

# Mercury and apollo in horace ode i.10 and i.31



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Throughout the books of Horace's odes there is a variety of approaches to the divine and to the composition of religious poetry. Horace, learning much from his Greek predecessors, is able to adapt Archaic Greek meter, motifs and themes into contemporary Latin verse that could be utilized by educated Romans in a variety of ways. In poems ten and thirty-one of the first book two of these ways are displayed. Poem ten is written in such a way as to provide the reader with an eloquent way of invoking the various aspects of Mercury. Whereas poem thirty-one is a guiding ode, instructing one what not to pray for and ends with a stanza that could also be extracted from the poem as a whole and used independently as a private-prayer.

Prior to beginning a study on any poet, it would be prudent to first discuss their life before discussing their work. Quintus Horatius Flaccus was born 8 December 65 B. C.[1]The background of Horace is unique because he tells us so much about his upbringing and the great gratitude he felt towards his father. As such, no survey of the life of Horace would be complete without proper tribute to his father. In book one satire six, Horace tells us both of his father's good nature and his motivations for sending his son to Rome for school.

*S. 1. 6 70-* my father

*75* was the

*causa fuit* cause of

*pater his;* all this:

*qui macro* who

*pauper* though a

*agello* poor man

on a lean  
 farm, was  
 unwilling  
 noluit in to send  
 Flavi me to a  
 ludum me school  
 mittere, under  
 magni [the  
 quo pueri pedant]  
 magnis e Flavius,  
 centurioni where  
 bus orti great  
 laevo boys,  
 suspensi sprung  
 loculos from  
 tabulamque great  
 e lacerto centurion  
 ibant s, having  
 octonos their  
 referentes satchels  
 Idibus and  
 aeris, tablets  
 swung  
 over their  
 left arm,  
 used to

go with  
money in  
their  
hands  
the very  
day it  
was due

Trans. C.

Smart.

Theodore

Alois

Buckley.

Unlike many poets, Horace discusses his father and credits him with giving him the educated livelihood he quickly came to enjoy. *Magni quo pueri magnis e centurionibus orti* proves that at least part of the reason for his decision to go Rome was influenced by the other school boys. Horace's father likely had several not-so-pleasant experiences, being a freedman, with the centurions mentioned here. It is not directly recorded that the citizens of Horace's hometown, Venusia, was subjected to the settlement of veterans; but it is likely that during the crisis of the social war Venusia had gone over to Rome's enemies and as such had to be reconquered and even settled by veterans. Regardless of who the centurions being referenced here are, the fact remains that Horace's father did not want his son to be associated with the sons of overbearing centurions. This indicates that Horace's father not only wanted the best education for his son but also for him to be able to be

free from the local bullies who likely looked down on him on account of his father's freedman status. This proves his father not only cared that his son was educated, but that he was educated in an environment that best suited a boy like Horace, far from the " hulking sons of hulking centurions".

Horace, being born in the Roman Republic in 65B. C, meant that he was born shortly after the chaotic civil war that nearly destroyed Rome. That was not to be the end of the civil strife, when Horace was the age of seven until he was fifteen Julius Caesar was conquering Gaul and shortly after his return Horace was likely sent to Athens as a way to further his education, likely around the year 46B. C.[2]Shortly after arriving in Athens Caesar was assassinated in Rome. This led to the immediate action of both Mark Antony and young Octavian to avenge the death of their friend and adoptive father and later the two would fight each other to determine the succession of Caesar and the fate of Rome. In the first war, that of the tyrannicides, Octavian and Mark Antony sought to kill the remaining tyrannicides and continue on the path that Julius Caesar had carved out for his successor. It is in this war that Horace first finds himself caught up in the politics of Rome. In 44 B. C Brutus, failing to summon much of an army in Italy, went to Greece, and subsequently crossed paths with Horace.[3]Brutus fails and takes his own life, and clemency is given to many others including Horace. Horace tells us in one of his satires that *at olim, quod mihi pareret legio Romana tribune* [4]so it is worthy of note that he was granted clemency even though it appears he wielded some authority in the actual fighting and was not a common soldier. A fateful decision, as were he to have not given clemency

to so many, we may be living in a world where Horace never met Vergil and Maecenas and never produced the wondrous works of art he has left for us.

