

HORACE EPISTLES

BOOK II

I

Caesar, alone you bear the heavy weight
Of many things, saving the Roman state
From foes, establishing laws and decrees,
And therefore your responsibilities
To interrupt by talking endlessly
Would maybe harm the Roman citizenry.
Bacchus, Castor, Pollux and Romulus
Apportioned fields to all the populus
And housed them, building towns, and when they ended
Their savage wars, they all of them ascended 10
To Heaven, and yet they grieved that they could see
That man's esteem would not turn out to be
Commensurate with their deeds. The man who slew
The dreadful Hydra – other monsters, too –
Found out that only Death can truly slay
Envy. The man whose merits far outweigh
Another's burns bright: but once he has died
He's loved. But in your lifetime we provide
Altars to honour you and recognize
Such altars have not risen nor will rise 20
Hereafter and assert unanimously
That through our goodness and sagacity
We favoured you above our leaders who
Once ruled here and above Greek leaders, too,
Assessing other things, though, differently,

Spurning and holding in antipathy
 All things unless they had lived out their days
 In ancient times; indeed so full of praise
 Are they for what's now ancient history
 That they assert what the *decemviri* 30
 Set up to outlaw sin or the decrees
 Our kings mandated with the citizenries
 Of the harsh Sabines or the Gabii,
 The pontiff's books, each ancient prophecy
 Were spoken by the Muses where they dwell
 Upon the Atlas Mountains. We know well
 The writings of the ancient Greeks are best
 But therefore think that we should always test
 Them by the self-same scale. What's there to tell?
 "The olive has no pit, the nut no shell." 40
 Because Dame Fortune's favoured us do we
 Paint, sing and wrestle just as skillfully
 As the anointed Greeks? If poems grow
 In worth with age, like wine, I'd like to know
 How long it takes. Should an author who's been dead
 A hundred years be classed as talented
 Ancient or modern hack? A boundary,
 Then, must be drawn to end the case. "If he
 Is dead a hundred years, he's nonpareil,
 Being an ancient writer." But let's say 50
 He died a month past that, or else maybe
 A year, what then should be his category?
 "He is ancient." Alright, then, as though
 I'm pulling, one by one, the hairs that grow

Upon a horse's tail, I will withdraw
Each year until this speaker stands in awe
Of the diminishing pile – the man who sees
The annals as the sole authorities
On worth and merit and will idolize
Only what Libitina sanctifies. 60

Old Ennius, wise and brave, whom critics say
Is Homer born again, does not display
Anxieties about his dream about
Pythagoras or his vows. There is no doubt
That Naevius is in our books and we
May fancy that it was but recently
He wrote his poems. As often as debate
Is held about which of two poets is late,
Which early, Pacuvius bears off the prize
Of a wise old bard and Accius will arise 70
As a lofty ancient and Afranius,
We say, equals Menander, and Plautus
In style resembles his epitome
Epicharmus and the crown for gravity
Goes to Caecilius while Terence earns
The prize for art. Their very lines Rome learns
By heart; in theatres, packed from tier to tier,
We watch their works performed. They all are here,
An honour roll kept from antiquity
Up to the time of Livy's history. 80

Opinions vary. If the people pay
Obeisance, as if they were nonpareil,
To the ancients, then they speak erroneously,

But if they say that some write overly
Outmodedly or if they should confess
They're harsh, with many full of sluggishness,
You're wise, siding with Jupiter and me.
I don't, though, take to task the poetry
Of Livius or wish we should destroy
It all; when I was just a little boy 90
Orbilius read them out with many a blow
Accompanying his voice; I wonder, though,
Why they are thought so fine and smooth and near
Perfection. For if one word should appear
That scintillates or if a line or two
Sound slightly lovelier than others do,
The reader is beguiled and thinks it's all
So well-composed. I feel a certain gall
When a work is censured not because it's rated
Graceless and boring but because it's dated 100
As modern, while on ancient bards no blame
Is placed but only accolades and fame.
If I should question whether Atta's play
Trod properly or not through the array
Of croci, almost all the old men cry
That modesty is dead whenever I try
To fault the plays that featured Aesopus,
The tragic actor, and wise Roscius;
They think that nothing pleases but what they
Enjoy or that to let the young hold sway 100
Is base, and they're reluctant to allow
That what they learned as beardless youths is now

