

8-2017

Horace Satires 1.8: A Blast from the Past

John Higgins

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj>

Recommended Citation

Higgins, John (2017) "Horace Satires 1.8: A Blast from the Past," *New England Classical Journal*: Vol. 44 : Iss. 3 , 139-149.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol44/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Horace Satires 1.8: A Blast from the Past¹

John Higgins

Department of History

University of Massachusetts, Amherst



In his *Satire* 1.8, Horace tells the story of a comic conflict between a statue of Priapus and two witches on the outskirts of Rome. Apparently a light entertainment, the poem can also be read as a political statement; the witches represent the Roman past of the civil wars and Octavian's part in them, but Priapus, who wins the contest by scaring the witches off, represents the new Rome of the (eventual) Augustus. Priapus, symbolic of the new order, rejects the dark arts of the witches and accepts the future in which old conflicts are forgotten.

In this *Satire* we see that the *horti* that Horace's friend and patron Maecenas had constructed on the Esquiline in the 30s BCE were part of the developing public face of what was to become Augustan Rome. The satire deals with the establishment of Maecenas' gardens on the Esquiline Hill on the site of Rome's former potter's field necropolis. The ideology of renewal and fertility was planted there with the gardens; the gardens covered the bones in the former potter's field just as the pro-

¹ This paper had its origin as a site report for the American Academy at Rome's Classical Summer School in 2006 and subsequently was a presentation at the CANE Annual Meeting in 2011. I thank Ann Higgins of Westfield State University for many helpful comments on successive drafts and the anonymous reviewer for *NECJ*. All translation from Latin are mine.

to-Augustan cultural revolution concealed the blood and the cruelty of the civil wars of the triumviral period.

The poem is spoken through the persona of a statue of Priapus, the phallic god of good luck and fertility, located in the Garden of Maecenas to serve as its protector.² Early in the 30's BCE Maecenas had decided to develop the land on both sides of the *agger* associated with the Servian Wall; the burial ground was, naturally, right outside the wall. The satire is not just a celebration of the new gardens as an urban amenity, much less a simple fart joke. It is also and more significantly a part of the proto-Augustan program of renewal and, concomitantly, the assignment of the memory of the civil wars to oblivion.

The plot of the satire is simple. Priapus describes how pleasant the area has become since being acquired by Maecenas (*nunc licet Esquiliiis habitare salubribus atque / aggere in aprico spatari*; “now one can reside on the salubrious Esquiline and take walks on the sunny wall” (1.8.14-15)), but goes on to tell a story: he observed the witch Canidia and her henchwoman Sagana returning to the place which in its past incarnation as a cemetery had been the scene of their magical misbehavior (*vidi egomet nigra succinctam vadere palla / Canidiam pedibus nudis passoque capillo, / cum Sagana maiore ululantem*; “I myself saw Canidia coming in with her black robe around her, with bare feet and loose hair, and wailing, with Sagana her elder” 1.8.23-25). The two of them attempt to raise the spirits of the dead by witchcraft, sacrificing a lamb and pouring its blood into a ditch like Odysseus in the underworld. Priapus, as guardian of the new gardens, farts loudly at them and drives them away in fright; they run away from the garden and return down to the city below (*displosa sonat quantum vesica, papedi / diffissa nate ficus; at illae currere in urbem*; “it made a noise like a burst bladder, and I farted and broke the fig wood with my buttocks split; but they ran away into the city” 1.8.46-47).

Horace is most likely talking about a real statue of Priapus carved from fig wood that actually stood in the Gardens of Maecenas and that had a broad rift in the wood of its hindquarters.³ This *Satire* then is an *aition* or origin tale of the statue, ex-

2 For statues of Priapus in gardens, see Kellum (2015, pp. 199-200). These statues were not fine sculpture but rough work. Having a statue of Priapus was what made a garden. See also Edmunds (2009). See Hauber for the suggestion that Maecenas' family had owned the property before its transformation into *horti* (2014, pp. 426-31). Whether it is or is not the case that they did, the repurposing of the area as a pleasure garden is part of the proto-Augustan renewal of Rome and required at least the prospect of the peace of the *Pax Augusta*.

