HORACE *ODES* 3. 15: THE DESIGN OF *DECUS*

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Uxor pauperis Ibyci,
  tandem nequitiae fige modum tuae
famosisque laboribus;
  maturo propior desine funeri

inter ludere virgines
  et stellis nebulam spargere candidis.
non, siquid Pholoen satis,
  et te, Chlori, decet: filia rectius

expugnat iuvenum domos,
  pulso Thyias uti concita tympano.
illam cogit amor Nothi
  lascivae similem ludere capreae:

te lanae prope nobilem
  tonsae Luceriam, non citharae decent
nec flos purpureus rosae
  nec poti vetulam faece tenus cadi.

HORACE, concerned as so often with patterns of order and disorder in human behavior, here limits his attention to figurations of grace and, more pertinent, gracelessness, in sexual mores. His protagonist is a mother who would emulate her daughter, a wife playing among unmarried girls, the aging beldame craving to be young.[1]

At first only her husband is named—Horace's crisp way of noting her duty.[2] After observing that she is married and that Ibycus is poor, the poet proceeds to watch her heightening spurts of emotion and each time to exhort against them. Her indulgences range from abstract (*nequitiae tuae*) to something nearer concrete (*famosis laboribus*).[3] Impropriety is glossed through those "efforts" known to all. Presumably such *labores*, because they

1. The best discussion of aspects of *Odes* 3. 15 is by S. Commager, *The Odes of Horace* (New Haven, 1962), pp. 249 f., 255 f., 292, though he offers no general interpretation of the poem as a whole. His comparisons with *Odes* 1. 23 are especially helpful for elucidating Horace's view of time. The poem is not treated in other important recent work by Fraenkel, Lee, Pöschl, Reckford, or West, though G. Williams gives a summary overview in *The Third Book of Horace's "Odes"* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 96–97. There and in *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), p. 296, Williams sees the poem as an illustration of Horace's poetic commingling of Greek and Roman elements.

2. If there is anything in Horace's choice of the name Ibycus, it might lie in ironic contrast between our *pauper* and the sixth-century lyric poet of Rhegium whose eroticism was notorious. Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 4. 71 ("maxime vero omnium flagrasse amore Reginum Ibycum apparet ex scriptis . . .") and the *Suda*, s.v. "Ιβυκος ("γέγονε δὲ ἐρωτομανέστατος περὶ μειράκια . . .").

3. In the elegies of Propertius and Tibullus *nequitia* can apply equally well to wantonness in male or female. *Labor*, however, in an erotic context, usually defines purely masculine enterprise (Prop. 1. 1. 9, 1. 6. 23, 2. 24. 29; Tib. 1. 2. 33, 1. 4. 47). As in the case of her daughter, Chloris also takes on a sexually incongruous *persona*.

are public rather than private, do not befit a wife concerned with her husband's poverty.[4] Horace urges an end to be fixed, not merely placed, to this conduct which has gone on for some length.[5] The imperative mood attacks Chloris directly and is the poet's persistent, commanding attempt at rhetorical control.

At the next moment he lures us more excitedly into both her action and his counter-remedy. We learn that her desire is to play among young girls (*inter ludere virgines*), which, to the poet, is like scattering a cloud over bright stars (*stellis nebulam spargere candidis*). These details expand upon the still vague *nequitia* and *labores* of lines 2 and 3 with verbs now added to nouns. Abstract and generalized concrete notions are elaborated first by specific, literal fact, then by analogy, with the final imaginative touch left to metaphor. A parallel heightening qualifies the poet's own exhortations. *Tandem fige modum* is drawn out into *maturo propior desine funeri*. Death is the ultimate *modus*, the finale of life itself and an especially importunate presence, we assume, for one whose iniquity is accompanied by an attempt to reverse time's progress.

This heightening from *nequitia* to *nebula*, from abstraction to metaphor, literal to figurative, makes us see the wife's idea of "playing" in terms of the poet's "scattering clouds." Her gamboling is a form of immoral exertion, the part taken by the Lucilian *nebulo*, the shady scoundrel of earlier Roman satire.[6] Horace plays dexterously on the tension between *maturo* and her name, Chloris, when it finally comes. Instead of being "green," "unripe," "immature," she is in fact an elderly wife unwilling to mature elegantly toward time's finish. For one who is forgetful that she is long past the stage of courting and can make little pretension to being a *virgo*, for one whose play is effort (especially if harlotry is involved), it is fitting that what is most ripe in her life is death. The cloud in motion against the stable background of gleaming stars denotes a time fulfilling itself toward ultimate oblivion, not only the momentary eclipse that age and ugliness and moral disrepute project on the bright and colorful territory of the young.