We know little of what exactly went on at this second battle of Philippi, but Horace tells us after they were defeated he *relicta non bene parmula*. [5]The same phrase had been uttered by Alcaeus,[6]though that is not substitute for interpreting what Horace meant. The reason for his saying is best interpreted in two ways, one “ the mode in which he makes his confession is in accordance with his habitual candour and ironical self-depreciation”. [7]And two, he speaks about his deficiency in war because “ the friend to whom the ode *O saepe mecum* is addressed survived because he took part in the *celeris fuga* from Philippi”. [8]This characteristic of Horace is one that appears several times over. The comment about the shield is both true, funny and poetic. Instead of simply saying that he ran away as fast as he could, he decided to use an old motif descended down to him from an earlier Greek poet. To do so because he wanted a funny way to look back on a terrifying situation he was in with a friend. Intertwining seriousness and more jocular motifs and themes is something Horace does frequently as will become clear.

Finally, after Philippi and having been given clemency Horace returns to Rome. He then learns that he has lost his father's farm in 43B. C.[9]Soon, he became a *scriba quaestorius*, responsible for financial matters of the state and matters of public record. Fraenkel describes the position as “ responsible for putting down the resolutions of the Senate and keeping the records of them in the *aerarium* ”.[10]It would be the Sabine farm presented to him by Maecenas sometime before 31B. C.[11]that would make the biggest

difference in both his personal and financial life as well his public and literary life. From this point on Horace was finally able to focus on his poetry.

Two different gods and their appearances in the Horatian hymns are to be discussed. The first, Mercury and the second, Apollo. Horace counts himself among *Mercurialium virorum*. [12]As such, there are a few poems in which the presence of Mercury is strongly felt, the one in which is to be considered is *I. 10*. Alongside the prevalence of Mercury in one of the first odes in his first book is Apollo who appears shortly later at *I. 31*. It will become clear that while there are certainly similarities between the two odes they were written with unique purposes in mind and the two poems contrast well together. One will be shown to be meant for public performance, either as a chorus or as an individual while the other is for a more private occasion

<i>I. 10</i>	O
Mercuri	Mercury,
facunde	eloquent
nepos	grandson
Atlantis,	of Atlas,
qui feros	you who
cultus	being
hominum	clever
recentum	formed
voce	the fierce
formasti	practice
catus et	of newly
	made

decorae humans  
 more by voice  
 palaestrae and by  
 , the  
 te canam, custom  
 magni of the  
 lovis et proper  
 deorum wrestling  
 place.  
 nuntium I will sing  
 curvaeque you,  
 lyrae messeng  
 parentem, er of  
 callidum, great  
 quidquid Jupiter  
 placuit, and the  
 iocoso gods and  
 condere parent of  
 furto. the  
 te, boves rounded  
 olim nisi lyre,  
 reddidisse clever to  
 s hide by  
 per dolum jocose  
 amotas, theft



puerum whatever  
 minaci pleases  
 voce dum him  
 terret, You,  
 viduus Apollo  
 pharetra laughs  
 risit deprived  
 Apollo. of his  
 quin et quiver,  
 Atridas while he  
 duce te was  
 superbos threateni  
 ng you  
 llio dives by  
 Priamus terrible  
 relicto voice,  
 Thessalosq unless he  
 ue ignis et moved  
 iniqua back the  
 Troiae once  
 castra stolen  
 fefellit. cattle  
 through  
 tu pias trick  
 laetis  
 animas Moreover

reponis , with you  
 sedibus as leader  
 virgaque rich  
 levem Priam,  
 coerces with Ilium  
 aurea having  
 turbam, been  
 superis abandon  
 deorum ed  
 gratus et escaped  
 imis. notice  
 (of) the  
 Thessalia  
 n fires  
 and the  
 camp of  
 those  
 hostile to  
 Troy  
 You  
 return  
 pious  
 souls to  
 their  
 proper

place and  
you  
compel  
the light  
mob by  
golden  
rod to  
those  
above-  
gods and  
those  
below.

