The full Latin text of Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (from Shackleton Bailey’s 2001 edition, except where indicated) appears on pages xii–xli. The original text is on the left-hand pages and my own translation appears on the right. Readers less familiar with the poem will want to begin by reading it in its entirety; others may find it useful to refer back to this translation as needed. In addition to offering readability of a fairly literal sort, the translation aims to reflect the reading of the poem offered in the present study.

1. I have removed Shackleton Bailey’s paragraph markings, for reasons detailed in my introduction.
Text

Humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam iungere si velit et varias inducere plumas undique collatis membris, ut turpiter atrum desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne, spectatum admissi risum teneatis, amici? credite, Pisones, isti tabulae fore librum persimilem cuius, velut aegri somnia, vanae fingentur species, ut nec pes nec caput uni reddatur formae. ‘pictoribus atque poetis quidlibet audendi semper fuit aqua potestas.’ scimus, et hanc veniam petimusque damusque vicissim; sed non ut placidis coeant immitia, non ut serpentes avibus geminentur, tigribus agni. inceptis gravibus plerumque et magna professis purpureus, late qui splendeat, unus et alter assuitur pannus, cum lucus et ara Dianae et properantis aquae per amoenos ambitus agros, aut flumen Rhenum aut pluvius describitur arcus. sed nunc non erat his locus. et fortasse cupressum scis simulare: quid hoc, si fractis enatat exspes navibus aere dato qui pingitur? amphora coepit institui: currente rota cur urceus exit? denique sit quidvis, simplex dumtaxat et unum. maxima pars vatum, pater et iuvenes patre digni, decipimur specie recti. brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio; sectantem levia nervi deficiunt animique; professus grandia turget; serpit humi tutus nimium timidusque procellae. qui variare cupit rem prodigaliter unam, delphinum silvis appingit, fluctibus aprum: in vitium ducit culpae fuga, si caret arte. Aemilium circa Ludum faber unus et unguis exprimet et mollis imitabitur aere capillos, infelix operis summa, quia ponere totum
Author’s Translation

Human—to a human head if a painter should wish
to join a horse’s neck, and make multi-colored feathers grow
on limbs gathered from all over, so that horribly in a black
fish-tail she ends, a beautiful woman up above,
would you, friends let in for a viewing, hold back your laughter? 5
Believe, Pisos, that just like that painting would be
a book, whose images will be fashioned to be empty, like
a sick man’s dreams, such that neither head nor foot can be reconciled
with a single form. “Painters and poets have
always had the same opportunity to dare whatever they wish.” 10
We know, and we ask for and we grant this indulgence by turns;
but not with the result that harsh things combine with gentle ones,
not with the result that
serpents be paired with birds, lambs with tigers.
Onto weighty beginnings and ones that announce great things often
one purple patch and another is sewn, which
may gleam widely, when the grove and altar of Diana
is described and the course of water rushing through pleasant
fields, or the river Rhine or a rainbow.
But now it was not the place for these. And perhaps you know how
to reproduce a cypress: what good is this, if he who is painted swims 20
hopeless away from broken ships, with money given? An amphora
begins
to be set up: why does a jug come off the running wheel?
In short, let it be what you wish, provided that it is simple and unified.
The greatest portion of poet-priests, o father and young men worthy
of the father,
[we] are deceived by the appearance of right. I work to be concise, 25
I become obscure; sinews and mind fail
the one who chases smooth things; the one who has professed great
things becomes inflated;
the one who plays too safe and is wary of the storm creeps on the
ground.
He who desires to vary a single theme unnaturally
paints a dolphin in the woods, a boar on the waves:
the avoidance of [one] fault leads to [another] vice, if done artlessly.
One workman around the Aemilian School will both press out
fingernails and imitate soft hair with bronze,
unhappy with the totality of the work, because he does not know
how to set forth
nesciet. hunc ego me, si quid componere curem, non magis esse velim quam naso vivere pravo,
spectandum nigris oculis nigroque capillo.
sumite materiam vestris, qui scribitis, aequam
viribus et versate diu quid ferre recusent,
quid valeant umeri; cui lecta pudenter erit res,
nec facundia deseret hunc nec lucidus ordo.
ordinis haec virtus erit et Venus, aut ego fallor,
it iam nunc dicat iam nunc debentia dici,
pleraque differat et praesens in tempus omittat.
hoc amet, hoc spernat promissi carminis auctor.
in verbis etiam tenuis cautusque serendis
dixeris egregie, notum si callida verbum
reddiderit iunctura novum. si forte necesse est
indiciis monstrare recentibus abdita rerum,
fingere cinctutis non exaudita Cethegis
continget dabiturque licentia sumpta pudenter;
et nova fictaque nuper habebunt verba fidem si
Graeco fonte cadent, parce detorta. quid autem
Caecilio Plautoque dabit Romanus ademptum
Vergilio Varioque? ego cur, acquirere pauc
si possum, invideor, cum lingua Catonis et Enni
sernomem patrium ditaverit et nova rerum
nomina protulerit? licuit semperque licebit
signatum praesente nota procudere numnum.
ut silvae foliis privos mutantur in annos,
prima cadunt *********
***** ita verborum vetus interit aetas
et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque.
debemur morti nos nostraque; sive receptus
terra Neptunus classis Aquilonibus arcet,
regis opus, sterilisve + diu palus+ aptaque remis
vicinas urbis alit et grave sentit aratrum,
the whole. I myself would not wish for me to be this man, if I should care to put something together, any more than [I would wish] to live with a crooked nose, though admired for my black eyes and black hair.

Take up material that is well-matched to your strengths, you who write, and keep turning over in your mind at length what your shoulders would refuse to bear, what they would be able to; the one who has chosen his subject matter sensibly, him neither eloquence nor clear arrangement will abandon. This will be the manly excellence and feminine charm of arrangement, unless I am mistaken, that he already now says things deserving to be said already now, and puts off many things and leaves them out for the present time.

Let the author of a promised song-poem love this thing, reject that one.