The association of *labores* and *ludere* helps expand our thinking into other Horatian contexts which further prove the paradoxical folly of Chloris' ways. Horace is wont to urge a limitation to *labores*. He so advises Maecenas (*Sat.* 1. 1. 92–94):

> denique sit finis quaerendi, cumque habeas plus,
> pauperiem metuas minus et finire laborem
> incipias, parto quod avebas . . .

4. Sexual prodigality is thus pitted against economic poverty in a very Roman distinction. The two should be mutually exclusive because impecuniousness, we are often told, fosters lack of indulgence. Plautus, for instance, sees *nequam* in opposition to *frugi bonae* (*Pseud.* 468; cf. 337 ff.). See also Cic. *De or.* 2. 248, *Font.* 39; and, for fuller detail, W. Ramsay (ed.), *The "Mostellaria" of Plautus* (London, 1869), pp. 229–30.

5. There is verbal heightening even here. What is initially hers (*tuae*) is soon qualified as of more universal ownership (*famosis*).

6. Lucilius frags. 468, 577 Marx. Cf. Hor. *Sat.* 1. 1. 104 (with Heinze's comments on Cicero's connection of *nebulo* and *homo nequam*), 1. 2. 12; *Epist.* 1. 2. 28.

Plancus, too, should put bounds to *labor* (*Odes* 1. 7. 17–19):

> . . . tu sapiens finire memento
> tristitiam, vitaeque labores
> molli, Plance, mero . . .

It is ironic that, in extending this wisdom to Chloris, it is for reasons of *decus* presently lost, not of past pleasure adequately enjoyed, that Horace enjoins restraint in erotic matters. What is natural play for her daughter is now effort for Chloris. Age interrupts the sexual game, and any strenuous attempt to circumvent nature becomes a matter of public concern over a blatant insult to decorum. These notions are combined again, with a bow to Lucretius, at the end of *Epistles* 2. 2 (213–16):

> vivere si recte nescis, decede peritis.
> lusisti satis, edisti satis atque bibisti:
> tempus abire tibi est, ne potum largius aequo
> rideat et pulset lasciva decentius aetas.

It is no accident that Chloris' name is revealed only in line 8, away from her husband and near her daughter, since these lines are devoted to their strange intermingling. Though grammar and thought conjoin the two opening stanzas, the second stanza has a formal unity of its own, caused partly by the anaphora of *et* and by pronounced sigmatism seen prominently at each line ending. The vague *virgines* is specified in Pholoe, daughter of the household, whose company her mother would keep. The latter, an *uxor* whose manner is in several senses cloudy, is finally and appropriately mentioned in a line contiguous to her offspring.

Horace's moralism is offered softly. Matters are open to discussion and comparison, and gentle disparagement is meted out to both, not to Chloris alone. Chloris' performance is not totally indecorous. It is only that her ways are not sufficiently seemly. Just as she is nearer death than youth, so her daughter's cavorting is only more, not unreservedly, right, and only more by juxtaposition to Chloris' actions.[7] Pholoe is no normal *virgo* by other standards, as the third stanza, which is hers alone, unmistakenly proves. We do not, for instance, find ourselves observing a fit subject for elegy, a lady demurely closeted from the onslaught of gallants by house door, parent, or nurse. Instead, adopting more a masculine than a feminine role, she acts the bellicose lover, taking by storm the houses of youths, house after house, youth after youth.[8] She is orgiastic as well as martial, behaving like an ecstatic devotee of Bacchus (as often as not an analogy for the insatiate ravings of a middle-aged lovesick matron).[9] Finally her energies are comparable to those of a licentious goat, unrestrainedly physical and animalistic.[10] To all this extremity of vigorous stimulation she is a

7. Perhaps, too, Horace uses *modum* instead of a more unequivocal synonym for *finis* to allow some leeway in conduct even for Chloris.

