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### Author

Lam, Erin

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# THE CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPES OF HORACE'S POETIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE *ODES*

By Erin Lam

I would like to thank the Classics department and especially my mentor Kathleen McCarthy for her helpful guidance in the course of my thesis research. I begin this paper with a question: How do we distinguish ourselves from those who have gone before us? In an academic setting such as Berkeley, many of us struggle with this question when trying to produce our own original research, attempting to balance originality with tradition in our respective disciplines. Classical Roman poets such as Horace dealt with the same struggle when composing their poetry. Horace stands within a long tradition of Greek and Roman lyric, and sought to establish himself as a lyric poet in the *Odes*, yet to also distinguish himself as unique and innovative. In my research, I explore how this dilemma plays out in the construction of settings within the *Odes*.

My overall project investigates the ways in which the Roman poet Horace uses space and landscape in the *Odes* to anchor and legitimize his poetic autobiography, while manipulating this space and landscape to demonstrate his poetic prowess. I do this by examining which features make a landscape a constructed one, and how these constructed landscapes serve as the settings for Horace's poetic autobiography. In this paper, I will focus on one particular poem, *Fons Bandusiae*, to provide specific examples of the themes I have observed in many of the *Odes*. I will explore how the unreal and constructed nature of the scene is established, first, through aesthetic details, and second, through the manipulation of time. I will then conclude with what this constructed unreal setting adds to this episode of Horace's poetic autobiography.

This summer I close read a selection of Horace's *Odes* in Latin and read current literary criticism on Horace and the subjects that I am interested in. My aim was to clarify these following terms that are central to my claims.

So what, then, is “poetic autobiography?” In the context of this paper, “poetic autobiography” can be defined in two ways. First, it is an autobiography that is written into the poet’s work. The poet may leave clues about his life scattered throughout the poetry or describe certain events that have occurred and places that he has been to.<sup>1</sup> Second, it is a statement of the poet’s style and worldviews expressed through his poetry –in other words, the poet’s self-assertion of who he is in relation to the tradition of his genre, in this case, lyric.

Next, let us tackle the term “constructed landscape” as a category of setting. You can think of setting as existing on a spectrum, with one extreme being a “real” landscape and the opposite extreme being an “unreal” or “fantastic” landscape, one that you could not actually visit. For example, an underworld scene would take place in an unreal landscape. At some point between the two ends is the “idealized” landscape. This is a setting in which the author stresses pleasant characteristics while omitting or downplaying the negative.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, a constructed landscape is both more real and more unreal than an idealized landscape. At first glance, a constructed landscape may seem extremely realistic, for it draws on characteristics of the real landscape, both good and bad. However, upon further examination, the constructed landscape is revealed to be fantastic in some way. One could potentially visit the place that a constructed landscape is based on, but would likely not see the exact same features that the poet describes.

Now then, let’s take a look at Horace’s *Fons Bandusiae*, which I have translated from the original Latin (see Fig.1.):

O Fons Bandusiae, more brilliant than glass,  
 worthy of sweet unmixed wine and flowers too,  
 tomorrow you will be presented with a young goat,  
 whose brow, swollen with horns  
 that are his first, destines for him both love and battles  
 in vain, for he will stain your ice cold  
 streams with red blood,  
 the offspring of a playful herd:

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1 Barbara Graziosi, “Horace, Suetonius and the Lives of the Greek Poets.” In *Perceptions of Horace: A Roman Poet and His Readers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140-160.

2 Thomas E. Page, ed. *Virgil. P. Vergili Maronis Bucolica* (London: Macmillan, 1891).

you, whom the fierce hour of the burning Dog Star  
does not know how to touch, you offer lovely coldness  
to bulls tired from the plow  
and to a wandering herd.

You too will be one of the noble fountains  
with me speaking of the oak placed on the hollow  
rocks, whence the talkative  
clear waters of yours leap down.

This poem is in the form of a hymn to the Bandusian fountain, or spring. I had the privilege to visit the alleged spring this summer with the American Academy in Rome Classical Summer School using my SURF funding. This spring is identified primarily by speculation, using setting clues from Horace's poems, and so cannot be concretely called the Bandusian fountain. Nevertheless, it is useful for one to get an idea of the sort of place Horace may have seen and by which he was inspired to write poetry.

The structure of the poem is as follows: the first two lines are an introduction of the fountain, embedded with praises. Lines 3-8 describe the sacrifice of a young goat. Lines 9-12 are praise for what the fountain provides, that is, rest for weary animals and respite from the heat. In the last lines, 13-16, Horace promises poetic immortality for the fountain via the immortality of his own work, and therefore himself in his work.

Let us begin with the aesthetic features of the scene, which are carefully arranged. There are several pairs of opposites within the poem: color, represented by the red blood of the goat, is contrasted with the absence of color, the clarity of the fountain's waters. Heat is juxtaposed with cold: the heat of the goat's blood and the heat of the Dog Star, with the frigid cold of the fountain's waters. Then there is light and darkness. The fountain is brighter than glass and the heat from the Dog Star is accompanied by light, while the location in which the fountain is positioned is shadowy, for the oak provides shade and grows above a cave, another dark space. Although Horace describes a natural scene, the juxtaposition of opposites draws attention to the unnatural quality of the scene surrounding the fountain. Horace deliberately highlights these extremes, building a location that is unreal due to its careful arrangement of natural elements.

