

HORACE: ARS POETICA

Horace (65 BC- 8 BC) is a remarkable Latin lyric poet and satirist who lived under the emperor Augustus. He wrote Odes and verse Epistles dealing with the themes of love, friendship, philosophy, and the art of poetry.

His "Ars Poetica" or "The Art of Poetry" is a verse epistle written in (19 B.C.). It deals with the art of writing poetry and drama.

It was written in hexameter verse as an Epistle (or Letter) to Lucius Calpurnius Piso (the Roman senator and consul) and his two sons, and is sometimes referred to as the "Epistle to the Pisos."

It consists of 476 lines containing nearly 30 maxims for young poets.

THE PLAN OF ARS POETICA

Ars Poetica seems formless and unsystematic, but a closer examination shows a definite and well-marked scheme of treatment. The subject matter falls into three well-marked divisions:

1. *Poesis*: or the discussion of the subject matter of poetry.
2. *Poema*: or form.
3. *Poeta*: or poet.

Poesis

Poesis is the first part of Ars Poetica in which Horace discusses the subject matter of poetry.

- A poem must have organic unity
- The poet is free to indulge his fancy, but he must not create monsters or impossible figures.
- He must not lapse into absurdity.
- As in painting, so in a poem, all parts must be vitally connected with one another.
- There must exist a harmonious relationship between the parts and the whole.
- The subject should be chosen wisely. It must suit both the style and the powers of the poet and it should be simple and consistent.
- A wise discretion must be exercised in the use and choice of words. Sometimes a happy phrasing gives the most familiar word an air of novelty.
- A poet is free to coin new words and revive old ones, but this should be done with much discretion, only when absolutely necessary.
- Any word, old or new, which has the stamp of present usage, is permissible.
- There can be no stereotyped rules or conventions regarding the language of poetry.

- Language is like a tree, and words are leaves, which wither every year, and are succeeded by new ones.
- Usage is the only final arbiter or the final court of appeal.
- The poet may revive obsolete words, and thus give them currency. But all this should be done in moderation.
- Each particular genre should stick to the meter allotted to it by the ancient Greeks. For epic poetry, they used the iambic hexameter; for poems of complaint, elegiac verse, for tragedy or comedy, iambic verse, and hymns to the gods, odes to victory, and love poems, measures of a lyrical kind. This practice must be followed by every poet.

Poema

Poema is the second part of *Ars Poetica*. It is the most thoroughly handled of the three parts. In this part, drama as a form of poetry is discussed at length to the exclusion of the lyric and the epic.

1. Plot

- The plot should be based on old familiar stories, and novelty may be imparted by skillful treatment.
- New themes may be invented, but for their successful treatment, the poet requires great skill and art.
- When an old story is chosen, a slavish imitation of all details is not necessary, but care should be taken that the reshaping process is free from inconsistencies and absurdities.

- Comic themes should not be treated in the lofty vein of tragedy, nor tragic themes in the low vein of comedy.
- As regards plot construction, it is good to follow the example of Homer, and plunge straight into the middle. (*in medias res*)
- The beginning should be simple and straightforward.
- All unnecessary details should be avoided.
- All incidents should have a logical connection.

2. Characterization

- The poet must be true to Types.
- Characters must be consistent. Those drawn from tradition must preserve their traditional traits.
- The qualities of various characters must fit their respective ages. Thus children should be shown as quick to anger and quick to cool, boys fond of sport, reckless, fickle and high-spirited; the men of riper years as businesslike, ambitious and worldly-wise; and the old men always as critics of the new times and full of praises for the past, almost sluggish and cynical.

3. The dramatic style

- The dramatic style must vary by character, mood, and circumstance.
- Different tones must be associated with different moods and personalities. This is essential for verisimilitude.
- The dramatist must know what to represent on the stage and what to report to the audience. Ugly and horrible incidents should happen off the stage.
- A play should not have more or less than FIVE ACTS.
- There must not be more than THREE CHARACTERS in any one scene. The fourth character should never be introduced.
- The gods should not intervene in the action unless it is absolutely essential.
- The denouement should be the natural outcome of the incidents which have preceded, not the result of chance.
- The Chorus should form an integral part of the play. Its songs should forward the action of the play, and it, must “back the good, and give sage counsel.” It must check and control the passionate.
- The meter in which a long syllable is preceded by a short one is called an iambic meter. The syllables should be in groups of six. Spondees may be occasionally used for a change, “to make the movement sedate and slower.” the Greek models should be strictly followed. The poet who wants to achieve excellence must, “read them by day, and think of them by night.”

Poeta

- The art of poetry requires labor, long and persistent; polished workmanship is the outcome of incessant toil.
- A poem should be revised, blotted, and pruned several times until it attains artistic excellence and polish. It may be shown to some wiser and more skillful person and his advice taken.
- The poet must not be in a hurry to publish his work, “he should let it stand for over a decade”.
- The fountain source of good writing is a sound judgment which can best be found in the writings of Socrates. If the material is sound and is chosen wisely, apt words will follow without difficulty.
- A poet must be a keen observer of men and manners. He should constantly study the book of life and draw thence, “language true to life”.
- Excessive greed and love of money come in the way of good writing.
- Nobility and dignity of the soul are necessary.
- A poet should instruct, or please, or may combine both these functions. But for the sake of pleasing, he should not indulge in romantic extravagances and absurdities. Fictions made to please must keep close to the truth of things. He should aim at mixing pleasure with profit.

- He should be brief, and avoid all superfluity, for only then would the people pay attention to his instruction.
- The poet who mixes the sweet with the useful has everybody's approval. Such a book enriches the publisher and prolongs the fame of the author.
- Minor faults in poetry may be forgiven, because, "Even Homer nods". A poet should, however, try to avoid faults as much as he can. If there is much that shines in a poem, a few blemishes will not offend the reader.
- Poetry has great power and appeal. Great poets have been great prophets. So a poet should not feel ashamed of his office; he should be proud of his calling.
- It is frequently discussed whether a poet achieves greatness through nature or art. Both are essential for good poetry. Abundant wit or natural ability without sound workmanship, or mere workmanship without wit or inborn ability, is of no avail, Both wit and training are necessary,
- The idea of poetic madness or inspiration is absurd. Excess must be kept under restraint. A poet who relies on mere inspiration is generally laughed at.

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