

Horace's Ars Poetica

P.G. Semester II

CC – 07

Unit II

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In the Latin world, the most important and influential critic was Horace (65-8 BCE), or Quintus Horatius Flaccus, with his celebrated *Ars Poetica* ('Art of Poetry), also referred to as *De Arts Poetica to the Pisos* written as an epistle in verse, as a letter of advice to two young men having poetic ambitions, Horace's text is traditionally divided as by David H. Richter, into three parts.

- lines 1-41 are on *poesis* or subject matter;
- lines 42-294 on *poema* or technique; and
- line 295-476 on *poeta* or the poet;

Ars poetica is a body of rules and principles which intending poets will find useful in their composition. The treatise opens with Horace's stress on the need of observing organic unity and prosperity. He says, "If a painter should try to unite a horse's neck to a human head, and to add various features to limbs collected from every kind of animal, so that a woman's hair from above should end in a foul and ugly fish beneath, tell me, my friend, could you control your laughter, if admitted to a private view?"

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Poesis: Ars Poetical opens with the assertion that a poem must have an organic unity. The poet is free to indulge his fancy, but he must not create monsters or impossible figures. As in a painting, so in a poem, all the parts must be vitally connected with one another. A wise discretion must be exercised in the use and choice of words. A poet is at liberty to coin new words and revive the old ones, but this should be done with much discretion.

Language is like a tree, and words are leaves, which wither every year, and are succeeded by new ones. The poet may revive absolute words, and thus give them currency.

Each particular genre should stick to the meter allotted to it by the ancient Greeks. For epic poetry, they used by iambic hexameter; for poems of complaint, elegiac verse, for tragedy or comedy, iambic verse, and for hymns to the gods, odes to victory, and love poems, measures of a lyrical kind. This practice must be followed by every poet.

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