3 Edmunds (2009, pp. 126-27), citing earlier literature. The rift in the wood is also discussed in Hallett (1981), citing Rudd (1966, pp. 70-72) and Fraenkel (1957, p. 123).

plaining the crack as the result of flatulence⁴. Why Priapus farted at the necromantic witches instead of driving them away in some more conventional way has occasioned scholarly discussion, with several scholars arguing convincingly that the garden represents poetry, and the Priapus Horace himself. The fart represents Horace's adoption of invective as a poetic stance, or perhaps his rejection of older satiric verse in favor of his own work. The poem thus is speaking of literature.⁵ The poem is more than simply a fart joke, though, and its significance is more than literary.

The geography of the poem suggests that something more is at issue. Throughout the first book of the *Satires*, Horace is constantly talking about the changing landscape of Rome.⁶ The city as a whole was undergoing a radical rebuilding which continued throughout Augustus' long reign; Augustus' urban renewal program started as early as the triumviral period. In particular, the first book of *Satires* is a response to the social and political context of triumviral Rome.⁷ In this *Satire*, Horace's focus is on the *horti* as much as on Priapus, and the *horti* of Maecenas were undergoing a complete change from their previous function — no trace of the cemetery was left.

In planting his *horti* on his property on the Esquiline, Maecenas had become one of several upper class Romans at the end of the republic and the beginning of the empire who established formal gardens in the hills around Rome. The best known are the Horti Sallustiani⁸; but there were many others.⁹ All these gardens were ostensibly entirely *loci amoeni*, pleasant retreats for their owners and their friends, Rome's intellectual and social elite, to exercise *otium*. They became so widespread that they created a sort of green belt around the hills above the city. Of course, the gardens were intended as much for self display to one's peers and clients as for personal playgrounds. The gardens of the hills were full of plundered Greek art, placed there totally out of its original context, to serve a new function for the Augustan elite. Indeed, many of the sculptures now in the museums of the world, and especially in the Capitoline Museums, were originally placed in the *horti*, and

4 So Gowers, (2012, p. 264) who notes parallels in Callimachus' *Iambos*.

5 See Gowers (2005; 2012, p. 268) and Uden (2010); Maecenas' Gardens were a locus for literary culture in the *Satires*.

6 Freudenburg (2014). For the renewal of Rome as the *leitmotif* of Augustan propaganda, see Zanker (1988).

7 Freudenburg described this as "the evertightening turn of Rome's totalitarian pipe wrench," (2001, p. 4).

8 The Gardens of Sallust are the subject of a major study; see Hartswick (2004).

9 Favro (2005, p. 251).

were rediscovered when the area was being redeveloped in the 19th century.¹⁰ The gardens were also residential; the owners had them developed as semi-rural retreats, “periurban” rather than suburban: still close to the Forum, but allowing the Roman elite to indulge in the fiction that they were country gentlemen. Over time the *horti* became almost exclusively the property of the emperors, and many of the Caesars made the *horti* their primary residence. In the next century the Gardens of Maecenas became imperial property; during the Great Fire of 64 CE, Nero was in residence and indeed watched the fire from the *turris Maecenatiana*.¹¹

No matter the owners at any particular time, it is clear that the gardens were meant to be seen. The displays of art and the gardens themselves were meant to show the degree of culture and wealth of the owner, and there was certainly no point if nobody could see them.¹² Exactly who could go there to see things is unclear, but we have to imagine a relatively wide potential audience, including virtually everyone in the intellectual and social elite of the city of Rome. It is inconceivable, for instance, that the well-known statue of Laocoön now in the Vatican Museums was not available for Vergil to study, but he surely didn’t own it. The gardens spoke of power and influence to the people who got to view them, and were meant to do so.

The gardens were a constructed environment in more ways than as outdoor landscape design or a sculpture garden. Constructed environments convey a message, and at the end of the republic during the time of the triumvirs, the message of the new gardens on the Esquiline has to have been about Octavian/Augustus — after all, the owner was Maecenas. Maecenas and Octavian, the later Augustus, were closely linked by friendship, and everyone knew it. The mention of one in a poem certainly implied the other. The gardens that were on show presented a political message to the visitors, their audience, above and beyond the message of Maecenas’ wealth and culture.

