

QUIS . . . DIGNE SCRIPSERIT?  
THE TOPOS OF ALTER HOMERUS  
IN HORACE C. 1.6.

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*Quis Martem tunica tectum adamantina  
digne scripserit aut pulvere Troico  
nigrum Merionen aut ope Palladis  
Tydiden superis parem?*

Horace C. 1.6.13–16<sup>1</sup>

THE GERMANE ANSWER TO HORACE'S rhetorical question has been a matter of strenuous dispute among modern philologists. Nisbet and Hubbard's erudite commentary<sup>2</sup> (hereafter N-H) provides a convenient conspectus (and critique) of the different opinions:

Peerlkamp argued that the only reasonable reply is *nemo*, and accordingly deleted the last two stanzas as an absurd interpolation; this makes the whole poem intolerably lame. Meineke and Lehrs deleted the fourth stanza; this at least leaves the poem coherent, but the lines sound Horatian, and no reason for interpolation can be suggested. Housman . . . placed the fourth stanza after the first, reading *qui* for *quis*; but the resulting relative clause is rambling, one would expect *et* for *aut*, and after *gesserit* the disparate *scripserit* is awkward.

Fraenkel suggests that the rhetorical question could admit the answer "no ordinary poet and certainly not I;" he thinks that after the initial stanza Horace "is far less concerned with what Varius might be able or unable to achieve than with what he, Horace, feels absolutely unable to undertake . . . ." (87–88)

Despite this divergence of scholarly opinion, there are, I submit, compelling reasons, both extrinsic and intrinsic, for endorsing D. A. Russell's answer (as reported in N-H): "only another Homer."

To begin with the intrinsic: the opening lines of the Ode explicitly designate Varius as a bard comparable to, if not on a par with, Homer:

*Scriberis Vario fortis et hostium  
victor Maeonii carminis alite*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Citations of the Odes are from the OCT of E. C. Wickham and H. W. Garrod, *Q. Horati Flacci Opera* 2 (Oxford 1901).

<sup>2</sup>R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book 1* (Oxford 1970), *Book 2* (Oxford 1978).

<sup>3</sup>My argument does not turn on the vexed choice between the readings *aliti* and *alite*, since the metaphoric equation of Varius with the Homeric "swan" remains intact in either case. For a balanced presentation of the evidence, consult N-H at line 2.

The metaphor, *Maeonii carminis alite*, sponsors Varius as a worthy successor to Homer, and, by implication, a fitting encomiast of Agrippa. In its context, no less than in its extravagant sentiment, the accolade anticipates the rhetorical question to follow in lines 13–16.

The descriptive topics that the speaker lists as lying beyond his competence (the grammatical objects of *scripserit*) constitute a virtual *praeteritio* of quasi-Homeric scenes.<sup>4</sup> As specific agenda for a heroic poem on the exploits of Agrippa, the list is not, strictly speaking, pertinent (a fact that accounts for the distrust of Housman *et al.*). The *rhetorical* purpose of the list, however, is to reinforce the earlier point that the ideal singer of the *laudes Agrippae* is stylistically required to become an *alter Homerus* if he is to do full justice to the *laudandus*. The emphatic repetition of the key verb *scribo* in the *reprise* (cp. 14: *scripserit* with 1: *scriberis*) serves to highlight the thematic parallelism between the two segments of the poem. The direct recall of the prooemia of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in lines 5–7<sup>5</sup> is carried forward in the Homeric imitations of lines 13–16. Thus the very question as formulated by the speaker implicitly contains its own answer: Agrippa's surrogate *laudator* must, *a fortiori*, be another Homer. Since the qualified poet has already been conspicuously named as Varius, the speaker deliberately (and with telling economy) avoids restating the obvious.<sup>6</sup>

Now to the extrinsic evidence. Horace's *aporia* in the face of the encomiastic program (the *laudes Agrippae*) has an apt, though generally overlooked,<sup>7</sup> precedent in Ennius' *Scipio*. A notice in the *Suda* (s.v. Ἐννίος) is our authority for reconstructing the Ennian version of the *topos*:

Σκιπίωνα γὰρ ἄδων καὶ ἐπὶ μέγα τὸν ἄνδρα ἐξᾶραι βουλόμενός φησι μόνον ἂν Ὅμηρον ἐπαξίους ἐπαίνους εἰπεῖν Σκιπίωνος.

By claiming, albeit paradoxically, that only Homer could do justice to so great a *laudandus* (cp. ἐπαξίους ἐπαίνους εἰπεῖν with the phrase *digne scripserit*)<sup>8</sup> the encomiast engineers a deft triple compliment—to Scipio, to Homer, and to himself. As always in such cases, it is impossible to deter-

<sup>4</sup>N-H (at lines 13; 14; 15) meticulously point out the un-Homeric details. Despite these minute discriminations, the dominant impression of the pseudo-epic sketches is that *typical* Homeric characters and styles are being imitated, if not reproduced (see the commentaries of Nauck and Wickham, *ad loc.*).

<sup>5</sup>The standard commentaries routinely match *stomachum* with μῆνιν and *duplisis* with πολύτροπον.