Fit for the scrap-heap. A keen devotee
Of Numa's Sicily hymns, who would, like me,
Like to seem more profound, won't eulogize
Dead writers but prefers to criticize
Our present bards. Now if the Greeks had been
As hostile to the new as we are seen
To be, what would be ancient now? Indeed
Would there be anything for us to read 120
And re-read? When the Greek wars came to an end,
They turned to trifles, starting to descend
To vice through their good fortune, ardently
Promoting athletes, horses, ivory,
Marble or brazen sculptures; they would gaze
On art or flautists or take up a craze
For actors, like a child who fretfully
Begs something from her nurse, then fitfully
Throws it away. Don't you believe that you
May love something that you may later view 130
With hatred? That's what came about in Greece,
The fruits of favourable winds and peace.
It was the custom years ago in Rome
To rise at daybreak, freshen up one's home
With morning breezes and then educate
One's clients in law and, at a heedful rate,
Lay out one's funds and hear one's elders give
Advice and teach one's juniors how to live
Prosperously and to keep far away
From ruinous lust. The Romans of today 140
Are fickle, though, and burn only to pen

Their poetry. Young boys and grave old men,
 All garlanded with wreaths, declaim their verse
 At dinner. I, in telling tales, am worse
 Than any Parthian – at break of day
 I get up from my bed and scribble away.
 A man who can't sail ships would never dare
 To do so; only doctors, too, may care
 For sick folk; only joiners work with wood.
 But we, whether incompetent or good, 150
 Write verse. But think – he who writes poetry
 Is rarely money-mad: exclusively
 He dotes on writing verse. When money's tight
 Or someone's set his property alight
 Or a slave has run away, he laughs, and he
 Won't cheat a colleague with some trickery
 Or bilk a ward; he thinks that he's well-fed
 While living on mere beans and day-old bread.
 Although a poor and lazy soldier, he
 Still serves the city if you will agree 160
 That small things aid great ones. A poet may
 Train babies how to speak and turn away
 Their ears from filth and teach them gentleness,
 Correcting anger, hate and bitterness.
 He tells them of the splendid deeds of men
 And with well-drawn examples through his pen
 He educates the rising generation
 And to the vulnerable brings consolation.
 How could that hymn be sung by virtuous
 Maids and boys had the Muse not given us 170

A bard? They ask for succour as they sing,
Sensing the gods, imploring them to bring
Down rain and cause all maladies to cease
And begging, in their learned prayers, for peace
And fruitful harvests. Thus we satisfy
The gods who dwell below and those on high.
Our farmers of the past, stout men, content
With little, once their seeds were sown, were bent
On merriment, now glad their drudgery
Was done at last, and in the company 190
Of wives and slaves, who shared the labouring,
They'd make an expiatory offering
Of a pig to Tellus and, to Silvanus,
Milk and, to each farmer's Genius,
Flowers and wine, to show the brevity
Of life, and hence arose the revelry
Called the Fescennia – rival sides would sing
Alternate verses with which they would fling
Taunts at each other. This was happily
Allowed for many years till finally 190
Fun turned to open frenzy, spilling through
The homes of honest folk, and people who
Were bitten in that way with anger burned,
While even those uninjured were concerned.
Therefore a law, which bore a penalty,
Was promulgated that no-one must be
Shamed by a poem. Then people changed in dread
Of being whipped and were brought back instead
To eloquent speaking and gentility.

When Greece was brought into captivity 200

She captivated Rome and occupied
Rough Latium with her arts. The fetid tide
Of old Saturnian metre flowed away,
Though long there were – some still exist today –
Some brutish signs. The Roman bard was slow,
After the Punic Wars, to try to know
How to use Aeschylus and Sophocles
And Thespis to enhance his faculties.
He tried to see if he could worthily

Translate their plays, often successfully 210

With wit and grandeur, being animated
With tragic authors and exhilarated
With his own boldness, but he thought it base –
For he was still a neophyte – to erase
One line. To write a comedy, they say,
Needs less work, dealing with the everyday,
And yet the less we show our charity,
The harder is the work, for we may see
The lovesick swain, the sneaky pimp, the cad,
The parasites and the suspicious dad 220

In Plautus as in sloppy socks he'll dash
About the stage. As long as he has cash,
Whether the play should be a big success
Or a resounding flop he couldn't care less.
A careless audience will depress that man
Who's glorified by some tragedian:
Attentive audiences, though, delight
That man. How small a thing it is, and slight,