You, slender and cautious also in stringing together words, will have spoken outstandingly if a clever join gives back a familiar word as new. If it is perhaps necessary to show with recent symbols the hidden ones of things, it will fall to you to craft ones not heard by the girded Cethegi and a license taken up prudently will be granted; and words new and recently created will have trustworthiness if they fall from the Greek font, sparingly opened. What indeed will the Roman grant to Caecilius and Plautus that has been denied to Virgil and Varius? Why am I begrudged if I am able to add a few things, when the tongue of Cato and Ennius enriched the paternal conversation and brought forth new names of things? It has been permitted and always will be permitted to strike a coin marked with the present’s symbol.

Just as the woods are transformed in their leaves each year, the first [sc. leaves] fall, so the ancient age of words perishes and ones just born flourish in the manner of young men and are vigorous.

We are owed to death, we and our things; whether Neptune, received on land, guards the fleets against the North winds, the work of a king, or whether a †marsh, for a long time† sterile and suitable for oars, nourishes the neighboring cities and feels the heavy plow,
seu cursum mutavit iniquum frugibus amnis
doctus iter melius: mortalia facta peribunt,
nedum sermonum stet honos et gratia vivax.
unta renascentur quae iam cecidere, cadentque
quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,
 quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi.
res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella
quo scribi possent numero, monstravit Homerus.
versibus impariter iunctis querimonia primum,
post etiam inclusa est voti sententia compos;
quae tamen exiguos elegos emiserit auctor,
grammatici certant et adhuc sub iudice lis est.
Archilochum proprio rabies armavit iambro;
hunc socci cepere pedem grandesque cothurni
alternis aptum sermonibus et popularis
vincentem strepitus et natum rebus agendis.
Musa dedit fidibus divos puerosque deorum
et pugilem victorem et equum certamine primum
et iuvenum curas et libera vina referre.
descriptas servare vices operumque colores
cur ego si nequeo ignoroque poeta salitor?
cur nescire pudens prave quam discere malo?
versibus exponi tragicis res comica non vult;
indignatur item privatis ac prope socco
dignis carminibus narrari cena Thyestae.
singula quaeque locum teneant sortita decentem.
interdum tamen et vocem comoedia tollit
ratusque Chremes tumido delitigat ore
et tragicus plerumque dolet sermone pedestri
Telephus et Peleus, cum pauper et exsul uterque
proicit ampullas et sesquipedalia verba,
si curat cor spectantis tetigisse querela.
non satis est pulchra esse poemata; dulcia sunto,
et quocumque volent animum auditoris agunto.
up ridentibus arrident, ita flentibus afflent
humani vultus: si vis me flere, dolendum est
primum ipsi tibi. tum tua me infortunia laedent,
Telephe vel Peleu; male si mandata loqueris,
or whether a river has changed its course, unfair to crops,
having been taught to go a better way: mortal deeds will perish,
still less could the honor and lively charm of conversations stand.
Many things will be reborn which have already fallen, and the words
that are now [held] in honor will fall, if usage wills it,
in whose hands are judgment and the code and the norms of speech.
The deeds of kings and generals and sad wars—
in what meter these could be written, Homer showed.
First lamentation was enclosed within verses
joined unevenly, [and] afterwards also the expression
of [thanks for] a granted prayer;
which author, however, [first] sent forth slender elegies,
the grammarians dispute and the case is still under
[the consideration of] a judge.
Rage armed Archilochus with their own iamb;
the socks [of comedy] and the grand tragic boots took this [iamb] up,
well-suited for back-and-forth conversation and able to overcome
the popular uproar and born for doing things.
The Muse granted it to the lyre to tell of gods and the boys
of gods and the victorious boxer and the horse first in the contest
and the concerns of young men and the freedom of wine.
Why, if I am incapable of and ignorant at preserving the described
turns and colors of works, am I greeted as a poet?
Why do I wrongly prefer to be modestly unknowing than to learn?
Comic material does not wish to be set forth in tragic verses;
likewise, Thyestes’s banquet takes offense at being narrated
in song-poems that are private and almost worthy of the [comic] sock.
Let individual things keep to the proper place they have been allotted.
Sometimes, however, comedy also raises her voice
and angry Chremes disputes with a swollen mouth
and often tragic Telephus and Peleus express their pain
in pedestrian conversation, when each, a pauper and an exile,
flings forth bombast and sesquipedalian words,
if he is concerned with touching the spectator’s heart
with his complaint.
It is not enough for poems to be beautiful; they shall also be sweet,
and they shall lead the listener’s spirit wherever they wish.
Just as human faces laugh at laughing people, so they weep
at weeping ones: if you want me to weep, you yourself must
first feel pain. Then your misfortunes will hurt me,
Telephus or Peleus; if you speak things poorly entrusted to you,
aut dormitabo aut ridebo. tristia maestum
vultum verba decent, iratum plena minarum,
ludentem lasciva, severum seria dictu.
format enim Natura prius nos intus ad omnem
fortunarum habitum; iuvat aut impellit ad iram
aut ad humum maerore gravi deducit et angit;
post effert animi motus interprete lingua.
si dicentis erunt fortunis absona dicta,
Romani tollent equites peditesque cachinnun.
intererit multum divusne loquatur an heros,
maturus senex an adhuc florente iuventa
fervidus, et matrona potens an sedula nutrix,
mercatorne vagus cultorne virentis agelli,
Colchus an Assyrius, Thebis nutritus an Argis.
aut famam sequere aut sibi convenientia finge.
scriptor †honoratum† si forte reponis Achillem,
impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer
iura neget sibi nata, nihil non arroget armis.
sit Medea ferox invictaque, flebilis Ino,
perfidus Ixion, Io vaga, tristis Orestes.
si quid inexpertum scaenae committis et audes
personam formare novam, servetur ad imum
qualis ab incepto pro cesserit et sibi constet
†difficile est† propre communia dicere, tuque
rectius Iliacum carmen deducis in actus
quam si proferres ignota indictaque primus.
publica materies privati iuris erit, si
non circa vilem patulumque moraberis orbem,
nec verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus
interpres, nec desilies imitator in artum,
unde pedem proferre pudor vetet aut operis lex.
nec sic incipies ut scriptor cyclicus olim:
‘fortunam Priami cantabo et nobile bellum.’
I will either sleep or laugh. Gloomy words are fitting for a sad expression, words full of threats for an angry one, playful ones for a joking one, those serious to say for a stern one.