8. On the name Pholoe, a mountain in Arcadia favored by centaurs, see M. C. J. Putnam, "Horace and Tibullus," *CP* 67 (1972): 82.

9. For more detail on the meaning of Thyias see A. S. Pease on Vir. *Aen.* 4. 302; C. J. Fordyce on Cat. 64. 390–91; J. G. Frazer on Pausanias 10. 4. 3, 6. 4, 32. 7.

10. The posture is natural enough in life's spring (cf. Lucr. 1. 260–61; Vir. *Ecl.* 2. 64).

passive prey (*pulso, concita*), compelled by love to succumb to emotions beyond her wish or capacity to harness.[11]

As contrast with this excitable world of Pholoe, Horace turns to what in fact should enhance Chloris' existence: "te lanae prope nobilem / tonsae Luceriam . . . decent. . . ." *Lanae* ought to signify her life. No newfangled role-reversals or unbridled lusts for her, says the poet, merely the traditional posture of *lanifica*, the Roman *matrona* working her wool. This means, by implication here, not only keeping her house chaste and remaining faithful to her husband, but also perhaps helping the domestic economic situation by praiseworthy *labores* to replace the public and unfortunate bursts of emotion in rivalry with her daughter's erotic impulses. Tightly organized verbal structure knots this portrait of the ideal Chloris controlled by words. From *lanae* to *Luceriam* nouns and adjectives are placed chiastically yet modify each other in alternating order. The pattern of alliteration in *te lanae . . . tonsae Luceriam*, by which Horace varied a possible but trite jingle *te tonsae . . .*, complicates the unity still further.[12]

Pholoe's own climactic appearance, by suggestion at a symposium, is as stimulated as ever. Now, though mother and daughter are again juxtaposed as in the second stanza, distinction rather than unity is triumphant. The climax from *citharae* to *cadi*, in three stages yet strung together by the chain of negatives from *non* to *nec . . . nec*, is one of the more impressive in Horace. This tricolon extends from one word to three to four, from a plural noun to two singular nouns to singular and plural nouns combined. In terms of sensual perception, in the progress of *citharae* to *flos* to *cadi*, we expand first from sound to sight. Here hypallage sets in relief the flower which is first qualified by a color word and then by its species, which also posits color. Then we turn to a union of touch and taste (and sight as well, if we consider the visual impact of *faex*[13]), the most intimate, tactile sensations combined.[14] Seen emotionally this parallels a development from song (that merely entertains) to rose crowns (that deck the symposiasts' heads) to the committed act of drinking. This last is done not tamely with goblets but with whole jugs, to suggest, as elsewhere in Horace, utter emotional exhaustion and resolution.[15]

We think at first that this is merely another stage in Pholoe's rakish progress, but there is a certain finality to it that complements the concluding vignette of Chloris' proposed stability. We presume that each is now inside a house—Chloris dutifully working the dull wool of sheep habitually shorn,

11. The name Nothus may be chosen deliberately to undercut Pholoe's passionate pursuit. Is she excited over someone "false," "counterfeit"? Does his putative illegitimacy run counter to the poet's demands for familial stability? Or is he merely part of an ethically different world which he shares with Pholoe, distinguishing himself thereby from Ibycus, to whom Chloris should remain loyal? Is it that Pholoe, the product of a legitimate union whose continuity is threatened by her mother's behavior, is now taking up deliberately with the offspring of an illicit liaison?

12. It is possible that not only wool but the act of shearing should be associated with Chloris, who in fact could trim her lifestyle as well as practice the virtues of spinning. She should be, but is not, subject to diurnal and seasonal time.

13. For *faex* as dye or rouge see Hor. *AP* 277; Ovid *Ars am.* 3. 211.

14. Sound, and therefore hearing, may also be operative as a unifying rhetorical feature throughout these lines. At *Odes* 3. 19. 9–11 Horace uses *ae* sounds to suggest festive shouting at a party. Here we move from *citharae* to *rosae* to *faece*, though the last word works in two ways at once.