Furthermore, time does not progress in a linear fashion in the poem. The poem begins with a prediction. Horace addresses the fountain, promising that “tomorrow, you will be presented with a young goat” (line 3). The use of the future tense as well as the time indicator “tomorrow” at the very beginning of the poem lead the reader to believe that the entire poem will be set in the future. This prediction continues in the second stanza with “he will stain” (line 6) and the future sense of “destines” (line 5).

Horace abruptly switches into the present tense in the third stanza, with “does not know” (line 10) and “you offer” (line 12). Though the present tense leads one to believe initially that this stanza is firmly anchored in the present, closer examination changes this conclusion. The fountain and its surroundings are frozen in time; that is, the Dog Star, which represents midday or summer,<sup>3</sup> does not touch it, so that it remains in a permanent cold state and is essentially timeless, or outside of time. This shift from the second stanza to the third, from future to present tense, also marks Horace’s rewinding of time. Although the waters are stained in the second stanza, they become lovely again in the third (*amabile* line 10), and clear in the fourth (*lymphae* line 16). He restores the purity of the fountain and the overall scene after it was sullied by the goat’s blood. The reason I say that this is a rewinding rather than a cleansing, as water does flow and would wash away blood, is because of this shifting in tense. We, the readers, have taken a step back, from the future to the present, with this shifting in tenses. In addition, Horace makes no mention of the water washing away the blood, leaving out an essential step in the transition from stained water to clear water. The use of a charged term such as “stain,” which in Latin (as well as in English) possesses the connotation of spoiling, corrupting, or tainting, signifies that the water is too sullied to allow for the simple solution of the dirtied water flowing away.

With this rewinding, it becomes clear that the image of the goat is an elaborate prediction, including a projected, nonexistent future. Horace laments the fact that the goat will not be able to experience its “love and battles” (line 5) because it will be sacrificed. Yet, that sacrifice is completely undone by the third stanza, so the goat’s future actually comes back into existence. Horace plays with the flow of time, juxtaposing the mutability

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3 Quinn, Kenneth, ed. *Horace. The Odes* (Basingstoke, New Hampshire: Macmillan Education 1980), 3.13.14-15n.

of the goat's future with the fixed time of the fountain, thus adding to the unreal quality of the scene.

In the fourth stanza, Horace reverts to future tense to put forth a final prediction: that the fountain will be honored as one of the noble fountains (line 13). He does end with present tense, however, since he is "speaking" (line 14) and the waters of the spring "leap down" (line 16), combining the future tense of the first two stanzas with the present of the third, a point I will return to later in this talk.

The rewinding of time represents the rejection of the goat as a suitable offering, for this sacrifice actually ruins the qualities that are so praiseworthy in the fountain. Again, the staining of the water with blood introduces both color and heat, and also represents a perversion of the fountain's function as a sanctuary for weary animals (lines 11-12). Instead, Horace offers poetic immortality for the fountain in the last stanza.

If we go back and read the poem with this poetic offering in mind, that the poetry itself is the gift, our reading begins to gain another level of meaning. Throughout the poem, Horace paints a scene of nature surrounded or shaped by culture. The animals in the scene are subdued by man: the goat by death and the weary cattle by domestication and labor. In the first line, the fountain is compared to glass, a creation of culture. The personifications of the Dog Star as unknowing (line 9) and the waters as talkative (lines 15-16) claim these natural entities as part of human culture. Finally, the premise of the poem is that there will be a festival to honor fountains the next day,<sup>4</sup> which represents man's honoring of nature within a cultural setting. Culture results from man's knowledge and manipulation of the world, and this permeation of culture throughout the scene points to the constructed quality of the landscape.

The poem thus becomes Horace's shaping of the natural scene, and his creation or offering to the fountain. The contrasting juxtapositions of aesthetic details mentioned before become a decoration to the poem, for contrast draws attention to the unique qualities of each of the individual elements as well as their composition as a whole. The unrealities of time and place are precisely what Horace is offering – this scene is only possible within this poem.

Finally, let us return to the concept of poetic autobiography. What has Horace really accomplished with this complex offering and rejection of offering depicted in the poem? What portrait of himself has he painted?

First, we have Horace as a pious worshipper, participating in rituals of sacrifice. Other poets such as Sappho have taken this role earlier in the lyric tradition.<sup>5</sup> Horace, however, individualizes his worship with the rejection of a typical offering and its replacement by his unique poetic gift.

Next, we have the poet as a prophet, another traditional role.<sup>6</sup> Horace once again injects his personal touch in establishing this role. Instead of simply predicting what will happen in the future, Horace demonstrates an ability to manipulate time, at least within the realm of poetry.