For Nature first shapes us on the inside for every circumstance of fortunes; she helps or drives us to anger, or leads us down to the ground with heavy grief and chokes us; afterwards, she brings out the motions of our souls with her interpreting tongue.

If the words of the one speaking are out of tune with his fortunes, the Roman knights and foot-soldiers will raise a cackle. It will matter a great deal whether a divinity is speaking or a hero, whether a mature old man or one hot with still-blooming youth, and a powerful married woman or a busy nurse, whether an itinerant merchant or the cultivator of a green little plot of land, a Colchian or an Assyrian, one reared at Thebes or at Argos. Either follow the received tradition or craft things that are in keeping with themselves.

If as a writer you happen to put back on stage †honored† Achilles, energetic, hot-tempered, relentless, fierce, let him deny that laws were born for him, let there be nothing that he does not refer to arms. Let Medea be ferocious and unconquered, Ino tearful, Ixion deceitful, Io a wanderer, Orestes unhappy. If you entrust something untried before to the stage and dare to craft a new character, let it be kept to its bottom such as it started from its top and let it be consistent with itself. †It is difficult† to say common things in one’s own way, and you will do better to render the song-poem of Ilium into acts than if you are the first to bring forth unknown and unspoken things. Public material will be of private ownership, if you do not linger around cheap and wide-open areas, and you will take care not to give back one word for one word, a faithful interpreter, nor will you, an imitator, jump down into a narrow spot, from where modesty or the law of genre may forbid you from bringing forth your foot. Nor will you begin thus as the cyclic writer once did: “The fortune of Priam I shall sing and the noble war.”
quid dignum tanto feret hic promissor hiatu?
parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.
quanto rectius hic qui nil molitur inepte!
‘dic mihi, Musa, virum, captae post tempora Troiae
qui mores hominum multorum vidit et urbis.’
non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare lucem
cogitat, ut speciosa dehinc miracula promat,
Antiphaten, Scyllamque et cum Cyclope Charybdin.
nec reditum Diomedis ab interitu Meleagri
nec gemino bellum Troianum orditur ab ovo.
semper ad eventum festinat et in medias res
non secus ac notas auditorem rapit, et quae
desperat tractata nitescere posse relinquit,
atque ita mentitur, sic veris falsa remiscet,
primo ne medium, medio ne discrepet imum.
tu quid ego et populus mecum desideret audi:
.si plausoris eges aulaea manentis et usque
sessuri donec cantor ‘vos plaudite’ dicat,
aetatis cuiusque notandi sunt tibi mores
mobilibusque decor naturis dandus et annis.
reddere qui voces iam scit puer et pede certo
signat humum, gestit paribus colludere, et iram
concipit ac ponit temere et mutatur in horas.
imberbis iuvenis, tandem custode remoto,
gaudet equis canibusque et aprici gramine Campi,
cereus in vitium flecti, monitoribus asper,
utilium tardus provisor, prodigus aeris,
sublimis cupidusque et amata relinquere pernix.
conversis studiis aetas animusque virilis
quaeveit opes et amicitias, inservit honori,
commisisse cavet quod mox mutare laboret.
multa senem circumveniunt incommoda, vel quod
What worthwhile thing could this promiser bring with such a gaping maw? The mountains will give birth, a ridiculous mouse will be born. How much more correctly this one [does], who sets nothing in motion ineptly!

“Tell me, Muse, of the man, who after the days of captured Troy saw the customs of many men and their cities.” He intends to produce not smoke from a spark, but light from smoke, so that he may bring forth brilliant marvels, Antiphates, and Scylla, and Charybdis together with the Cyclops.

Nor is the return of Diomedes arranged from the death of Meleager nor the the Trojan war from the twin egg. It hastens always to the outcome and snatches the listener into the middle of things not otherwise than if they were known, and those things which he worries are not able to gleam through his handling of them, he leaves aside, and he lies in such a way, he mixes false things with true thus, that the middle is not discordant with the beginning, nor the end with the middle.

Listen to what I and, together with me, the people desire: if you have need of a clapper who waits for the curtains and who will sit all the way up until the singer says, “clap,” the customs of every age must be noted by you, and appropriate qualities must be given to changeable natures and ages.

The boy who already knows how to return speech and marks the ground with a sure foot is eager to play with his age-mates, and he becomes angry and puts aside his anger rashly and he changes every hour. The beardless youth, his guardian at last removed, rejoices in horses and dogs and the grass of the sunny Campus, like wax in being turned toward vice, harsh to those who watch over him, a slow foreseer of practicalities, extravagant with money, of lofty ideals and eager and speedy in leaving behind things he loves.