That ruins or refreshes one who's keen
For praise. Well, if a flop will make me lean, 230
A smash a healthy person, Comedy,
Farewell! A thing like this will frequently
Repel and scare a playwright who has guts:
Those numerous, those theatre-going nuts
Are low in virtue, stupid and unread,
Prepared to fight the knights in the rows ahead
Of them and in the middle of the play
Call for a bear or boxers, because they
Adore such things. Indeed what would delight
Knights' ears is now transferred to random sight 250
And hollow joys. The play goes on and on,
Four hours or even more, while there upon
The stage, charging about, are companies
Of horse and foot; then the adversities
Of captured kings we look upon, hands bound
Tightly behind their backs, while all around
Rush litters, chariots and an argosy
Bearing purloined Corinthian ivory.
Democritus would laugh if he returned
To earth; whether the rabble's eyes are turned 250
Upon a leopard that was interbred
With a camel or a white elephant, instead
Of looking at the stage, he'd cast *his* eyes
Upon the rabble, out of whom would rise
More means for laughter, for he'd think the plot
Was written for a stone-dead ass. For what
Voices can top the uproar that rings out

In theatres now? You'd feel there was no doubt
That storms were crashing on Mount Garganus
Or on the Tuscan Sea, for it is thus 260
The games are held, where on a gorgeous set
The actor, smeared in foreign garb, will get
Applause. "What did he say?" "Nothing." "Then why
Did they applaud?" "The cloth in purple dye."
And lest you think that I praise grudgingly
The work that others do successfully,
Though I refuse to write such things, that man
Who is a playwright seems like one who can
Walk a tightrope – he causes me distress,
Then pique, then peace of mind, then fearfulness: 270
For just like a magician he can set
Me first in Thebes and then in Athens. Yet
To those who'd rather have us read their books
Than bear the audience's scornful looks
Attend a little, if you wish to load
Apollo's shelves with books and add a goad
To bards so that with greater energy
They're able to reach Helicon's greenery.
What we bards do can prove injurious
To us (though my own grapevines I would thus 280
Cut down) when offering you some poetry
Of ours when you're full of anxiety
And weary; we are hurt, too, when a friend
Has the temerity to reprehend
Us for a single couplet, and when we
Recite a second time some poetry

When unsolicited; when we lament
Our work is not met with acknowledgment –
Those fine-spun poems of ours; and when we pray
That when we're known as poets, on that day 290
You'll summon us, forbidding us to be
Paupers and charge us to write poetry.
But you should know what kind of priests you choose
To tend the temples honouring the news
Of your great deeds at home and overseas,
For bards who get appointments such as these
Must earn them. Alexander the Great adored
The poems of Choerilus, who drew a hoard
Of royal cash with tawdry verse. As when
Ink leaves a stain when touched, a writer's pen 300
Will mar fine deeds. This king who lavishly
Purchased a silly poem sent a decree
That no-one was allowed to paint the bold
King but Apelles and no-one must mould
His features but Lysippus. Should you say
He rated books in the same skillful way
As he judged paintings, you would have to swear
That he'd been born beneath the cloying air
That fills Boeotia. Vergil and Varius,
The bards you love, however, are courteous, 310
Admiring your views of what they pen.
The minds and characters of famous men
Of whom they write they make to be as clear
As how their sculptured visages appear.
Rather than verse that creeps upon the ground,

Which now I write, I hanker to expound
 On famed actions, principalities,
 Lands, rivers, mountain keeps, hostilities
 Throughout the world though your authority
 Ended when Janus brought us amity 320
 By fastening his gates and, under you,
 Rome cowing Parthia. If I could do
 All that, I would, but your great majesty
 Would not allow my meager poetry.
 My modesty wouldn't suffer me to dare
 To do what my resources couldn't bear.
 One's ardour goes too far when foolishly
 It badgers those it loves, especially
 When one's attempt at favour's made by way
 Of poetry and metre. People may 320
 Learn earlier and recall more vividly
 What's mocked and what's prized in society.
 I shun such praise as brings me down and would
 Not want a waxen image, far from good,
 To render me or ill-penned verse to acclaim
 My gifts lest I should blush for very shame,
 Laid out in some closed casket, alongside
 The poet's name, then carried through the tide
 Of people on the streets to where they sell
 Frankincense, pepper, nasty things that smell 340
 And lots of other miscellaneous
 Items, all wrapped in well-used papyrus.