<sup>6</sup>Horace's remark in *Sat.* 1.10.43–44 bears on Varius' preeminence as a composer of epic: "*forte epos acer / ut nemo Varius ducit*" (where *nemo* relates to the set of contemporary poets).

<sup>7</sup>An exception is the brief notice in Keller-Holder at lines 12 ff.

<sup>8</sup>It is noteworthy that Vergil twice in the *Eclogues* (4.3; 9.36) employs the cognate *dignus* in the context of poetic adequacy. In the latter instance Varius is one of two poets held up as poetic paragons ("swans"): *neque adhuc Vario videor nec dicere Cinna / digna sed argutos inter strepere anser olores*.

mine conclusively on the basis of a Greek paraphrase whether Horace actually echoes the *Scipio* or simply avails himself of a standard epideictic *topos*.<sup>9</sup> In either event, the writers' expressed deference seems calculated to magnify their respective *laudandi* by invoking the paragon of Homer's art (cp. the *Suda*: ἐπὶ μέγα τὸν ἄνδρα ἐξάραι βουλόμενος). Modesty in these disavowals is usually part of a rhetorical stance. Ennius evidently went on to praise Scipio in his lost poem; and Horace, in his usual tongue-in-cheek manner, proceeds to demonstrate by his specimens of epic diction in the Ode under consideration that he can indeed handle abbreviated encomia within the generic constraints of lyric.

As is well known, Ennius is reported to have made the bold claim, in the proem to the *Annales*, to be Homer reincarnate.<sup>10</sup> Whether we take the metaphysical aspect of the claim figuratively or at face value, there are, as we have seen, strong *rhetorical* grounds for a *laudator* to advance such an extravagant notion—the promotion of his *laudandus*. Since Horace echoes Ennius elsewhere in the *Carmina* in the context of poetic claims (most conspicuously in the epitaphic close of C. 2.20),<sup>11</sup> we may reasonably infer that he was probably familiar with the *Annales* and the *Scipio* (and, by extension, with their eulogistic motifs). This inference is substantiated by a passage in an Ode that may fittingly be labelled "Horace's encomium of encomiastic poetry" (C. 4.8), where he alludes, in a series of circumlocutions, to Ennius' *laudes Scipionis*:

*non celeres fugae  
reiectaeque retrorsum Hannibalis minae,  
non incendia Carthaginis impiae  
eius, qui domita nomen ab Africa  
lucratus rediit, clarius indicant  
laudes quam Calabrae Pierides . . .*

15–20

Though the text of the passage is, in part, suspect,<sup>12</sup> the sense of the whole is not seriously in doubt: the exploits of Scipio Africanus the Elder, however glorious in themselves, depend for their fame on the work of his poetic *laudator*, Ennius. The specific characterization of Ennius as "another Ho-

<sup>9</sup>See O. Skutsch, *The Annals of Q. Ennius* (Oxford 1985) 3.

<sup>10</sup>For the most recent, authoritative discussion of the relevant fragments of the proem, consult Skutsch 147–153.

<sup>11</sup>Cp. lines 21–24 with the exhortation forbidding mourning in the epitaph attributed to Ennius *apud* Cicero *Tusc.* 1.34; 1.117; *De sen.* 20.73. Once again there can be no final adjudication of the issue of commonplace versus intended allusion. On the *communis locus* consult the literature cited in N-H at C. 2.20. Horatian references to Ennius are conveniently assembled in Skutsch (above, n. 9) 14–15.

<sup>12</sup>On the metrical and historical grounds for indicting line 17 (e.g., lack of caesura; violation of Meineke's canon; apparent confusion of the two Scipios) see the useful review in Wickham's commentary. See further G. Jachmann, "Calabrae Pierides," *Philologus* 90 (1935) 331–351.

mer" was a contemporary critical cliché, as Horace himself indicates at *Epist.* 2.1.50–52:

*Ennius et sapiens et fortis et alter Homerus,  
ut critici dicunt, leviter curare videtur  
quo promissa cadant et somnia Pythagorea.*

There is another significant link between Varius and Ennius in terms of literary genre: both composed successful plays bearing the title *Thyestes*. Varius' piece of that name is supposed to have been performed two years after Actium (see, e.g., N-H 81). Many commentators correctly understand an allusion to the theme of this highly acclaimed play<sup>13</sup> in the Horatian phrase, *saevam Pelopis domum* (line 8). If Varius' tragedy is indeed the specific target of reference, then its juxtaposition with the Homeric tags is meaningful. The effect of the association of themes is twofold: it obliquely continues the audacious suggestion of parity of *ingenium* between Varius and Homer, and it reconfirms the conventional critical axiom that tragedy and epic share a comparable level of stylistic decorum.

In conclusion, the indirect testimony of Ennius' *laudes Scipionis* corroborates the internal argument of Horace's measured disavowal of the *laudes Agrippae*. Thus the coherent answer to the speaker's bold rhetorical question is, to expand on Russell, "only an *alter Homerus* such as Varius has proved to be."

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<sup>13</sup>The high reputation that Varius' play enjoyed in antiquity is perhaps echoed in the judgment of Quintilian: *Vari Thyestes cuilibet Graecarum comparari potest* (*Inst. or.* 10.1.9).