Once interests have changed, a man’s age and spirit seeks resources and friendships, is devoted to honor, is wary to begin something that he may soon labor to change. Many discomforts besiege the old man, either because
quaerit et inventis miser abstinet ac timet uti
vel quod res omnis timide gelideque ministrat,
dilator, spe †longus†, iners <p>avidusque futuri,
difficilis, querulus, laudator temporis acti
se puero, castigator censorque minorum.
multa ferunt anni venientes commoda secum,
multa recedentes adimunt. ne forte seniles
mandentur iuveni partes pueroque viriles,
semper in adiunctis aevoque morabimur aptis.
aut agitur res in scaenis aut acta refertur.
segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem
quam quae sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus et quae
ipse sibi tradit spectator. non tamen intus
digna geri promes in scaenam, multaque tolles
ex oculis quae mox narret facundia praesens.
ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet
aut humana palam coquat exta nefarius Atreus
aut in avem Procne vertatur, Cadmus in anguem.
quodcumque ostendis mihi sic, incredulus odi.
neve minor neu sit quinto productior actu
fabula, quae posci vult et spectanda reposci.
nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus
inciderit; nec quarta loqui persona laboret.
actoris partis chorus officiumque virile
defendat; neu quid medios intercinat actus
quod non proposito conducat et haereat apte.
ille bonis faveatque et consilietur amice
et regat iratos et amet peccare timentis;
ille dapes laudet mensae brevis, ille salubrem
iustitiam legesque et apertis otia portis;
ille tegat commissa deosque precetur et oret
ut redeat miseris, abeat Fortuna superbis.
tibia non, ut nunc, orichalco vincta tubaeque
aemula, sed tenuis simplexque foramine pauco
aspirare et adesse choris erat utilis atque
he seeks [things] and [yet], wretched, holds back from what he has found and fears to use it, or because he manages all things timidly and coldly, a delayer, †long† in hope, inactive and fearful of the future, a curmudgeon, given to complaining, a praiser of time past when he was a boy, a chastiser and censor of younger ones. The years as they come bring many comforts with them, [and] take many away as they recede. So that old men’s parts are not by chance entrusted to a young one and men’s parts to a boy, we will always take our time over traits associated with and fitting for an age.