Florus, dear friend of Nero, think maybe
A slave born in Tibur or Gabii
Is offered you for sale by someone who
Says this: "Here is a lad I'll sell to you –
Good-looking, born in-house, and just eight grand,
Most eager to respond to your command.
He speaks a little Greek and he will sway
To anything you want – here is wet clay
For you to shape. While you carouse, he'll sing –
Not well, though. When someone 's struggling 10
To make a sale, once he has overplayed
His hand by offering one accolade
Too many, he's not trusted – that's not me,
No pressure here! Though needy, I'm debt-free.
No other trader would do this for you,
And I myself would not so rashly do
This just for anyone. This lad one day
Ran off, as happens, and, in his dismay
And fear of whipping, hid beneath the stair.
So pay me now, if you don't really care 20
About that fault." You'd buy an escapee
And know the score, and so it seems to me
He'd make his price scot-free, and yet you'd sue
The man unjustly. I declared to you,
When you were leaving, that I'm indolent
So that you wouldn't scold me if I sent
No letters to you. If you criticize
Me still, what is the point? You note my lies

As well when I sent you no poetry
 And broke my vow Lucullus' soldiery 30
 Once had a man who saved up quite a hoard
 Of cash in his campaigns, but while he snored
 One night it was purloined. Then furiously,
 Mad at himself and at the enemy
 Who stole it, like a wolf that ravenous,
 He drove a garrison from its mountainous
 Location full of riches, so they say,
 And for this exploit he would walk away
 With twenty grand. Soon he was urged to take
 Another keep – his captain's words would make 40
 The timidest man a hero – "Go, stout soul,
 Where bravery calls you and achieve our goal.
 What's keeping you?" The rustic, in reply,
 Said, "He who's lost his purse will go, not I."
 Rome nurtured me and there I have been taught
 About the ravages Achilles wrought
 In anger at the Greeks. Athens as well
 Taught me more of the arts: I learned to tell
 Crooked from straight, and there among the trees
 Of Academe I learnt the niceties 50
 Of truth. Then civil war broke out and drew
 Me from that pleasant place and, although new
 To soldiering, I was compelled to meet
 An enemy unable to compete
 With Caesar's arms. Then Philippi took place,
 Discharging me, and I was forced to face
 A clipping of my wings: I lost my land,

My home, my money, compelled to withstand
 Harsh poverty, which then encouraged me
 To write, but now that I am moderately 60
 Well-off, what drugs are there to make me say
 I'd rather write than doze my life away?
 The passing years rob one of everything.
 They took from me fun, sex, games, banqueting,
 Now keen to snatch my verse. What's to be done?
 Not everything is liked by everyone:
 My odes, my epodes, my satires that bite
 After the mode of Bion, all delight
 This man or that, as if three guests should eat
Chez moi, demanding different kinds of meat. 70
 What should I offer them? What should I not?
 You turn down something which another's hot
 To try. You ask for what the other two
 Pronounce unsavoury. Tell me, do you
 Think I can keep on writing poetry
 Right here in Rome with such anxiety
 And toil to bear? One man wants me to play
 A sponsor's role, one would have me delay
 All of my other duties so that I
 Can hear his poetry. One man lives high 80
 On the Quirinal, the other far from there
 Upon the Aventine, and I must care
 For both of them – an inconvenient
 Distance! The streets are clean and won't prevent
 Your contemplation." Sweating terribly,
 With all his mules and porters, I would see

A builder; cranes would hoist a great big log
And then a stone; a funeral train would clog
The street and jolt huge carts in rivalry;
A mad dog and a filthy sow would flee 90

Across my path. So go and meditate
On sonorous verse! Bards love a grove and hate
The city, honouring Bacchus whose delight
Is sleep and shade: would you all day and night
Desire to trace bards' steps? A bard
In quiet Athens who has studied hard
For seven years and, wrapped in poetry,
Grown old, when he goes out is frequently,
As quiet as a statue, laughed at by

The mob of people: do you think that I 100
Can think up lyrics in Rome's hullabaloo
To match the lyre? In Rome there once were two
Brothers a lawyer and an orator:

Their praises for each other more and more
You'd hear – one was a Mucius to the other,
Who was pronounced a Gracchus by his brother.
That madness strikes our bards, too. I compose
My odes, that man his elegies. "Ah, those
Are splendid. How the Muses do agree!"