The gardens were explicitly places of poetic artifice for the circle of Maecenas and a locus for the poetic renewal sponsored by Augustus. The members of Maecenas’ circle were certainly literary: “literary society flourished on country estates because *otium* seems to have been a prerequisite for such activity.”¹³ Indeed the site

10 See Cima and Tolano (2008).

11 Suetonius *Nero* 38.2. See Uden (2010, pp. 208–209) for the reputation of the *horti* in imperial times, culminating in the *Domus Aurea*, the logical end of the expansion of *horti* as imperial residences. Nero brought the suburban *horti* into the center of the city.

12 Hartswick (2004, p. 16).

13 Hartswick (2004, p. 16).

was used for living quarters for Maecenas' stable of writers:

i puer, et citus haec aliqua proponere columna,
et dominum Esquiliiis scribe habitare tuum. Propertius 3.23.24

Go, slave, and quickly post this (sc. information) on some column
and write that your master resides on the Esquiline.

Vergil was perhaps even brought to live there with Maecenas; we may imagine the same for Horace until he was given the Sabine Farm.¹⁴ The place was important for the poets of the proto-Augustan literary circle and in particular for Horace.¹⁵

The only remaining structure of Maecenas' residence in the *horti* is the so-called Auditorium in the Via Merulana; it is probably not exactly an auditorium, but surely suitable for poetic recitation. It is identified as a place for social gatherings, the formal *cenae* of Roman high society.¹⁶ A close analogy would be Livia's dining room from her *villa suburbana* at Prima Porta, which in its most self-consciously Roman way gives the visitor the illusion of being in the country when he actually *is* in the country.

The Auditorium is as artificial as Livia's dining room, with very similar wall paintings. In any case, the *horti* were not a place of physical recreation only. The *locus* was a particularly poetically *amoenus* one and it seems to have been designed specifically to provide a setting for poetic inspiration. The setting was created with artwork from Greece or inspired by Greek models — the pieces now in the various Roman museums. For instance, we can see the Muses and Apollo from the *Horti Maecenantis* in the Capitoline Museums. This was a totally artificial garden; significantly, the Auditorium is situated right on the Servian Wall and so is liminally both in the city and in the country.

In the context of the statues of the Muses and the poetic character of the *horti*, it is no stretch to suspect that the statue of Priapus, which speaks in this poem both as the narrator and as the character who so explosively communicates his displeasure

14 Suet. *Vita Vergilii* 13: *habuitque domum Romae Esquiliiis iuxta hortos Maecenatianos*. See Welch (2001, p. 169).

15 “. . . Maecenas' Esquiline home doubles as a metaphor for moral behavior and poetic values Horace presents in his *Satires* . . .” Welch (2001, p. 177).

16 “. . . the room was essentially a setting for dinner parties,” Claridge (1998, p. 295). See now the major publication by Häuber (2014).

to the witches, functions as a kind of representative of the poet. Priapus is also himself an artifact, that is the product of an *artifex* — he calls his Geppetto a *faber* (1.8.2). All of Augustan Rome, starting now during the triumviral period, was a constructed place, and this poem is precisely part of that—in it we see the construction in process, with the old uses of the area in direct conflict with the new use as Maecenas' pleasure garden. The renewal was to be celebrated by a literary movement centered on the gardens.

As with everything in Augustan Rome, and I would argue proto-Augustan Rome of the triumvirs — the new marble temples, the Ara Pacis, the *Carmen Saeculare*, the very *Aeneid*—the theme of the garden decoration was Renewal and Rebirth. On the most basic level, Maecenas bought the area and subjected it to urban renewal. The very *fact* of the redevelopment speaks of renewal—not the least part of the message. More, the lush plantings that appear here in reality as well as on the sculptural decoration of the Ara Pacis, are naturally reflective of new growth.¹⁷

As the gardens of Caesar's Minister for Propaganda (as some call him), these Gardens were one of the first items in the transformation of the city of Rome under Augustus; the decorative and horticultural design of the area was the first really to present the Augustan themes of Renewal and Restoration.

