



‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’  
READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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## 20. *The First Ode of the Fourth Book of Horace: To Venus*

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### Example: Lines 37–48

Pope wrote just one version of a complete Horace ode. An imitation of four stanzas of another, the ninth ode of book 4, was published only posthumously, in Warburton's 1751 edition of Pope's works. The imitation of the first ode of book 4, thus, has a unique status. It first appeared unofficially and anonymously in a newspaper, the *Whitehall Evening Post*, a few days before its authorized publication on 9 March 1737 (TE, IV, ed. Butt, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1953, p. 148; Mack 1985, pp. 672–74).

Horace's ode begins with an appeal to Venus to cease her demands on him now that he is approaching the age of fifty. Please, he says, visit instead the house of his much younger good friend Paulus Maximus, a well-born and handsome lawyer who will make an ideal lover. For Horace himself, such days are over. And yet, the poem concludes in a poignant twist: he finds a tear or two falling down his cheek and silence breaking into his speech. 'Why, Ligurinus, is this happening; and why do I dream of pursuing you over the grass of the Campus Martius?' As in Thomas Hardy's 'I look into my glass' (*Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, 1898), time 'shakes this fragile frame at eve / With throbbings of noontide'. This is Pope's version of Horace's finale:

– But why? ah tell me, ah too dear!  
Steals down my cheek the involuntary tear?  
Why words so flowing, thoughts so free,  
Stop, or turn nonsense at one glance of thee?  
Thee, dressed in Fancy's airy beam,  
Absent I follow through the extended dream,  
Now, now I seize, I clasp thy charms,

And now you burst, (ah cruel!) from my arms,  
 And swiftly shoot along the Mall,  
 Or softly glide by the canal,  
 Now shown by Cynthia's silver ray,  
 And now, on rolling waters snatched away.

lines 37–48

Or so it was in the officially published text. In the newspaper, line 37 read, 'But why, ah Patty still too dear' (*TE*, IV, 1953, p. 153). 'Patty' was Martha Blount's nickname: a moment of delicate intimacy had found its way into public print.

With or without the confessional name, Pope's finale subtly and movingly adjusts Horace's original. Up to this point, Pope has carefully, discreetly, and brilliantly followed the structure and import of the Latin text, employing octosyllabic / decasyllabic couplets to reflect Horace's alternating shorter and longer lines. The first eight lines echo Horace's vocative appeal to Venus to relent in her pursuit of him. Horace's repetition 'parce precor, precor' [spare me, I beg you, I beg you'] becomes 'let me, let me rest' in both second lines. The famous and delicately self-depreciative 'non sum qualis eram bonae / sub regno Cynarae' (lines 3–4) [I am not as I was under the reign of good Cynara] is wittily and gracefully deflected to 'I am not now, alas! the man / As in the gentle reign of my Queen Anne'. A 'sober fifty' awaits him, as Pope's forty-ninth birthday is fast upon him (21 May), too late an age to endure the paradox of Venus as 'Mother too fierce of dear desires' (line 7): in Horace, 'dulcium / mater saeva Cupidinum' (lines 4–5) [in literal order: 'of sweet / mother fierce of desires'].

The middle sections of both poems depict a future of pleasure, sociability, and love for (in Horace) Paulus Maximus and (in Pope) William Murray, a young lawyer, future lord chancellor, and addressee of Pope's 1738 *Imitation* of Horace's *Epistle* I, 6 (see Chapter 23). Pope's iterative 'shall' (seven times in the space of fifteen lines, 16–30) beats out the future as in the celebratory dance envisaged by both poets. Set against such joys, Horace forcefully hammers home his loss of desire in a succession of negatives ('nec'):

Me nec femina nec puer  
 Iam nec spes animi credula mutui  
 Nec certare iuvat mero  
 Nec vincere novis tempora floribus.

lines 29–32

[In neither woman nor boy  
 nor trusting hope in mutual feelings  
 nor drinking parties, do I have pleasure  
 nor garlanding my temples with fresh flowers]

Pope depicts a lost and irrecoverable past by means of a succession of equivalent negatives ('those joys are o'er', 'the vernal garlands bloom no more') and two exclamations of 'adieu!', indicating the finality of farewell' (lines 31–35). However, he leaves out Horace's 'nec femina nec puer', reacting sensitively to sexual mores less flexible than those of an earlier time. This omission creates space for a more wistful and protracted conclusion, in which present desire for another person—whether named or, as in the approved version, a vague 'too dear'—is dwelt upon longingly.

Horace's dream occupies four lines, whereas Pope's stretches out over eight. The latter describes a scene in which the beloved not only bursts from his embrace but leads his thoughts on a lyrical chase through both a contemporary townscape, one romanticized by classical light. The effect of Pope's momentary self-indulgence can be gauged by contrasting his finale with an earlier verse translation, that by Ben Jonson:

Hard-hearted, I dream every night  
 I hold thee fast! But fled hence, with the light,  
 Whether in Mars his field thou be,  
 Or Tiber's winding streams, I follow thee.

*Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Parfitt (1975):  
 'Underwoods', 86, lines 37–40

Jonson's is a more literal, tighter version. It is indicative that he keeps to the forty lines of Horace's original, whereas Pope extends his poem to forty-eight lines. Pope retains an element of topographical precision ('the Mall'), so that the vision keeps one foot in the here and now. But he transforms the scene by means of evocative verbs and adverbs: 'swiftly shoot', 'softly glide' (lines 45–46). Echoing consonants (notably liquid 'l's), and alternating short and long vowels stretch the lines into harmonious grace. The penultimate line, 'Now shown by Cynthia's silver ray', is Pope's own, an unexpected addition which maintains euphony through vowel and consonant repetitions in 'Cynthia' and 'silver'. Mythological lunar light irradiates the scene, and luminescence

sheds a glow of poetic imagination, as the verse form changes from alternating octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines to a trio of octosyllabics (lines 45–47), so introducing a song-like closing note. The poem is extended and touched with lyric felicity.

Horace's dream takes place in an affirmed present: 'iam captum teneo, iam volucrem sequor' (line 38; 'now I hold you: now I follow you in flight'.) Pope, again, extends this sense of the here and now through double repetitions: 'Now, now I seize ... And now you burst'; 'Now shown ... And now'. Pope's vision resounds with the voice of longing, of yearning for beauty. In short, Pope transfigures his imitation into a love poem, in which only at the very end is the tantalizingly present scene 'snatched away'. The mood of those poems of the 1710s, the *Epistle to Miss Blount, with the Works of Voiture* and the *Epistle to Miss Blount, on her Leaving the Town, after the Coronation*, written 'in the gentle reign of my Queen Anne', returns for one last time. And the poet knows it will be the last, which is why this tender lyric is also an acknowledgement of, and a meditation on, the nature and experience of time passing, time passed.