

Stephen D'EVELYN: Reciprocity, Genre Conventions, and the Asymmetrical Gift of Beauty: Re-evaluating Status in Horace Odes I, 1

In *Horace and the Gift Economy of Patronage*, Phebe Lowell Bowditch discusses the word "decus" which Horace uses in the address to Maecenas in Odes I,1: The range of meanings suggested by the word – "glory," "ornament," "honor"--shows the honor the patron confers and the praise the poet reciprocally confers. Bowditch argues that as Mauss has noted status requires a public to see and to envy such displays.

The word 'decus' however can also mean 'beauty'. 'Decus' may be beauty as a gift judging from the situations of patronage in which we find the word and the reciprocal nature of the exchange involved in its aspects as glory and honor. The connections between beauty and gift appear too in uses of the Greek term 'charis' to describe both reciprocity and the delight of erotic beauty. More broadly, beauty and the gift are related in sharing two definitive characteristics, surprise and obligation. The experience of beauty is often said to surprise us Gift is also often discussed in the context of surprise. Social theorists and historians have pointed out how gift paradoxically works by and engenders obligation. Beauty too is implicated in obligation. The cultural obligation to assert control through objectification has been seen as a response to the threat posed by beauty to the viewer's self-control. On the other hand, beauty obliges the viewer to respond with exclamations of wonder and praise.

Beauty as gift does not conform neatly to univocal reciprocation, the 'do ut des' principle. It is unquantifiable. It thus calls into question the envy necessary for status. Yet beauty as gift does not isolate or exalt the poet beyond society but involves him in asymmetrical relations requiring further exchange; the lack of balance calls forth continuous reciprocation seeking an elusive balance.

The possibility of beauty as gift helps us read Odes I, 1. The interpretation of 'decus' as merely 'glory', 'ornament', 'honor', confined to the human economy of patronage and praise, does not adequately leave open ways in which the poem uses satirical hyperbole and plays with generic conventions to suggest how beauty is itself a patron with which the elusive Horatian self engages through flirtatious exchange.

I shall explore this cluster of ideas in several uses of genre conventions in Odes I, 1, for example the priamel calling to mind Pindar's evocations of the hero's glory and Sappho's priamel on beauty as whatever one loves. Or again we shall consider satirical and aesthetic echoes in the word 'sublimi' in the characteristic Horatian 'diminuendo' at the end of the ode. The diminuendo can be seen in terms of the asymmetrical gift of beauty in poetic composition: the beginning can never be matched exactly by a reciprocal image through ring composition. This reminds us of the importance of the satirical perspective which sees human activities including patronage from a larger context and helps us re-evaluate patronage to include the gift of beauty as that which cannot be reduced to abstractions such as power but which confers status by forging connections of desire and delight.