Either the matter is acted out on stage, or things done are reported. Things absorbed through the ear stimulate more sluggishly than those which have been placed before the faithful eyes and which the spectator himself hands to himself. Nevertheless, you should not bring onto the stage things that ought to be done inside, and you should take away many things from before the eyes that an in-person eloquence will soon relate. Let Medea not slaughter her boys before the people or unspeakably wicked Atreus cook human innards openly, or Procris be turned into a bird, Cadmus into a snake. Whatever you show me thus I hate, not believing it. Let the tale be neither smaller nor more drawn out than a fifth act that wishes to be demanded to be watched and demanded again. And let a god not intervene, unless a knot worthy of a liberator has befallen; and let a fourth character not strive to speak. Let the chorus provide support for the actor’s parts and manly task; and it should not sing anything in between the middles of the acts that does not pertain to the matter at hand and relate to it fittingly. Let that one cherish good men and advise them in a friendly manner and rule the angry and love those fearing to sin; let that one praise the feasts of a sparing table, [let] that one praise healthful justice and laws and leisure with open gates; let that one conceal things that have been entrusted and pray to the gods and beg that Fortune return to the wretched, be absent from the arrogant. The double-pipe was not, as now, bound with brass and a rival to the trumpet, but slender and simple to play without many an opening and useful at supporting choruses and
nondum spissa nimis complere sedilia flatu;
quo sane populus numerabilis, utpote parvus,
et frugi castusque verecundusque coibat.
postquam coepit agros extendere victor et urbem
latior amplecti murus vinoque diurno
placari Genius festis impune diebus,
accessit numerisque modisque licentia maiore.
indoctus quid enim saperet liberque laborum
rusticus urbano confusus, turpis honesto?
sic priscæ matumque et luxuriam addidit arti
trabicen traxitque vagus per pulpita vestem;
sic etiam fidibus voces crevere severis
et tulit eloquium insolitum facundia praecipua
utiliumque sagax rerum et divina futuri
sortilegis non discrepuit sententia Delphis.
carmine qui tragicò vilem certavit ob hircum,
mox etiam agrestis Satyros nudavit et asper
incolui gravitate iocum temptavit, eo quod
illicebris erat et grata novitate morandus
spectator, functisque sacris et potus et exlex.
verum ita risores, ita commendare dicaces
conveniet Satyros, ita vertere seria ludo,
ne quicunque deus, quicunque adhibebitur heros,
regali conspectus in auro nuper et ostro,
migret in obscuras humili sermonem tabernas,
aut, dum vitat humum, nubes et inania captet.
effutire levis indigna tragoedia versus
ut festis matrona moveri iussa diebus,
intererit Satyris paulum pudibunda protervis.
non ego inornata et dominantia nomina solum
verbaque, Pisones, Satyrorum scriptor amabo;
nec sic enitar tragico differre colori
ut nihil intersit Davusne loquatur et audax
Pythias emuncto lucrata Simone talentum,
an custos famulhusque dei Silenus alumni.
at filling the seating area, not yet crowded, with its blast;  
there certainly the whole populace, countable since small,  
used to come together, honest[ly] and chaste[ly] and modest[ly].
After the victor began to extend his fields and a more extensive  
city-wall began to embrace the city and the Genius began  
to be placated
with daily wine on festal days with impunity,
a greater license was added to rhythms and meters.
Indeed what was the untaught man discerning about, and the one  
free from labors,
a rustic man mixed with an urban one, a shameful one with  
an honorable one?
Thus the pipe-player added movement and luxury to the ancient  
art and dragged his robe wandering about across the platform;
thus also voices grew onto stern lyre-strings  
and a rushing fluency brought an unfamiliar eloquence  
and the way of thinking, keen in practical matters and foreseeing of the future, did not differ from lot-drawing Delphi.
He who competed with a tragic song-poem for a cheap goat  
soon even took the clothes off the field-Satyrs, and roughly  
attempted a joke with seriousness unharmed, because of the fact that  
the spectator had to be stayed with enticements and pleasing novelty, done with his sacred rites and drunk and exempt from  
the law.
But in this way it is fitting to render attractive the laughing Satyrs,  
in this way the  
chatty ones, in this way to turn serious things to play,  
so that whatever god, whatever hero is brought on,  
conspicuous just now in his royal gold and purple,  
may not travel to dusky inns with humble conversation,  
or, while he avoids the ground, grasp at clouds and empty things.  
Tragedy, disdaining to babble light verses,  
just like a married woman ordered to dance on festal days,  
will be present a little embarrassed among the impudent Satyrs.  
Not only unadorned and established names  
and words, Pisones, will I, a writer of Satyrs, love;  
nor will I struggle to be different from a tragic color in such a way  
that it makes no difference whether Davus is speaking and bold  
Pythias, after she has profited a talent from swindled Simon,  
or Silenus, the guardian and attendant of a divine protégé.
ex noto fictum carmen sequar, ut sibi quivis speret idem, sudet multum frustraque laboret ausus idem: tantum series iuncturaque pollet, tantum de medio sumptis accedit honoris. silvis deducti caveant, me iudice, Fauni ne velut innati triviis ac paene forenses aut nimium teneris iuvenentur versibus umquam aut immunda crepent ignominiosaque dicta. offenduntur enim quibus est equus et pater et res, nec, si quid fricti ciceris probat et nucis emtor, aequis accipiunt animis donantve corona. syllaba longa brevi subiecta vocatur iambus, pes citus; unde etiam trimetris accrescere iussum nomen iambis, cum senos redderet ictus primus ad extremum similis sibi. †non ita pridem† tardior ut paulo graviorque veniret ad auris, spondeos stabilis in iura paterna recepit commodus et patiens, non ut de sede secunda cederet aut quarta socialiter. hic et in Acci nobilibus trimetris appetet rarus et Enni in scena missos cum magnus pondere versus aut operae celeris nimium curaque carentis aut ignoratae premit artis crimen turpi. non quivis videt immodulata poemata iudex et data Romanis venia est indigna poetis. idcircone vager scribamque licenter? an omnis visuros peccata putem mea, tutus et intra spem veniae cautus: vitavi denique culpam: non laudem merui. vos exemplaria Graeca nocturna versate manu, versate diurna. at vestri proavi Plautinos et numeros et laudavere sales, nimium patieter utrumque, ne dicam stulte, mirati, si modo ego et vos scimus inurbanum lepido seponere dicto legitimumque sonum digitis callemus et aure. ignotum tragicae genus invenisse Camenae
I shall trace my song-poem crafted from something familiar, so that each man may hope for the same for himself; [and] may sweat a lot and labor in vain, having dared the same thing: so potent are linkage and combination, so much honor attaches to things taken from the middle. Let the Fauns led out from the woods be careful, with me as judge, that they not, as though born at the cross-roads and almost men of the Forum, either ever behave like young men with excessively tender verses or rattle out unclean and ignominious utterances. For they will be offended who have a horse and a father and substance, nor, if the buyer of a broken chick-pea and nut approves of something, do they receive him with equal spirits or reward him with a crown. A long syllable attached to a short one is called an iamb, a swift foot; from there also the name was ordered to grow onto iambic trimeters, since it was repeating six beats, like itself from beginning to end. †Not in this way previously† so that it might come slower and a little heavier to the ears, it received stable spondees into its paternal rights, obliging and tolerant, [but] not such that it would go away from its second or fourth place in the partnership. This both appears rarely in the noble trimeters of Accius, and it charges the verses of Ennius, sent onto the stage with their great bulk, with the foul crime either of being a work too swift or lacking care, or of ignorance of the art. Not just any judge sees unrhythmical poems, and an unmerited indulgence has been given to Roman poets. Should I therefore wander off and write without discipline? Or should I think that all men will see my faults, [and so be] safe and cautious, [staying] within hope of indulgence? In short, I avoided blame: I did not earn praise. You, keep turning over Greek models with your hand by night, keep turning them over by day. But your ancestors praised both Plautine meter and wit, having admired both too tolerantly, let me not say stupidly, if only I and you all know how to separate an inurbane utterance from an elegant one, and we have developed an understanding of a genuine sound with our fingers and ear. Thespis is said to have discovered the unknown genre