15. Cf. *Odes* 1. 35. 26–27.

Pholoe at last with her lovers, partaking of the colorful, volatile round of immediate feelings.[16] But whatever the role Pholoe might play in such a context or however fleeting such a situation might at first seem, we must grant also that the Horatian symposium is an event for which time usually stops. In *Odes* 2. 11, for instance, though the locks of Horace and his friend Quintius Hirpinus are hoary with age, nevertheless wine and music, roses and the wench Lyde are only part of a setting that will abstract them from the existential cares of reality. Though the accoutrements of the symposium may betoken the heightened moment of sexual fulfillment, they also reiterate the symbolism of the continuously glimmering stars behind the passing clouds—Pholoe for the moment ever young. We are made to think of aspects of life beyond mere human temporality—the rose's surpassing beauty,[17] the eternity of music, and the enduring imaginative impulses forgetful wine often gave the lyricist at work or play.

The unexpected appearance of the long postponed *vetulam* in this context is both the climax and the rhetorical masterstroke of the poem. Pholoe's animalistic, orgiastic, impetuous energy has been channeled into the passionate yet delimited emotions of the symposium. The bacchante, stirred up by beaten drum, yields to the symposiast drinking copious wine to the sound of the lute. Into the midst of the final burst of excitement, when the reader had thought she was already happily settled elsewhere, Chloris is verbally thrown by the poet, far from where grammar and ethics would ordinarily place her. Age again is projected among the young, time passing into the imaginatively eternal.[18]

The seriousness of reality forces its alien presence upon the illusions of game, that is, upon one of those self-contained festive moments defined apart from the course of ordinary events.[19] Horace's satirical eye sees Chloris finally at her most graceless—degraded into ugly, undignified age, sharply incongruous with her daughter. As a result the poem too is wrenched, generically. Analogies for Chloris' conduct come more readily to hand from comedy or invective than from elsewhere in lyric. We think, for instance, of Scapha's representation of rank old women as an object lesson to Philematium (*Most.* 274–77):

> . . . istae veteres, quae se unguentis unctitant, interpoles,
> vetulae, edentulae, quae vitia corporis fuco occulunt,
> ubi sese sudor cum unguentis consociavit, ilico
> itidem olent quasi quom una multa iura confudit coquos.[20]

16. The house is a natural symbol for continuity and stability, whether for spinning or symposia. It plays a subtle but important role in evaluating ethics through the dialectic of outer and inner, motion and calm, active and passive. On the association of woolworking and fidelity, see G. Williams, *The Third Book of Horace's "Odes,"* p. 97 and p. 87, n. 1; and idem, "Some Aspects of Roman Marriage Ceremonies and Ideals," *JRS* 48 (1958): 21, n. 20.

17. The rose here symbolizes Pholoe's intense yielding to the sensual moment rather than the fragility of beauty, often recherché, always passing with time, that it occasionally bears elsewhere in Horace. For the beauty of the rose, see *Odes* 2. 3. 14 (beauty and brevity), 3. 19. 22, 4. 10. 4.

18. *Vetulus* is associated once elsewhere with the aging crone, at *Odes* 4. 13. 25 (on which see p. 95), the last of a series of poems on the same topic which smacks as much of Archilochean diatribe as of the lyric Horace (*Epodes* 8 and 12; *Odes* 1. 25).

19. On the nature of play as described here, see J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London, 1949), passim, esp. chap. 1.

20. Cf. also *Men.* 864.

This aspect of *vetulam* is reinforced by proximity to *faece*, which equally, if less immediately, qualifies her actions as ethically out of place. Though, for Pholoe, wine lees connote the culmination of spent emotion, they also reflect onto the promiscuous finality of Chloris' old age an association with the lowest refuse of society whose evil influence on the ethical standards of contemporary Rome Cicero and later authors expound.[21] She would in fact also attempt to drain life to the dregs but is herself used up. Instead of "drinking" or "revelry" as unsuitable for Chloris we have the striking passive *poti cadi*. She is neighbor to something thoroughly exhausted, one step even beyond the diminished pretensions of Lyce (*Odes* 4. 13. 2–6):

> . . . fis anus et tamen
> vis formosa videri
> ludisque et bibis impudens
>
> et cantu tremulo pota cupidinem
> lentum sollicitas . . .

For Lyce, feebly at play, love comes slowly and only when she is drunk. She is now a subject of amusement to the young, a torch turned to ashes, in her own way, too, aging inevitably toward the grave.