These two roles have a common thread: the idea that the poet possesses some special power that ordinary people do not. The only place where the poet is mentioned in the entire poem is in the last stanza, marking it off as special. Now, I return to the mixing of tenses in the fourth stanza to explain the presence of the poet. The two times or existences described in the poem, that of the sacrificed goat and that of the fountain, cannot coexist, for the fountain cannot be simultaneously forever pure and stained with blood. I have argued that Horace rewinds the future scene of the sacrifice so that it does not occur, but this does not fully resolve the tension between the two scenes, nor the fact that they represent two different times in a single location. So how can this disunity be resolved? The verb tenses I mentioned before may hold an answer (see Fig.2). I have translated the present active participle "*dicente*" as "speaking." As we have seen earlier, the present tense is used when Horace describes the timeless state of the fountain. The present active participle doesn't necessarily signify present tense, however. It is used to describe time contemporaneous with that of the main verb, and so the phrase "with me speaking" is attached to the previous verb, "you will be," which is in the future. Horace is effectively linking the future of the rejected sacrifice with the present tense timeless existence of the fountain. The poet himself is what effects and enables this connection, for "with me speaking" is a single grammatical unit in Latin (*me dicente* line 14). The unity of the entire poem, the combination of the two existences to create a single place, depends on the poet.

Furthermore, this last stanza is also the only stanza in which place is explicitly referred to. The word "*unde*" in Latin (line 15), which I have translated as "whence," can also mean "from where." It is true that the entire poem is implicitly about place, for every time the fountain is addressed in the second person, this is a mention of the location. And indeed, the bulk of my argument thus far has been in establishing that the

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5 Campbell, David A., ed. *Greek Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 261.

6 James L Kugel, *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990).

entire poem functions as a special place. However, it is telling that this stanza is where he draws our attention to the setting. *This* is the place that the poet inhabits, the place that he has made special and that in turn has made him special.

In conclusion, we have seen within this poem the transformation of a real place, to a constructed place, to one centered on autobiography. Horace envisions a time and an existence in which the fountain is immortalized by his poetry. As this fountain is glorified in future generations, Horace's own work is also perpetuated. It is this work, which demonstrates his poetic style and ability, as well as his poetic persona, that Horace seeks to preserve.

## Appendix

<i>O fons Bandusiae splendidior vitro, dulci digne mero non sine floribus,</i>	O Fons Bandusiae, more brilliant than glass, worthy of sweet unmixed wine and flowers too,
<i>cras donaberis haedo,</i>	tomorrow you will be presented with a young goat,
<i>cui frons turgida cornibus</i>	whose brow, swollen with horns
<i>primis et venerem et proelia destinat; frustra: nam gelidos inficiet tibi rubro sanguine rivos lascivi suboles gregis.</i>	that are his first, destined for him both love and battles in vain, for he will stain your ice cold streams with red blood, the offspring of a playful herd:
<i>te flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae nescit tangere, tu frigus amabile</i>	you, whom the fierce hour of the burning Dog Star does not know how to touch, you offer lovely coldness
<i>fessis vomere tauris praebes et pecori vago.</i>	to bulls tired from the plow and to a wandering herd.



<i>fies nobilium tu quoque fontium</i>	You too will be one of the noble fountains
<i>me dicente cavis inpositam ilicem</i>	with me speaking of the oak placed on the hollow
<i>saxis, unde loquaces</i>	rocks, whence the talkative
<i>lymphae desiliunt tuae.</i>	clear waters of yours leap down.
<i>O fons Bandusiae splendidior vitro,</i>	O Fons Bandusiae, more brilliant than glass,
<i>dulci digne mero non sine floribus,</i>	worthy of sweet unmixed wine and flowers too,
<i>cras donaberis haedo,</i>	<b>tomorrow you will be presented</b> with a young goat,
<i>cui frons turgida cornibus</i>	whose brow, swollen with horns
<i>primis et venerem et proelia <b>destinat;</b></i>	that are his first, <b>destines</b> for him both love and battles
<i>frustra: nam gelidos <b>inficiet</b> tibi</i>	in vain, for <b>he will stain</b> your ice cold
<i>rubro sanguine rivos</i>	streams with red blood,
<i>lascivi suboles gregis.</i>	the offspring of a playful herd:
<i>te flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae</i>	you, whom the fierce hour of the burning Dog Star
<i><b>nescit</b> tangere, tu frigus amabile</i>	<b>does not know how</b> to touch, <b>you offer</b>
<i>fessis vomere tauris</i>	lovely coldness
<i><b>prae</b>bes et pecori vago.</i>	to bulls tired from the plow and to a wandering herd.
<i><b>fies</b> nobilium tu quoque fontium</i>	<b>You</b> too <b>will be</b> one of the noble fountains
<i>me <b>dicente</b> cavis inpositam ilicem</i>	with me <b>speaking</b> of the oak placed on the hollow
<i>saxis, unde loquaces</i>	rocks, whence the talkative
<i>lymphae <b>desiliunt</b> tuae.</i>	clear waters of yours <b>leap down.</b>

Note: Blue represents future tense/sense; Orange represents present.

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