dicitur et plaushris vexisse poemata Thespis
qui canerent agerentque peruncti faecibis ora.
post hunc personae pallaeque repertor honestae
Aeschylus et modicis instravit pulpita tignis
et docuit magnumque loqui nitique cothurno.
successit vetus his comoedia, non sine multa
laude; sed in vitium libertas excidit et vim
dignam lege regi. lex est accepta chorusque
turpiter obticuit sublato iure nocendi.
nil intemptatum nostri liquere poetae,
nec minimum meruere decus vestigia Graeca
ausi deserere et celebrare domestica facta
vel qui praetextas vel qui docuere togatas.
nec virtute foret clarisque potentius armis
quam lingua Latium, si non offenderet unum
quemque poetarum limae labor et mora. vos, o
Pompilius sanguis, carmen reprehendite quod non
multa dies et multa litura coercuit atque
perfectum decies non castigavit ad unguem.
ingeniun misera quia fortunatius arte
credit et excludit sanos Helicone poetas
Democritus, bona pars non unguis ponere curat,
non barbam, secreta petit loca, balnea vitat.
nanciscetur enim pretium nomenque poeta
si tribus Anticyris caput insanabile numquam
tonsori Licino commiserit. o ego laevus,
qui purgor bilem sub verni temporis horam!
non alius faceret meliora poemata. verum
nil tanti est. ergo fungar vice cotis, acutum
reddere quae ferrum valet exsors ipsa secandi;
munus et officium nil scribens ipse docebo,
unde parentur opes, quid alat formetque poetam,
of the tragic Camena and to have carried his poems on wagons,
[poems] that men, their faces stained with wine-lees, would sing
and act out.
After him Aeschylus, the discoverer of the mask and honorable
mantle, both laid platforms with modest wooden beams
and showed how to speak grandly and strive with the tragic boot.
Old Comedy succeeded these, not without much
praise; but freedom of speech degraded into vice and into a violence
that needed to be governed by law. The law was handed down
and the chorus
shamefully grew silent, its power to harm snatched away.
Our poets left nothing unattempted,
nor have they earned a small amount of distinction, having dared
to abandon
Greek traces and celebrate domestic deeds,
either those who taught praetexta-style plays or those who taught
togate ones.
Nor would Latium be more powerful in virtue and in celebrated
arms than in its tongue, if the effort of polishing and the time
[taken over it]
were not displeasing to every one of the poets. You, o
blood of Pompilius, censure the song-poem that many
a day and many an erasure has not kept within bounds and
corrected tenfold to a perfect fingernail.
Because Democritus trusts that inborn talent is a greater blessing
than wretched craftsmanship and he excludes sane poets
from Helicon, a good portion do not care to offer their nails
or their beard [to be cut], they seek out secret places, they avoid
the baths.
Indeed he will obtain the prize and the name “poet”
if he never entrusts his head, incurable with three doses
of hellebore, to the barber Licinus. O, I am unlucky,
I who purge myself of my bile just before the season
of spring time!
No one else would have made better poems. But
nothing is of such great value. Therefore I shall perform the role
of a whetstone, which
is able to make steel sharp, though itself incapable of cutting;
writing nothing myself, I will teach the gift and duty,
[namely] from where resources may be obtained, what may nourish
and mold the poet,
quid deceat, quid non, quo virtus, quo ferat error.
scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.
rem tibi Socraticae poterunt ostendere chartae
verbaque provisam rem non invita sequentur.
qui didicit patriae quid debeat et quid amicis,
quo sit amore parens, quo frater amandus et hospes,
quod sit conscripti, quod iudicis officium, quae
partes in bellum missi ducis, ille profecto
reddere personae scit convenientia cuique.
respicerexemplar vitae morumque iubebo
doctum imitatorem et vivas hinc ducere voces.
interdum speciosa locis morataque recte
fabula nullius Veneris sed pondere inerti
valdius oblectat populum meliusque moratur
quam versus inopes rerum nugaeque canorae.
Grais ingenium, Grais dedit ore rotundo
Musa loqui, praeter laudem nullius avaris.
Romani pueri longis rationibus assem
discunt in partis centum diducere. ‘dicat
filius Albani: si de quincunce remota est
uncia, quid superat? poteras dixisse.’ ‘triens.’ ‘eu!
rem poteris servare tuam. redit uncia: quid fit?’
’semis.’ an, haec animos aerugo et cura peculi
cum semel imbuerit, speremus carmina fingi
posse linenda cedro et levi servanda cupresso?
aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae
aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae.
quidquid praecipies, esto brevis, ut cito dicta
percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles.
omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat.
ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris:
what is fitting, what not, where virtue may lead, where error.
Having taste/wisdom is the starting point and wellspring of writing properly.
Socrates’s sheets of paper will be able to show the matter to you, and words will follow not unwillingly a thing that has been planned ahead of time.
He who has learned what he owes to his fatherland and what to his friends, with what love a parent ought to be loved, with what a brother and a guest, what a senator’s duty is, what a judge’s, what are the roles of the leader sent to war—that man undoubtedly knows how to give back to each character the things that are fitting to it.
I will order the learned imitator to look back at the example of life and of customs and to draw from there living voices. Sometimes a tale of no feminine charm, attractive in places and given manners correctly but with a clumsy weight, delights the people more and stays them better than verses poor in resources and tuneful trifles.
To the Greeks the Muse gave inborn talent, to the Greeks she granted [the ability] to speak with a rounded mouth, greedy for nothing besides praise. Roman boys learn how to divide a penny into a hundred parts through long calculations. “Let Albanus’s son answer: if an ounce is taken away from a five-ounce measure, what is left? You could have answered [already].” “A third.” “Well done! You will be able to preserve your wealth. An ounce comes back: what results?” “A half.” Can it really be that, when this rust-canker and concern for pocket money has tinged the soul once and for all, we may hope that song-poems are able to be crafted that must be anointed with cedar-oil and preserved in smooth cypress?
Poets want either to be useful or to delight or to say things that are simultaneously pleasing and suitable for life. Whatever advice you give, you shall be brief, so that teachable spirits may swiftly catch hold of the sayings and faithfully hold onto them. Every superfluous thing drips out from a full breast. Let things made for the sake of pleasure be very close to true ones:
