

## The 'Parentage' Topos

Horace, *Odes* 2.13.1–12 and Ovid, *Amores* 1.12

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(i) Horace, *Odes* 2.13.1–12

- 1 *Ille et nefasto te posuit die,*  
*quicumque primum, et sacrilega manu*  
*produxit, arbos, in nepotum*  
*perniciem opprobriumque pagi;*  
5 *illum et parentis crediderim sui*  
*fregisse cervicem et penetralia*  
*sparsisse nocturno cruore*  
*hospitis; ille venena Colcha*  
*et quidquid usquam concipitur nefas*  
10 *tractavit, agro qui statuit meo*  
*te, triste lignum, te caducum*  
*in domini caput immerentis.*

R. G. M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard identified five traditional elements which probably influenced this address to a fallen tree<sup>1</sup>. These are: (1) death or escape from falling objects as a topic of epigram; (2) the topic of the ἀρχὴ κακῶν; (3) the μακαρισμός which is here inverted to a σχετλιασμός; (4) imprecation against unknown inventors and originators; and (5) the tradition of mock-ferocious ἀραί in poetry. The meaning, therefore, of these twelve lines as Nisbet and Hubbard understand them appears to be as follows: Horace is here humorously insulting the unknown planter of the tree, who is deemed ultimately responsible for the danger Horace has just suffered, by accusing him of patricide and other abominable crimes. The purpose of this paper is to add a sixth element to the list, which Nisbet and Hubbard appear to have overlooked; this, moreover, is sufficiently important to affect the overall interpretation of these lines.

There is a *topos* in ancient literature which we might call 'parentage as the cause of cruelty', and whose origin can be traced as far back as the following passage from the *Iliad* (16.33–35: Patroclus' speech to Achilles):

1 R. G. M. Nisbet/M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book 2* (Oxford 1978) 201–203.

νηλεές, οὐκ ἄρα σοί γε πατήρ ἦν ἱππότης Πηλεύς  
 οὐδὲ Θέτις μήτηρ· γλαυκὴ δέ σε τίκτε θάλασσα  
 πέτραι τ' ἠλίβατοι, ὅτι τοι νόος ἐστὶν ἀπηνής.

Two passages will suffice to illustrate how later poets imitated the rhetorical pattern of these lines, and will also serve as points of reference in the discussion that follows<sup>2</sup>.

Eur. *Tro.* 766–771 (Andromache to the absent Helen)

766 ὦ Τυνδάρειον ἔρνος, οὐποτ' εἶ Διός,  
 πολλῶν δὲ πατέρων φημί σ' ἐκπεφυκέναι,  
 Ἄλᾶστορος μὲν πρώτον, εἶτα δὲ Φθόνου  
 Φόνου τε Θανάτου θ' ὅσα τε γῆ τρέφει κακά.  
 770 οὐ γάρ ποτ' αὐχῶ Ζῆνά γ' ἐκφῦσαί σ' ἐγώ,  
 πολλοῖσι κῆρα βαρβάρους Ἑλλησί τε.

Catull. 64.154–157 (Ariadne to the absent Theseus)

*quaenam te genuit sola sub rupe laena,*  
 155 *quod mare conceptum spumantibus exspuit undis,*  
*quae Syrtis, quae Scylla rapax, quae vasta Carybdis,*  
*talia qui reddis pro dulci praemia vita?*

The characteristics which these three passages share are: (1) that the speaker, in order to reproach or denounce the addressee, makes a display of his or her extravagant fancies concerning the cause of the latter's undesirable nature; and (2) that the alleged cause is the heartlessness or monstrousness of the latter's parents.

If we notice the existence of this *topos* and its features identified above, then the passage of Horace cited at the beginning can be interpreted as being much more witty than Nisbet and Hubbard found it to be: Horace regards the tree-planter as the 'parent' of the 'villainous' tree which assaulted him, and by claiming that the 'parent' planter was an evildoer who committed many abominable crimes, he is not simply insulting the tree-planter, but is pronouncing the quasi-genetic background of the tree's 'wickedness'.

That Horace consciously made use of the 'parentage' *topos* in composing the present passage can be recognised even more clearly by examining the diction of these twelve lines, for this bears marked resemblances to that of the three examples cited above. In all of these four passages, the speaker first makes a considerable show of pronouncing the opinion that the addressee's parents are not ordinary human – much less divine – beings, offering instead a range of extremely unattractive probabilities. The expressions used for introducing this first part of the speech all serve to indicate that the speaker's words

<sup>2</sup> For other examples see A. S. Pease, *Publi Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Quartus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1935) 314–317.

are neither simple assertions nor uncertain surmises. This declarative tone is demonstrated by the words ἄρα ... ἦν<sup>3</sup> at Hom. *Il.* 16.33, by the words φημί and ἀύχῳ<sup>4</sup> at Eur. *Tro.* 767 and 770, by the use of a rhetorical question<sup>5</sup> at Catull. 64.154–157, and at Hor. *C.* 2.13.5 by the word *crediderim*.

Immediately after the enumeration of likely parents comes the concluding ‘argumentation’; this is expressed by a causal clause in the Homer passage (*Il.* 16.35 ὅτι τοι νόος ἐστὶν ἀπηνής), by an appositional phrase in Euripides (*Tro.* 771 πολλοῖσι κῆρα βαρβάροις Ἑλλησί τε), by a relative clause in Catullus (64.157 *talia qui reddis pro dulci praemia vita*), and by a pronominal phrase in Horace (*C.* 2.13.11–12 *te caducum in domini caput immerentis*). All thus constitute variations upon the identical theme.

