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A Battle of Wits: Horace, *Satire 1.5*

Horace's "Journey to Brundisium" (*Sat.* 1.5) has been dismissed as a trivial "evening with slides" (Rudd) incongruously framed by two more substantial poems. I argue that the satire constitutes a poetic discussion on the nature and superior quality of satirical wit that elaborates on the theme of *Sat.* 1.4 and introduces the themes of *Sat.* 1.6, the value of true friendship and the folly of false ambition.

The clue to the meaning of *Sat.* 1.5 lies in the battle of wits between Sarmentus and Messius right in its center (50-70). Horace devotes more lines to this apparently irrelevant interlude than to any other stop on his journey. In addition, the verbal contest between slaves and boatmen (11-13) and the "bucolic" singing contest between a sailor and a passenger (15-17) lead up to the central comic duel (50-70) as if to a climax.

The insults Messius and Sarmentus exchange in order to entertain the friends of Maecenas are characteristically different from each other. Sarmentus' jokes about the physical appearance of his opponent (56-64) mark him as the *scurra* he in fact is (52; cf. Cic. *De or.* 2.246).

Messius, in contrast, displays subtle satirical wit by focusing on a typical target of Horatian satire, *ambitio* (1.4.26). He mocks the servile origins of the self-important *scriba* Sarmentus and hints at the folly of his ambition (65-67). The *scurra's* only weapon, invective directed at Messius' looks, is turned against himself when Messius skillfully combines mockery of the freedman's puny physique with another joke about his low birth (68-69). Messius has the last laugh and demonstrates the superiority of a satirist's *ridiculum* over the *scurrile*, a leitmotif of *Sermones I* (cf. also *Sat.* 1.7; 10.14-15).

The distinction between *ridiculum* and *scurrile* links 1.5 to 1.4, where the satirist defends himself against the label *scurra* by pointing out the differences between these two kinds of humor. At the same time, *Sat.* 1.5 introduces the themes of *Sat.* 1.6, false ambition, servile descent, and the value of friendship. Like the pompous Aufidius in 1.5, Tillius in 1.6 is titled *praetor*, wears the *latus clavus*, and is mocked for his accoutrements (1.5.34-36; 6.24-25, 107-9). Unlike his colleagues Aufidius and Sarmentus in 1.5, the *scriba* Horace in 1.6 values friendship over political advancement. In sum, *Sat.* 1.5 is closely linked to both 1.4 and 1.6 and offers much more than a brief diversion from the serious content of these two satires.