Horace begins the tenth poem of his first book with a beautifully written invocation to Mercury where he mentions all the benefactions the god has given to men. His second stanza begins with a promise, *te canam*, while *canam* can sometimes be self-fulfilling it is not in this case,[13]and the next three stanzas prove that it was his intention to sing of the god. The next three stanzas display various exploits of Mercury getting more and more serious as one progresses through the poem. He uses anaphora, with *te* and *tu* to link the stanzas in which he was fulfilling his promise to sing of the god. *Quin* beginning the fourth stanza can be interpreted as “ changing the key” of the ode.[14] *Quin* changes the mood so that the reader is aware that the exploit he is about to sing of is one more serious than the preceding one. This mood is picked up by the *tu* beginning the fifth stanza where he again discusses something more serious than in the preceding stanzas.

In the first stanza Mercury is invoked as the civilization god *qui feros cultus hominum recentum*. He is also recognized as a skilful conversationalist by being *facunde*. These four lines simply serve to speak of the major accomplishments of the gods and as an indicator of the theme of the poem. The second stanza comprises of a promise to sing the god, as well as displays his role amongst the gods and his abilities. He is *nuntium lovis et deorum* and at the same time able to, *quidquid placuit, iocoso condere furto*. The first two stanzas of this poem then serve two important purposes. One, an eloquent way to invoke the god whom Horace received his protection from as he was a “Mercurial man”.<sup>[15]</sup>Two, a promise to sing of his exploits and to remind the listener that which Mercury is capable of. The first and last words of this stanza combine to remind the reader who is being discussed and where the poet wants the emphasis to lie, here he wants it to lie with the accusative pronoun, *te*, referring to Mercury and the way in which he is able to undertake his exploits, *furto*, or by thievery.

The first story Horace sings of is lifted from Greek myth, perhaps partially from Alcaeus’ hymn to Hermes,<sup>[16]</sup>but it is also found in Hesiod and elsewhere. This stanza while light in content, is still beautifully written and perfectly encapsulates the myth into such small amount of words.

*Redididisses* indicates the tactic that Mercury used when he stole the cattle from Apollo, in one word we are reminded of the scene where a young Mercury was driving a cow backward so as to confuse his brother. And in the next line there is a reminder of the power of Apollo *puerum minaci voce dum terret*, he was surely not amused by his cattle being missing but nevertheless Apollo can’t help but laugh as he reaches for an arrow but finds

his *pharetra viduus* and laughs . This scene leaves a funny and light picture in one's mind, a child stealing the cattle and quiver of his brother makes for an appropriate and eloquent vignette.

This scene transitions well into the next as Mercury being portrayed as the stealthy child quickly turns into him being stealthy in a more serious situation as a fully-grown god. In stanza four Horace reminds his audience of the Homeric tradition that displays Hermes as acting as a guide for Priam, providing him with some sort of invisibility so that he *Thessalosque ignis et iniqua Troiae castra fefellit* . This displays Mercury as being a serious god with a serious role in one of the most famous stories known to the Graeco-Roman world. It also once again, in four short lines, paints a picture of a widely known and celebrated story, a point which should be kept in mind as one comes to the conclusion of the poem.

The final stanza is reserved for the most important aspect of Mercury and that is his role as *ψυχοπομπός*, a tradition that could not be lifted from Alcaeus as it had not yet arisen as a belief in his time.[17]Special emphasis in this stanza is placed on *pias* and *imis* as the one is the first word after the substantive element *tu* and the other is the last of the poem. This is an indication that his role as *ψυχοπομπός* is most important for *pias animas* and for *deorum imis*. Making no mention of this aspect of Mercury until the very last stanza also provides further emphasis. It can then be said that as one progresses through stanzas three, four and five of *l. 10* we see increasingly more serious and important aspects of Mercury displayed.

The supposed speaker of the ode has the ability to influence interpretation, some have suggested that it is Horace himself and therefore is an indication of his devotion to Mercury. In other interpretations, such as that provided by the work "Roman Lyric: Collected Papers on Catullus and Horace" in the chapter "Five 'Religious' Odes of Horace (1. 10; 1. 21 and 4. 6; 1. 30; 1. 15)" it is suggested that the speaker is of a chorus.[18]Citing evidence that "throughout antiquity poems in hymn-form which employ only cult-material appear to be written along the lines of genuine cult-songs sung by choruses and to have such choruses as their imaginary speakers".[19]This is satisfactory as it is quite a cheery ode celebrating all the benefactions of a certain god, his various entertaining exploits and his very serious role as *ψυχοπομπός*. It is a comprehensive ode when sung in succession but something particularly interesting can be said regarding the final three stanzas and the understood speaker of them. If one were to take any of these three final stanzas completely out of their context, the stanzas could nevertheless exist as a succinct and elegant handful of lines that could invoke the various aspects of Mercury. While at times it would be meant for a chorus to sing the ode in full, it can also be said that in various social situations a well-read Roman could wield a handful of lines from the final three stanzas and invoke three very different aspects of Mercury.