Another aspect of Horace’s diction reinforces the connection with the *topos*. The planter not only ‘planted’ the tree (line 1: *posuit*), but also ‘brought it up’ (line 3: *produxit*). While the first verb is to be understood as being parallel to the words used for the begetting or bearing of a human child<sup>6</sup>, the second should be interpreted in the light of the following passages<sup>7</sup>:

Theoc. 3.15–17

νῦν ἔγνων τὸν Ἔρωτα· βαρὺς θεός· ἦ ῥα λεαίνας  
μαζὸν ἐθήλαζεν, δρυμῶ τέ νιν ἔτροφε μάτηρ,  
ὅς με κατασμύχων καὶ ἐς ὀστίον ἄχρῳς ἰάπτει.

*Id.* 23.19

ἄγριε παῖ καὶ στυγνέ, κακῶς ἀνάθρεμμα λεαίνας.

Verg. *Aen.* 4.365–367

*nec tibi diva parens generis nec Dardanus auctor,  
perfide, sed duris genuit te cautibus horrens  
Caucasus Hyrcanaeque admorunt ubera tigres.*

These diatribes clearly show that in ancient poetry the cause of someone’s cruelty was as ‘reasonably’ ascribable to his rearer as to his parent. Therefore, the word *produxit* used by Horace corresponds to the terminology used for suckling a human (or divine) baby; the tree which assaulted Horace is said to have been ‘reared by the sacrilegious hand of a villain’, just as other poetic villains are said to have been suckled by lionesses or tigresses.

3 See J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford 1954) 36–37.

4 For the meaning ‘feel confident’ of ἀύχῳ see W. S. Barrett, *Euripides Hippolytus* (Oxford 1964) 343.

5 The monstrous parentage of Theseus is here taken for granted and a choice is allowed only among such possibilities.

6 Cf. the parallel passages cited above: τίκτη (Hom. *Il.* 16.34), ἐκφῶσαι (Eur. *Tro.* 770) and *genuit* (Catull. 64.154).

7 For other examples cf. Ov. *Met.* 9.612–614; *Tr.* 1.8.43–44; and *ibid.* 3.11.3–4.

(ii) Ovid, *Amores* 1.12

Some similarities between Hor. C. 2.13.1–12 and Ov. *Am.* 1.12 have been observed by commentators<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, the nature of the resemblance between the two poems has not hitherto been made sufficiently clear; to cite the words of Nisbet and Hubbard<sup>9</sup>, “Ovid must be largely influenced by Horace, but there may have been other literary antecedents of which we know nothing”.

Ovid's other antecedents, however, are not beyond recovery. *Amores* 1.12 exhibits, to some degree, the influence of the *topos* ‘parentage as the cause of cruelty’, and this *topos* provides the most important cause of similarity between the two poems.

Ovid talks about the wax (*cera*) of the tablets (*tabellae*) which have returned from Corinna with the words of refusal:

9–10 *quam* [sc. *ceram*], *puto, de longae collectam flore cicutae*  
*melle sub infami Corsica misit apis.*

The crucial point of humour in this passage, as I think, cannot be appreciated, unless we notice the connection with the ‘parentage’ *topos*, and realise the absurdity of applying ‘the law of inheritance’ to an artificial object. The flowers from which the wax was made and the bees which gathered it are regarded as its ‘parents’; Ovid ascribes both the ‘wickedness’ of the wax which so mishandled its mission and its ‘coarseness’ to quasi-genetic factors: it has betrayed itself, as Ovid believes, to have come from poisonous hemlock-flowers, via Corsican bees (notorious for the bitterness of their honey).

After turning to the tablets themselves and cursing them (13–14), Ovid makes the following assertion (15–20):

15 *illum etiam, qui vos* [sc. *tabellas*] *ex arbore vertit in usum,*  
*convincam puras non habuisse manus;*  
*praebuit illa arbor misero suspendia collo,*  
*carnifici diras praebuit illa cruces;*  
*illa dedit turpes raucis bubonibus umbras,*  
20 *volturis in ramis et strigis ova tulit.*

Here too, the speaker's detection of dreadful heredity peculiar to the ‘parentage’ *topos* is easily perceived. Ovid's conjecture, moreover, is introduced

8 For the similitudes already noted see especially J. C. McKeown, *Ovid, Amores: Text, Prolegomena, and Commentary* (Liverpool 1987) ii. 327, 330, 331. However, the following remark of McKeown (330) contains little that is correct: “Horace's ἀγαί are directed against the tree and its planter; Ovid goes one better, cursing the tablets, the carpenter and the tree.” Since Horace actually utters no word of cursing (ἀγαί), Ovid's cursing of the tablets (he curses nothing else) has little to do with the ode of Horace.

9 Nisbet/Hubbard (n. 1) 203.

with a highly declarative verb *convincam* (16)<sup>10</sup>. The conventional interpretation of these lines as straightforward invective<sup>11</sup> therefore needs a fundamental revision; otherwise we shall miss the Ovidian humour. The carpenter who made the tablets and the tree which provided the material are regarded as the 'parents' of the tablets, whose character was formed by the impure hands of the one and the sinister association of the other<sup>12</sup>.

10 Cf. ἄρα ... ἦν at Hom. *Il.* 16.33; φημί, ἀνχῶ at Eur. *Tro.* 767, 770; and *crediderim* at Hor. *C.* 2.13.5.

11 E.g. McKeown (n. 8) 323, 330.

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