
T.S. Johnson has now augmented his previous studies on various aspects of Horace’s lyric output\(^1\) with a monograph that puts forward a novel interpretation of the iambic strain that recurs throughout the poet’s corpus. ‘Iambic’ in this account is defined not by meter, but by the genre of invective (iambos). Although the main focus of the exposition is on the Epodes and select Odes (Chapters 1 through 5), a final chapter is devoted to the Ars Poetica, primarily with respect to the opening and closing denigrations of the poor artist and the demented poetaster, respectively. Passages from the Satires and Epistles are frequently brought into play in support of the author’s central argument.

This thoroughly researched study develops a nuanced interpretation of Horatian invective that challenges the prevailing view of a radical disparity between the early iambic (‘hard’) detraction found in the Epodes and the later inoffensive (‘soft’) slander as represented by certain odes targeting amatory figures. Eschewing the assumption of a marked divide between iambic and lyric modalities, Johnson sets out to make the case that Horace integrates these seemingly incongruous strains into a discursive whole (‘fusion’ is a favorite word in his critical lexicon to characterize this integration). Thus he adopts an essentially dialectical approach to the speaker’s complex, often opposed, stances in individual poems in the Epodes and Odes. These stances and their concomitant personae are seen as complementing each other in a complex, dynamic unity. The analytic terms Johnson consistently employs to convey this ‘master-pattern’ include such Greek rhetorical lexemes as polyeideia, methexis and sympleke, and he applies throughout a threefold schema of poiesis according to which Horace makes invective and its associated rage “part of a larger iambic-lyric program featuring transgression, responsion and fusion” (p. 8). For the multiple theoretical foundations informing this schema, Johnson acknowledges his debt to scholarly investigations of religious ritual from a broad array of disciplinary perspectives.\(^2\) The book’s main thesis is adumbrated in a prelude called “A Personal Introduction” that also folds in elements of the author’s own intellectual biography.

\(^1\) These include the article: Sympotica Horatiana: Problems of Artistic Integrity (Philologus 141 (1997), 321-37), as well as a monograph on Book 4 of the Carmina (A Symposium of Praise: Horace returns to Lyric in Odes IV (Madison, WI, 2004)).

\(^2\) A typically extensive footnote (#15, pp. 8-9) refers to the seminal work of, among many others, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Walter Burkert, Victor Turner and Gregory Nagy.
Chapter One (entitled: “Non Res et Agentia Verba Lycamben: On Not Hunting Down Lykambes”) attempts to complicate, as well as clarify, Horace’s famous claim to primacy in Epistles 1.19.19-34 regarding the transplanting of “Parios iambos” to Italy. While discriminating between his own version of rage and Archilochus’ rabies, the speaker of the programmatic Epistle 1 selectively appropriates, though in a less damaging form, some aspects of the truculent manner that he ostensibly disavows. Here and throughout the rest of the book, Johnson uses the epithet “Lycambid” as a useful shorthand for the kind of slander that causes lethal harm to the victim. Horace’s practice is seen as avoiding a notably vicious extreme of the iambic register, but in such a way as to construct a Bakhtinian dialogic form composed of a ‘plurality’ or ‘diversity’ of critical voices. Thus Johnson’s Roman master circumvents an ‘either/or’ iambic manner in favor of an inclusive program that allows ‘responsion’ and ultimately produces a synthesis (‘fusion’) of vitriolic perspectives.

Chapter Two (“Society, Iambic Rage, and Self-Destruction”) contains an exposition of Epodes 1-7 along the lines sketched above. Johnson attributes to the speaker “complicating loyalties” in the first four Epodes in particular, and is not averse to interrogating the full measure of the poet’s friendship with Maecenas in his account of the opening poem in the collection. Since this subset of poems makes conspicuous reference to the Civil Wars, especially to the phase that culminated in Actium, Horace’s social-critical tone is represented as somewhat equivocal towards the young Octavian. More intriguing, in my view, is the imputation of self-criticism as an important element of the poet’s social/ethical diatribe, as exemplified in the Alfius epode, in which “finding Horace’s ‘professed’ simple life-style in a loan-shark’s wishful daydreams implicated the iambist in his own mockery” (p. 88).

Turning to Epodes 5 and 6, Johnson relates “Lycambid infection” to Horace’s aggressive denunciation of the Canidia figure and goes on to make comparisons between the justification of personal iambic vengeance on the speaker’s part and Augustus’ (retrospective) explanation for his motives in the Civil War as articulated late in his career in the monumental apologia of RG 2 (p. 109). Épode 7, which is a full-blown invective against Rome’s “propensity for civil bloodshed”, is exhibited as a climactic instance of the way Horace “progressively challenges societal boundaries by illustrating the infectious nature of aggression and its rage (. . .).” (p. 115).

In his third chapter (“Rage–Repression–Rage: Iambic Responsions (Epodes 8-15”)”), Johnson partially unpacks the intricate treatment of erotic themes in this group of poems and elaborates implicit parallels between sexual and ‘literary’ potency. Here he is at his interpretative best in demonstrating how Horace incorporates different tonal ‘registers’ (such as consolation, mockery and querulousness) in his portrayal of figures such as Chiron, Neaera and Maecenas. In short, he illustrates the subterfuges of an elastic poiesis that successfully extends the