That the beliefs of a remote past provided entertainment to Romans of Horace's day is discussed by Eduard Fraenkel. He argues that "those wonderful tales [stanzas three and four] captivated his [Horace's] imagination, not only as perfect poetry but also as manifestations of a belief which once had arisen from human hearts and which now, in a changed

world, was echoed by the heart of a true poet".[20]This suggests that Horace and his contemporaries were fond of the stories afforded to them from Greek myth and that strengthens the likelihood that this poem was written for recitation among friends. Horace took something many were familiar with, Greek myth, and provided it with an elegant summary in Latin that was easy for one to memorize and use as the situation arose.

*l. 31*      What does

Quid      the poet

dedicatu      demand

m poscit      recently

Apolline      consecrate

m      d Apollo?

vates?      What does

quid orat      he pray

de      while

patera      pouring out

novum      new liquid

fundens      from a

liquorem      bowl? Not

? non      for the rich

opimae      harvests of

Sardiniae      fruitful

segetes      Sardinia

feracis,      Nor the

attractive

herds of  
 sunny  
 Calabria,  
 nor the  
 gold or  
 non ivory of  
 aestuosa India, nor  
 e grata the  
 Calabria country,  
 e which the  
 armenta, silent Liris  
 non bites with  
 aurum quiet water  
 aut ebur Let them  
 Indicum, prune the  
 non rura, vine by  
 quae knife from  
 Liris Cale for  
 quieta whom  
 fortune  
 allows, so  
 a rich  
 merchant  
 dies up his  
 golden cup



by wine

gained

from

Syrian

trade

mordet The

aqua esteemed

taciturnu god

s amnis. himself, as

premant you see

Calenam three or

falce four times

quibus per year

dedit looking

back at the

fortuna Atlantic

vitem, fairly

dives ut unpunish

aureis d, olives

mercator feed me

exsiccet and so too

culillis does the

vina Syra chicora

reparata and light

mallows

merce, May you  
 dis carus give to me  
 ipsis, enjoyment  
 quippe of  
 ter et prepared  
 quater things  
 anno even when  
 revisens in good  
 aequor health, son  
 Atlanticu of Leto, I  
 m beseech  
 inpune. the whole  
 me with the  
 pascunt mind  
 olivae, neither to  
 me live out in  
 cichorea ugly  
 levesque senility nor  
 malvae. being  
 frui without the  
 paratis cithara  
 et valido  
 mihi,  
 Latoe,

dones et

precor

integra

cum

mente

nec

turpem

senecta

m

degere

nec

cithara

carente

m.

After a thorough analysis of this ode to Apollo the two will be considered and contrasted together to exemplify two different approaches Horace had regarding the production of religious odes. The first way, as discussed above, was by using tales of ancient, traditional religion in a way to produce entertainment for contemporary audiences. The second, as discussed below, as a way to pray to a popular god amongst the Romans, in either the traditional way of going to his recently consecrated temple or in a more private way by reciting the final stanza overtop of an offering to the god.

It is clear from the beginning that Horace speaks of himself as *vates* and refers to himself in the third person. This creates a level of intimacy between

the poet and one who may be reciting the prayer himself, it equalizes them as they both pray for similar things. It also indicates the private nature and that Horace has not written an ode for public recitation.[21]Another theme that becomes quickly apparent in the first stanza is that of modesty. Horace wants to encourage his fellow Romans not to ask for *opimae Sardiniae segetes feracis*. As that would be too much for a proper Roman. He also states that one should not look for fresh wine or other delicacies one might see as unnecessary *quid orat de patera novum fundens liquorem*.

Immediately we see two differences in the approach Horace takes to discussing the divine. When invoking Mercury, he does so in a celebratory way, completely removing himself from the role of speaker. While here, he begins by personally stating what he thinks one ought not ask the god for. This latter approach is much more personal.

