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Alas, Posthumus by Horace

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Paul Shlichta
Alas, Posthumus

Horace
Eheu Fugaces (Odes II.14)

Alas, alas, my friend Posthumus,
The fleeing years slip quickly by.
No force or virtue can delay them—
We must grow wrinkled, age, and die.

Though you might sacrifice your oxen
Three hundred daily, cease not your fears.
You cannot sway relentless Pluto,
Huge Geryon's keeper, unlearned in tears.

The dismal waters which confine
Tityos, all of us must sail,
Though we be kings or lowly peasants;
No earthly gifts will then avail.

In vain we flee from blood-drenched combat,
Avoid the sea's engulfing tides.
In vain we shun the winds of autumn
For fear their chill might harm our hides.

Each in his turn must see Cocytos,
Flowing black in stagnant coils,
And meet the cursed spawn of Danaus
And Sisyphus, damned to age-long toils.

You'll leave your lands, dear wife, and household,
And though you briefly were the lord
Of well-kept forests, none will follow
Except the cypress—pyre wood!

An heir shall gulp your choicest vintage
And splash upon your pebbled floors
Wine fit to stand on high priests' tables—
The sweetest of your locked-up stores.

Commentary

Quintus Horatius Flaccus, or “Horace” (65–8 BC) was the most popular lyric poet of the Augustan era. Though he wrote many longer and more serious poems, such as his epodes, satires, epistles, and *Ars Poetica*, he is most famous for his odes—short poems based on Greek models—which the contemporary rhetorician Quintilian thought the only lyrics in Latin worth reading.

Horace’s odes are unique among Latin poems for their gentle lightheartedness. They sing the praises of everyday comforts, such as wine and good fellowship, and the follies of love. Their charm has endeared them to twenty centuries of readers, so that even in recent years, new translations into English free verse are still being published. As Spaeth put it: “no other [Latin] author has moved the pens of later poets so constantly to reproduction and imitation, none has sired so many parodies.”

It is particularly significant that Horace’s odes have often been translated into rhymed verse, such as Franklin P. Adams’ translations of odes 8 and 38 of Book 1. Rhyming and meter, perhaps because of their obvious artificiality, tend to confer a lightness that free verse is seldom able to achieve; hence the popularity of limericks. But this approach usually forces the translator to pay the price of deviation from fidelity; he must omit or poorly translate a word in order to fit the meter or find an appropriate rhyme.

It might be argued that this particular ode should not be so treated. It is almost unique among its fellows in being of a somber, almost morose mood, so that the lightness of rhyming might be inappropriate. But the translator had no choice; the meter and rhymes came unbidden. In the initial attempt at an exact prose translation, the first stanza seemed determined to frame itself into tetrameters, with “by” and “die” in rhyming positions. This fortuitous arrangement provided the inspiration for continuing in the same format.

Although the ultimate aim was to achieve a verse translation that corresponded as closely as possible to the original Latin, the rhymed metric format forced several omissions and compromises. Since Latin is more compressed than English, it was necessary to omit one or two adjectives in each stanza. Some phrases, such as “whoever of us enjoys the gift of [life

on] earth” in the third stanza, could not be persuaded to fit the format and had to be replaced by other phrases of similar mood.

Repeated revisions left considerable debris, including alternative versions wherein fidelity to the original was relaxed for poetic considerations. For example, one might replace “friend” with “dear” in the first stanza, “age-long” with “endless” in the fifth, “briefly were” with “were awhile” in the sixth, and “locked-up” with “sealed up” in the seventh. The ultimate departure from fidelity was a loosely translated parody, in which the classical images were replaced by modern equivalents:

J. P. Posthumus, ageing comrade,
In not too long you'll lose your hide;
And all the Mayo Brothers' clinics
Can't keep you from the Great Divide.

Don't think that charity donations
Will help you when your time comes due.
The Reaper is immune to bribing;
He's cut down bigger guys than you.

You're booked to sail on Charon's ferry
And can't ignore the boarding call.
You won't be in a first-class cabin;
It's steerage deck for one and all.

Don't try go get a draft deferment;
Or hug the shallows at the shore.
Don't hope that trips to spas and salons
Will keep the Reaper from your door.

We all must cross the river Jordan
And walk the fiery floorless pit
We'll see where Lizzie Borden's burning,
Watch Adolph turning on a spit.

You'll leave your townhouse, private golf course,
Your chorus girls in platinum fox,
And all the lumber shares you've cornered
Will merit you just one pine box.

Your kids will swill your bonded bourbon
And, dopes they are, dump down the sink
Your scotch, the match of any bishop's—
The stuff you never lived to drink.

The classical allusions are in some instances obscure. Geryon was a giant, variously described as having either three heads or three bodies. Tityos was another giant, the son of the Earth goddess, who was punished in Tartarus (for attempting to rape Leto) by having two vultures peck eternally at his liver. Cocytos was one of the five rivers encircling the underworld. Danaus instructed his fifty daughters, forced to marry their cousins, to kill their husbands on their wedding night; forty-nine did so. Sisyphus, a greedy and cruel king, notorious for his trickery, was punished in Hades by being forced to roll uphill a huge bolder that always escaped him and rolled back down.

In short, *Eheu fugaces* is filled with allusions to unpleasant characters and places and is pervaded by the somber inevitability of death. Nonetheless, like Horace's other delightful odes, it will continue to inspire translators and parodists for centuries to come.