We have been prepared for this final interruption of Chloris, but scarcely for its poetic power. The phrase *inter ludere virgines*, with Chloris' "playing" forced between preposition and noun, structurally among the maidens (and, we soon learn, specifically with her daughter), sets the pattern which is followed immediately and more expansively by *nebulam spargere* interposed between *stellis candidis*. This cloud, the unseemly presence of a creature incapable of living out her life decorously within bounds proper for an aging mother and wife of a poor husband, is itself fragmented and scattered throughout the poem. The consonants of *nebulam* reappear in *nobilem*, the vowels in *vetulam*. The latter is the realistic, disordering detail that emotionally inflicts time on the youthful. The first draws Chloris toward noble Luceria, toward wool from a spot known for its uprightness—an abstract, ethical ordering of her life through symbol. Chloris' untimely ways and impecunious background challenge the sumptuous circles into which her daughter has maneuvered. Wool, emblem of inner nobility and external parsimony, is her fit companion, suggesting wifely duties seriously undertaken and a mature understanding of human mortality.[22]

Upon these flashes of emotion and disorder Horace imposes another verbal pattern which has a steadying influence over and above the poem's many tensions. He achieves this effect more through repetition than novelty or displacement. The possibility of order appears most prominently in the reiterated appeal to Chloris—*non . . . te . . . decet, te . . . non . . . decent*—to understand that what is more appropriate for her virginal daughter is not so suitable for her. This design for *decus*, for the fitting in life, takes further poetic shaping in the chiastic iteration of *propior* and *prope* at the end of the

21. See, e.g., Cic. *Pis.* 9; *Att.* 1. 16. 11, 2. 1. 8; *Fam.* 7. 32. 2; *QFr.* 2. 4. 5.

22. *Nobilis* is complementary to *pauper*, antonymical to *famosus*. *Paupertas* is the external sign of inner *nobilitas*, while something *famosus* remains morally suspect. True uxorial "labor" has nothing to do with notoriety.

first and the commencement of the fourth stanzas and of *ludere*, opening the second and concluding the third stanza. Chloris does play among the maidens, and should not. Pholoe behaves like a lusty she-goat—and more becomingly, too. For Chloris, however, approaching a ripe death, wool sheared near renowned Luceria is a likely companion.

Hence, seen ideologically and rhetorically in the poem's thought as outlined in its verbal structure, life's patternings are all relative, whether they compose or interrupt, complement or challenge each other. Since metaphor itself implies a way of viewing experience by verbal relativity, the whole poem is a metaphor for *decus*, generating one abstract definition of grace by relating two different but interreacting manifestations of its presence (or absence). The ordered words themselves are the final exemplar of truth and propriety.

Horace further implies that as individuals we are constantly suffering a multitude of comparisons but that at any given moment one individual *decus* is most applicable and no other, a *decus* that can be conceived, say, in terms of ethics and personal obligations, of economics, or merely of time. Chloris is placed near her daughter when she is first addressed by name and makes one final, brilliant sally into Pholoe's realm of immature life at play. Her better role, because she is in reality nearer mortality, ripe for the funeral pyre, not for adolescent sexual adventuring, is to busy herself at home. To do so would restore her to her proper sphere as submissive, senescent wife to poor Ibycus and prevent her from the perversion of her own and the obfuscation of her offspring's *decus* which the poem illustrates. The point is both natural and universal. For Chloris it means the moderate, aware acceptance of time's passage and a wise initiation into death.

In all this we find revealed one brief but glittering example of Horace's sometimes desperate need for order in himself and in existence around him. The poet who framed Chloris and Pholoe into one picture knew instinctively the necessity for those stabilizing graces in life that help each being accept fearlessly, if on occasion ironically, temporal change and physical diversity, the pressures of history and society. Perhaps more even than wrapping oneself in virtue, marrying poverty, or sailing life's stormy Aegean in a two-oared skiff, the conjunctive imagining of the writer's external and internal worlds into the precise expression of poetry is the final gesture toward creative *decus*. It is this affirming configuration of life through art which makes Horatian lyric so finely revealing of its author's conscience and of our own continuing foibles revealed and molded through his words.[23]

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