Odes* 4.9.45 is not translated) and even a whole line (p. 44 omits to translate *Epistles* 1.10.25). The *Epodes* (promised on the blurb) is not included—but then Harrison is offering us a rather sanitised Horace (whose wet dream in *Satires* 1.5.84–5 is described (p. 117) euphemistically as 'a missed erotic assignation') rather than the conflicted author of *Epodes* 8 and 12, who could fall in helpless love in old age in *Odes* 4.1 and tell us (*Odes* 3.2.13) that it is *dulce et decorum* to die for the fatherland.

The book has a general index but (again unlike other books in the series) offers no suggestions for further reading and no notes. This is a shame: there are many excellent books on Horace which

would be of interest to anyone who wishes to read Horace as a brilliant poet rather than as a source of maxims for the good life. The book is not free of printing imperfections—my copy had several pages where the text was not printed square on the page—

but is a handsome and thought-provoking introduction to a major poet and his timeless value to all of us.

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