ne quodcumque velit poscat sibi fabula credi, neu pransae Lamiae vivum puerum extrahat alvo. centuriae seniorum agitant expertia frugis, celsi praetereunt austera poemata Ramnes. omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, lectorem delectando pariterque monendo. hic meret aera liber Sosiis; hic et mare transit et longum noto scriptori prorogat aevum. sunt delicta tamen quibus ignovisse velimus; nam neque chorda sonum reddit quem vult manus et mens [poscentique gravem persaepe remittit acutum] nec semper feriet quodcumque minabitur arcus. verum ubi plura nitent in carmine, non ego paucis offendar maculis, quas aut incuria fudit aut humana parum cavet natura. quid ergo est? ut scriptor si peccat idem librarius usque, quamvis est monitus, venia caret; ut citharoedus ridetur chorda qui semper oberrat eadem: sic mihi qui multum cessat fit Chorilus ille, quem bis terve bonum cum risu miror; et idem indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus; verum operi longo fas est obrepere somnum. ut pictura poesis: erit quae, si propius stes, te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes. haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri, iudicis argutum quae non formidat acumen; haec placuit semel, haec decies repetita placebit. o maior iuvenum,quamvis et voce paterna fingeris ad rectum et per te sapis, hoc tibi dictum
let not the tale demand for itself that whatever it wishes be believed, nor let it draw out a living boy from the womb of Lamia who has dined on him. The century-groups of elders decry poems that have no knowledge of morality, the lofty Ramnes-tribe men pass over austere ones. He makes off with every reward, who intermingled what is useful with what is sweet, by delighting the reader and advising him in equal measure. This book earns bronze from the Sosii; this one both crosses the sea and extends a long existence for its famous writer. There are, however, mistakes that we would wish to forgive; for neither does the chord give back the sound that the hand and mind wishes [and it very often sends back a high-pitched one for the one seeking a low-pitched one] nor will the bow always strike what it is aiming at. But when many things gleam in a song-poem, I will not be offended by a few blots that either carelessness caused or human nature took insufficient precautions over. What therefore is [the point]? Just as a writer of books, if he makes the same mistake continually, although he has been warned, lacks indulgence; just as a lyre-player is laughed at who always makes a mistake on the same chord: so the one who very much fails to take action becomes to me [like] that Choerilus, whom I marvel at as good with a smile/laugh two or three times; and likewise I take offense whenever good Homer becomes drowsy; but it is divinely permitted for sleep to creep over a long work. Like a picture is poetry: there will be one that, if you stand closer, captures you more, and another [captures you more] if you stand further away. This one loves the darkness, that one, which does not dread the keen incisiveness of a judge, will wish to be seen under the light; this one has given pleasure once, that one will give pleasure [even if] sought out ten times. O elder of the youths, although you are both still being shaped toward the right by a father’s voice and you are wise in yourself, take up mindfully this
tolle memor, certis medium et tolerabile rebus recte concedi. consultus iuris et actor causarum mediocris abest virtute diserti Messallae nec scit quantum Cascellius Aulus, sed tamen in pretio est: mediocribus esse poetis non homines, non di, non concessere columnae. ut gratus inter mensas symphonia discors et crassum unguntum et Sardo cum melle papaver offendunt, poterat duci quia cena sine istis, sic animis natum inventumque poema iuvandis, si paulum summo decessit, vergit ad imum. ludere qui nescit, campestribus abstinet armis indoctusque pilae discive trochive quiescit, ne spissae risum tollant impune coronae: qui nescit versus tamen audet fingere. quidnì? liber et ingenuus, praeertim census equestrem summam nummorum vitioque remotus ab omni. tu nihil invita dices faciesve Minerva; id tibi iudicium est, ea mens. si quid tamen olim scripsi seris, in Maeci descendat iudicus auris et patris et nostras nonumque prematur in annum membranis intus positis. delere licebit quod non edideris; nescit vox missa reverti. silvestris homines sacer interpresque deorum caedibus et victu foedo deterruit Orpheus, dictus ob hoc lenire tigris rabidosque leones; dictus et Amphion, Thebanae conditor urbis, saxa movere sono testudinis et prece blanda ducere quo vellet. fuit haec sapientia quondam, publica privatis secernere, sacra profanis, concubitu prohibere vago, dare iura maritis, oppida moliri, leges incidere ligno. sic honor et nomen divinis vatibus atque
pronouncement for yourself, that mediocrity and bearableness are
rightly allowed
to certain things. The mediocre lawyer and pleader
of cases is distant from the virtue of learned
Messalla and does not know as much as Cascellius Aulus,
but nevertheless he is valuable: to mediocre men, [however,]
not people,
not gods, not the bookstores have granted that they be poets.
Just as at a pleasing banquet a discordant group of musicians
and thick perfume and poppy-seed with Sardinian honey
cause offense, because the dinner could have been conducted
without these,
so a poem, born and discovered for pleasing spirits,
if it comes down a little from the peak, it sinks toward the depths.
The one who does not know how to play sports abstains from arms on
the Campus,
and untaught in ball[-games] or discus or hoop he rests,
so that the assembled crowd may not raise a laugh with impunity:
the one who does not know how to nevertheless dares to craft verses.
Why not?
[He is] free and nobly born, a member of the equestrian class
as rated by his property holdings and far removed from every vice.
You will say or do nothing with Minerva unwilling;
you have that judgment, that [good] sense. But if at some point
you write something, let it go down into the ears of the judge Maecius
and of your father and ours, and let it be pressed until its ninth year
within bindings placed upon it. It will be permitted to delete
what you have not given forth; a voice once sent [out] does not
know how to be turned back.
Orpheus, holy and an interpreter of the gods, scared woodland
men away from slaughter and foul sustenance, [and he was]
said on account of this to soothe tigers and rabid lions;
Amphion also, the founder of the Theban city, was said to move
rocks with the sound of his tortoise-shell [lyre] and with flattering
prayer
to lead them where he wished. This was wisdom once,
to separate public things from private ones, sacred from profane,
to prohibit [people] from wandering sexual relations, to give rules
to married people,
to build towns, to cut laws into wood [tablets].
Thus honor and the name came to divine poet-priests
carminibus venit. post hos insignis Homerus
Tyrtaeusque mares animos in Martia bella
versibus exaucit; dictae per carmina sortes,
et vitae monstrata via est et gratia regum
Pieriis temptata modis ludusque repertus
et longorum operum finis, ne forte pudori
sit tibi Musa lyrae sollers et cantor Apollo.
natura fieret laudabile carmen an arte
quaesitum est. ego nec studium sine divite vena
nec rude quid prosit video ingenium; alterius sic
altera poscit opem res et coniurat amice.
qui studet optatam cursu contingere metam
multa tulit fecitque puer, sudavit et alsit,
abstinuit Venere et vino; qui Pythia cantat
410
415
tibicen, didicit prius extimuitque magistrum.
an satis est dixisse ‘ego mira poemata pango.
occupet extremum scabies; mihi turpe relinqui est
et quod non didici sane nescire fateri?’
ut praeco, ad merces turbam qui cogit emendas,
assentatores iubet ad lucrum ire poeta
dives agris, dives positis in faenore nummis.
si vero est unctum qui recte ponere possit
et spondere levi pro paupere et eripere artis
litibus implicitum, mirabor si sciet inter-
noscere mendacem verumque beatus amicum.
tu seu donaris seu quid donare voles cui,
nolito ad versus tibi factos ducere plenum
laetitiae: clamabit enim ‘pulchre! bene! recte!’
pallescet super his, etiam stillabit amicis