Horace emphasizes this in his satire — the ground that had been the potters' field:

huc prius angustis eiecta cadavera cellis
conservus vili portanda locabat in arca;
hoc miserae plebi stabat commune sepulcrum; 1.8.8-10

Before this, a fellow-slave would bring to this place the bodies which had been thrown out of their narrow coffins, to be carried into a small box; here stood the common tomb of the poorest common folk.

was now transformed into something beneficial:

¹⁷ See Zanker (1988, pp. 167-183), Augustus' reign was meant to usher in an *aurea aetas* of abundance and fertility. Zanker sees the *Horti* of Maecenas as not fitting Augustus' later ideology which came after his victory in the civil wars and his constitutional settlement, but they certainly fit the imagery of renewal and growth (1988, p. 137). The development of Maecenas' *horti* in the 30's anticipates the imagery that emerged during and after the *Ludi Saeculares* of 17 BCE.

nunc licet Esquilis habitare salubribus atque
aggere in aprico spatium, quo modo tristes
albis informem spectabant ossibus agrum, 1.8.14-16

but now, we can live on the Esquiline in health and take strolls on the sunny rampart, where just now mourners used to see an unformed field with white bones.

and the guardianship of the Priapus was precisely to prevent a return of the witches who earlier used to perform their necromantic rites in the area, and also to chant spells.

More, we can (perhaps fancifully) see the rejection of the destructive voodoo of the crones, an emblem of the past, as a sign of the changes begun by Octavian. The witches are metaphorically the dark past of the Late Republic, to be replaced by the “restored” republic; they are the graveyard that the leaders of Rome from Sulla through Caesar and Pompey to the triumvirs had made of Rome, to be replaced by the pleasure gardens planted by Maecenas as a symbol of peace and prosperity;¹⁸ above all, the past of the 30’s BCE included the ambivalent figure of the generalissimo of the civil wars, Octavian, on his way to being replaced by the benevolent Father of his Country, Augustus.

The witches of the piece, Sagana and Canidia, representing the past for Horace and Priapus, were presumably understood as such by Maecenas and Octavian. Within the context of the poem itself, they are the ones trying to go back to the former use of the gardens — the cemetery. They are trying to revive the dead in the place where they had been accustomed to do so — the potters field. In fact, they are trying to revive the dead past of the Esquiline. It is notable that, for Horace, the dead bones are not removed and forgotten totally, but they are there beneath the new gardens and the witches are able to uncover them (*quin ossa legant herbasque nocentis*: “they collect bones and noxious herbs” 1.8.22).¹⁹

18 “... the garden stands symbolically for a hoped-for deliverance of Rome from the horrors of civil war, whose indiscriminate destruction is recalled in the bones of the dead littering the ground.” Dufallo states that the witches are to be identified with republican dissension (2007, pp. 109-10 and further, p. 103). DuQuesnay suggests that their magic rite of necromancy was associated particularly with the republicanism of Sex. Pompey (2007, pp. 38-39 and Gowers (2012, p. 272)).

19 Notably the bones were dug up when the *horti* were being constructed, but were not left lying about. Häuber (2014, p. 315).

They represent more, though. Their aim is explicitly defined by Priapus:

scalpere terram
unguibus et pullam divellere mordicus agnam
coeperunt; cruor in fossam confusus, ut inde
manis elicerent animas responsa daturas. 1.8.26-29

They began to scrape the earth with their fingernails and to tear apart a lamb with their teeth; blood was spilled into the ditch in order that they could call up the dead spirits to give them answers.

They are trying to revive the dead and make them speak. Now, for the Romans of the 30's, there had been enough bones in recent years and enough spirits departed before their time. The civil wars of the previous decade had seen all the leaders emerge with considerable *cruor* on their hands. It was getting to be time for the Roman people to forget that Octavian had been one of those leaders. The last thing he or any of his party wanted was to have his victims arise and speak from the butchery of Perugia where Octavian was believed to have ordered wholesale slaughter, or from the time of the proscriptions.²⁰ This satire is the first in a series of literary exercises in forgetting, perhaps most familiar to most of us from Horace's *Ode* 2.7 to Pompeius, whose eventual return Horace greets with the Massic wine that causes forgetfulness (*oblivioso . . . Massico*). Looked at in this way, the Gardens were meant to be the first item in the reconstruction of Rome according to the new order of Augustus (although that name was in the future). Augustus's reconstruction of the city is well known; this is the first reconfiguration of the land area. The gardens speak of renewal; this is the renewal of which they speak.