The second stanza flows along the same theme as the first, Horace lists that which the *vates* ought not wish for. It becomes increasingly evident however, that these are not simply statements directing an individual to ask or not ask something, but instead are examples of prayers people have that often go unnoticed by the god, not because he doesn't hear them but because they're inappropriate. *Non aurum aut ebut Indicum* invokes a picture of a luxurious lifestyle and that they are depicted " by moralists who praise the simple life". [22]This further strengthens the notion that Horace favored a simple life.

In the third stanza Horace ceases to list inappropriate prayers and begins by asking an unspecified " they" to be allowed to prune the vine for the benefit of the trader. This reading is dependent on the *et* of line ten be rendered as an *ut*. [23]This allows for a proper contrast to be made between the

agricultural laborer and the merchant, as one must exert physical effort to get a job done, so too must the merchant risk much to receive the rewards of “Syrian trade”. In this stanza then, Horace aims to compare two types of people that are at the mercy of Apollo and Fortune. By comparing them he illustrates succinctly the realms that the god operates in and that the following two stanzas serve as proper prayer for many people of various walks of life.

Finally, in the fourth stanza we start to see the private prayer that the previous three stanzas have been leading up to. The god *revisens aequor Atlanticum inpune*, this is a metaphor. For as the god looks back over the Atlantic, the most dangerous ocean known to the Romans, so too will he look back at the preceding stanzas and see the improper prayers to him fairly. The poet asks that Apollo do this *inpune* so as to not be overly cruel to those who have previously prayed to you for improper things. The stanza ends with a return to the simple life Horace loves to praise. These two lines reinforce the notion that what one prays for ought to be modest.

The fifth and final stanza is what Nesbit and Hubbard described as a “private prayer”.<sup>[24]</sup> Horace switches from the third person into the first person with *precor*, this indicates the personal and private tone that this last stanza takes. This last stanza, like stanzas three through five of the Mercury ode, could be extracted from the rest of the poem and used independently by those who wished to invoke Apollo. However, here it would be said privately by an individual, perhaps making an offering at the same time, whereas in the Mercury ode one might do it among friends as a piece of entertainment.

There are then two distinct ways in which Horace approaches the writing of religious odes. Both of which provide the reader with a resource in which to invoke the gods. In the hymn to Apollo we see a well written dismissal of the improper things to pray for as well as a stanza which one could memorize and use to invoke Apollo in times of private prayer. In the hymn to Mercury there are three stanzas which can be extracted and used as a way to invoke Mercury in a variety of situations. These two approaches symbolize the duality of Roman religion, one is cheerful public festivals where there is a real celebration of a particular god. The other is a solemn reminder of what to pray for followed by a short proper prayer.

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[1]Od. 3. 21. 1, Epodes 13. 6, Epist. 1. 20. 27-8

[2] *Epist* 2. 2. 41-52

[3]Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), p. 9

[4]Sat. 1. 6. 42-3

[5]Odes. 2. 7. 10

[6]Fr. 428 D. L. Page and Lobel, *Sappho and Alcaeus; an Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 153ff.

[7]W. Y. Sellar and Andrew Lang , *The Roman Poets of the Augustan Age: Horace and the Elegiae Poets* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1965), p. 17

[8]Fraenkel *Horace* , p. 12.

[9]App. B. *Civ* . 4. 3 says the triumvirs promised the veterans allotment of land from eighteen of the richest towns, Venusia among them.

[10]Fraenkel *Horace*, p. 14.

[11] *Sat* 2. 6. 36 f

[12]Od. II. 17. 29

[13]For more information on self-fulfilling future verbs in classical poetry see: Cairns, Francis “ Horace: The Five Religious Odes” In *Roman Lyric : Collected Papers on Catullus and Horace* edited by Beiträge Zur Altertumskunde, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.

[14]Horace and K. Quinn, *Horace: The Odes* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996), p. 143.

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[15]Horace *Od.* II. 17. 29-30

[16]Page *Sappho and Alcaeus*, p. 253. See also R. G. M. Nisbet and Margaret M. A. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes, Book I* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 126 Nisbet and Hubbard say that Horace likely read the poem but didn't take much from it here.

[17]Hubbard and Nisbet p. 126

[18]Cairns, Francis, *Roman Lyric* P. 195

[19]Ibid.

[20]Franekel, *Horace*, p. 166

[21]See Nesbit and Hubbard p347

[22]Ibid. 351

[23]Ibid. 354

[24]Ibid 347