2. The codices’ cantat for Shackleton Bailey’s certat, an emendation suggested by Brink
1971: 399.
and to song-poems. After these distinguished Homer
and Tyrtaeus sharpened male spirits for Mars’s
wars with their verses; lots were spoken through song-poems
and the road of life was shown and the grace of kings
was sought with Pierian modes and play was discovered
and the end of long labors, so that the Muse, skilled in
the lyre, and the singer Apollo might not by chance be a source
of shame to you.
Whether a praiseworthy song-poem is made by nature or by art
was the matter under investigation. I see neither what use it is to
apply oneself without
a rich vein [of talent], nor of what use unpolished talent could be;
in this way, the one
demands the assistance of the other, and [each] conspires in a
friendly manner.
The one who is working to touch the desired turning-post with
his turn
endured and did many things as a boy, he sweated and suffered,
he abstained from Venus and wine; the double-pipe player who sings
the Pythian [songs] first learned and feared his teacher.
Is it really enough to say, “I bang out amazing poems.
Let the skin-disease take the furthest one; is it foul for me to be
left behind
and clearly confess that I do not know that which I have not learned?”
Just like a herald, who collects a crowd for the purpose
of buying wares,
a poet, rich in fields, rich in money lent out
at interest, orders yes-men to proceed toward profit.
If in truth there is one who is able to serve up a rich feast properly
and act as guarantor for a fickle poor man and snatch away the
one tied up
in tight lawsuits, I will be amazed if he, blessed, knows how to
tell apart a lying and a true friend.
Whether you are given a gift or wish to give one to someone,
do not lead a man full of gladness to verses made
by you: for he will shout, “Beautiful! Well done! Not one error!”
He will grow pale over these ones, he will even make tear-drops
drip out
ex oculis rorem, saliet, tundet pede terram. 430
ut qui conducti plorant in funere dicunt
et faciunt prope plura dolentibus ex animo, sic
derisor vero plus laudatore movetur.
reges dicuntur multis urgere culillis
et torquere mero quem perspexisse laborent,
an sit amicitia dignus: si carmina condes,
numquam te fallant +animi sub vulpe† latentes.
Quintilio si quid recitares, ‘corrigite, sodes,
hoc’ aiebat ‘et hoc.’ melius te posse negares,
bis terque expertum frustra delere iubebat
et male tornatos incudi reddere versus.
si defendere delictum quam verte malles,
nullum ultra verbum aut operam insumebat inanem,
quin sine rivali teque et tua solus amares.
vir bonus et prudens versus reprehendet inertis,
culpabit duros, incomptis allinet atrum
traverso calamo signum, ambitiosa recidet
ornamenta, parum claris lucem dare coget,
arguet ambigue dictum, mutanda notabit,
fiat Aristarchus; nec dicet ‘cur ego amicum
offendam in nugis?’ hae nugae seria ducent
in mala derisum semel exceptumque sinistre.
ut mala quem scabies aut morbus regius urget
aut fanaticus error et iracunda Diana,
vesanum tetigisse timent fugiuntque poetam
qui sapiunt: agitant pueri incautique sequuntur.
hic, dum sublimis versus ructatur et errat,
si veluti merulis intentus decidit auceps
in puteum foveamve, licet ‘succurrite’ longum
clamet, ‘io cives!’ non sit qui tollere curet.
from his friendly eyes, he will leap, he will beat the ground with his foot.
Just like those who hired to weep at a funeral say and do almost more than those who are grieving from the soul, so a laugh is in fact moved more than a praiser.
Kings are said to press with many goblets and twist with unmixed wine the man whom they strive to have seen through,
[to discern] whether he is worthy of friendship: if you found song-poems,
let †the souls† lying hidden †under a fox† never deceive you.
Whenever you were reciting something to Quintilius, he used to say “fix this, please, and this.” [Whenever] you said that you were not able to do better,
he would order you in vain to delete something attempted twice and three times and to return the poorly rounded verses to the anvil.
If you preferred to defend a mistake rather than transform it, he would take up no further word or empty effort, to prevent you from loving yourself and your things alone without a rival.
The good and prudent man will check sluggish verses, he will find fault with the harsh ones, he will smear a black mark on the untidy with a reed turned sideways, he will cut back ambitious ornaments, he will force insufficiently clear verses to produce light, he will convict the one spoken ambiguously, he will note things that have to be changed,
he will become Aristarchus; and he will not say “why should I offend a friend over trifles?” These trifles will lead into serious evils the one [who has been] laughed at once and poorly received.” Just as the one whom bad skin-disease or the kingly illness press upon, or an orgiastic derangement and angry Diana, [so] people fear to touch the mad poet and flee him, if they are wise: boys harass him and incautious men follow him. If this one, while he sublimely burped up verses and wandered about, fell like a fowler intent on blackbirds into a well or a pit, even if he should shout “help, hey, citizens!” for a long time, there would not be anyone who would make the effort to raise him out.
si curet quis opem ferre et demittere funem,
‘qui scis an prudens huc se proiecerit atque
servari nolit?’ dicam, Siculique poetae
narrabo interitum. deus immortalis haberi
dum cupit Empedocles, ardentem frigidus Aetnam
insiluit. sit ius liceatque perire poetis.
invitum qui servat, idem facit occidenti.
nec semel hoc fecit, nec, si retractus erit, iam
fiet homo et ponet famosae mortis amorem.
nec satis apparet cur versus factitet, utrum
minxerit in patrios cineres an triste bidental
moverit incestus; certe fuit ac velut ursus,
obiectos caveae valuit si frangere clathros,
indoctum doctumque fugat recitator acerbus.
quem vero arripuit, tenet occiditque legendo,
non missura cutem nisi plena cruoris hirudo.
If someone should make the effort to bring help and let down a rope, I would say, “how do you know whether he threw himself into this place intentionally and does not wish to be saved?,” and I will relate the demise of the Sicilian poet. When Empedocles wanted to be considered an immortal god, he jumped, cold, into burning Etna. Let there be the right and let it be permitted for poets to die. He who saves the unwilling man does the same as one who kills. Neither did he do this once, nor, if he is dragged back, will he now become a human and put aside the love of a storied death. Nor is it sufficiently apparent why he keeps making verses, whether he urinated onto his father’s ashes or sacrilegiously disturbed a gloomy spot struck by lightning; certainly he rages and like a bear, if it has been strong enough to break the bars blocking its cage, the bitter reciter causes the taught and untaught man [alike] to flee. The one whom in fact he seizes, he keeps hold of him and kills him by reading, not about to let go of the skin unless full of blood, a leech.
HORACE’S ARS POETICA