Forgetting and reconstruction were especially important in the period of the 30s. The Gardens are dated to the mid-decade, just when relations with Antony were deteriorating. Octavian was working up his defense of Italy, making himself the defender of the West against the oriental barbarism of Cleopatra. He needed the influential people in Rome to know that he was the defender of their interests — he didn't need them to be reminded that he had killed so many of them in the recent

20 For Octavian's cruelty in the civil wars, see especially Suet. *Aug.* 13.1-2 (after Phillipi) and 15 (Perusia). Syme adverts to the reputation of Octavian: "These judicial murders were magnified by defamation and credulity into a hecatomb of three hundred Roman senators and knights slaughtered in solemn and religious ceremony on the Ides of March before an altar dedicated to *Divus Julius*." (1939, p. 212). There was certainly something there to forget.

past. He was soon enough to become *pater patriae*; here he is starting to put aside his past. The gardens represent the new order, not just the magic/fart. The setting in both its old and new incarnations is operative. The old is indeed represented by the bones scattered about; for Horace they represent indeed the civil wars, but specifically the Octavian of the civil wars, the man who slaughtered his fellow citizens. Octavian is in the midst of ramping up the propaganda war against Antony and Cleopatra (on which the *locus classicus* is Horace's "Cleopatra Ode," *Odes* 1.37), so he cannot be seen to be killing citizens any more. In fact, he is going to renovate the entire city. We are all familiar with the Augustan reconstruction of Rome — the *Forum Augusti* and Temple of Mars Ultor, the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, the Pantheon, and so on. The fart of the Priapus is the first blast in the (so to speak) new world ordure.²¹

Works Cited

- Cima, Maddalena and Emilia Tolano. "Horti di Mecenate," in Eleetra Mondadori, ed. *Gli Horti de Roma Antica*. Roma: Eleetra, 2008: 74-81.
- Claridge, Amanda, Judith Toms, and Tony Cubberley. in *Rome: an Oxford Archaeological Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1998: 295.
- Dufallo, Basil. *The Ghosts of the Past: Latin Literature, the Dead, and Rome's Transition to a Principate*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
- DuQuesnay, I.M. LeM. "Horace and Maecenas," in Woodman, T. and David West, eds. *Poetry and Politics in the Age of Augustus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984: 19-58.
- Edmunds, Lowell. "Horace's Priapus: A Life on the Esquiline (Sat. 1.8)," *CS* 59 (2009): 125-131.

21 Horace's *Satires* lose their satirical edge as they support the new establishment: "he plays the gamekeeper rather than poacher to the new regime." Gowers (2005, p. 52).

- Favro, Diane. "Making Rome a World City," in Galinsky, Karl. *The Cambridge companion to the Age of Augustus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 234-263.
- Fraenkel, Eduard. *Horace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Freudenburg, Kirk. *Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- _____. *The Walking Muse: Horace on the Theory of Satire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Gordon, Richard. "Magic as a Topos in Augustan Poetry: Discourse, Reality and Distance." *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 11 (2009): 209-228.
- Gowers, Emily. "Horace, *Satires* 1 and 2," in Freudenburg, Kirk. *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 48-16.
- _____, ed. *Horace: Satires*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Hallett, Judith P. "*Pepedi / Diffisa Nate Ficus*: Priapic Revenge in Horace, *Satires* 1.8." *Rheinisches Museum* 124 (1981): 341-347.
- Hartswick, Kim J. *The Gardens of Sallust: a Changing Landscape*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- Häuber, Chrystina. Appendix X in *The Eastern part of the Mons Oppius in Rome: the Sanctuary of Isis et Serapis in Regio III, the Temples of Minerva Medica, Fortuna Virgo and Dea Syria, and the Horti of Maecenas*. Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2014: 426-431.
- Kellum, Barbara. "Weighing in: the Priapus Painting at the House of the Vettii, Pompeii," in Dutsch, Dorota, and Ann Suter. *Ancient Obscenities: Their Nature and Use in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015: 199-224.
- Rudd, Niall. *The 'Satires' of Horace: a Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.
- Syme, Ronald. *The Roman Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.

Uden, James. "The Vanishing Gardens of Priapus." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 105 (2010): 189-219.

Welch, Tara S. "Est locus uni cuique suus: City and Status in Horace's *Satires* 1.8 and 1.9." *Classical Antiquity* 20.1 (2001): 165-192.

Zanker, Paul. Shapiro, A., trans. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988.