Observe how we so self-importantly 110
Gaze round Apollo's library supplied
With countless Roman poets. Step inside,
If you've the time, and from a distance pry
Upon our converse and discover why
Each of us weaves his ivy crown. We fight,

Like Samnites in slow battle till daylight,
I come off as Alcaeus; equally
He says I'm like Callimachus. If he
Needs more, he's like Mimnermus, I then claim,
And thus he grows in stature by that name. 120

I try hard to placate the company
Of touchy bards when I write poetry
And seek the people's voice. But now, my mind
Recovered and my studies left behind,
I would stop up my ears quite happily
If someone tried to read his poems to me.
But poets are a joke, though they're content
To write – it makes them over-confident.
If you are mum, he'll praise himself. But he
Who wants to write a proper poem will be 130

An honest critic of his work: he'll dare
To strip away whatever's lacking flair
Or weight or worth, though it would rather stay
In Vesta's temple. Ferreting away,
A gifted bard will find old words and bring
Them back into the world, enlightening
His readers – words which half a century
Ago had been in the vocabulary
Of Cato and Cethegus, now oppressed
With dusty old age; but he will invest 140

His work with new words, which are spawned by use:
Strong, like a river, this linguistic juice
Will flood through Latium, so rich so clean;
He'll check what's overgrown and add a sheen

To what's too raw, and he will take away
 What's worthless and will make it seem like play,
 Though labouring; now like a Satyr he
 Will dance, now, Cyclops-like, ponderously.
 I'd rather seem obtuse and tedious
 While finding all my faults harmonious 150
 Or else not seeing them than, being bright,
 Be irritated at my own insight.
 A well-known Argive once thought that he sat
 In a theatre, all alone, applauding at
 A brilliant play; he acted normally
 In all things else – he got on splendidly
 With neighbours, was a genial host, and kind
 To his wife; regarding slaves, he didn't mind
 If one of them had smashed a jar; this chap
 Was not the sort to suffer a mishap 160
 By falling down a cliff or well. Then he
 Was cured by his painstaking family
 With hellebore. However, "On my word,
 You've finished me, not cured me," he averred.
 "That sweet illusion you have snatched from me."
 Now it's a point of wisdom certainly
 To banish toys and leave them to boys who
 Would play with such things and not to pursue
 Words fitting for the Latin lyre but learn
 The rhythms of real life. These things I turn 170
 About in silent thoughts. Suppose that you
 Had an unquenchable thirst: you'd hurry to
 A doctor, for the more you drank, the more

You craved, being too reticent to bore
Folk with your case. If there's no remedy
To cure the wound that you've received, you flee
The herbs you're given. You'll have heard, I'd guess,
That all the gods remove their foolishness
From those they give prosperity. But when
You're wealthy yet still foolish, do you then 180
Still have the same advisors? Should you be
Made perspicacious by prosperity,
Less greedy and less shy, you'd blush if there
Were someone more rapacious anywhere
Than you. If you have paid the price that's due,
Then what you've bought belongs to you, if you
Trust lawyers. For you own the land that yields
Your food; the farmer harrowing your fields
Will call you boss. With money that you pay
You own eggs, chickens, grapes, wine: in that way 190
You will become the owner gradually
Of a farm for which somebody possibly
Paid what amounted to three hundred grand
Or more. What does it matter if the land
On which you dwell was bought just recently
Or long ago? He who buys property
In Aricia eats greens which he also buys
With money, although he thinks otherwise;
He also bought the kindling to heat
The cauldron. "It's all mine," he will repeat. 200
Even the poplars which with boundaries
Are clearly marked to stave off rivalries,

For that which has been yours could in a flash
Change masters by petition or hard cash
Or force or death. So if no-one can be
Given anything in perpetuity,
Heir following heir in streams, what is the use
Of granaries piled up with your produce,
Lucanian and Calabrian forest-land
If Orcus gathers in both low and grand, 210
Unbriable? Some people do not own
Gems, Tuscan statues, pictures, marble-stone,
Ivory, silver-plate, while some don't care
To have them. Why is it that, of a pair
Of brothers, one prefers a life of cheer,
Happy to live in indolence and smear
Himself with oil, to Herod's lush palm-trees,
His rich twin spending all his energies
Upon his farm as through his fields he goes
With scorching flame and steel? The Genius knows, 220
Controlling one's birth star before it dies
In order to guard someone else, its guise
Mutating, black and white. From my small pile
I'll do the best that I can do; meanwhile
I will not fear what my heir thinks of me
Since I am left so little, as he'll see.
But I would like to know that I can tell
The difference between a ne'er-do-well
And one who has a blithe and open heart
As well as knowing how to tell apart 230

A thrifty from an avaricious man,

Since squandering is very different than
Buying things willingly and, like a boy
Upon Minerva's holiday, enjoy
The short but happy time. Harsh poverty,
Stay far from me! When I am out at sea,
Whether it be on a quinquere or skiff,
I'm still the same. The squalls aren't always stiff
Before us or against. In force, estate,
Wit, looks, worth, place behind the first I rate, 240
Ahead, though, of the rest. So you lack greed?
But have your other faults with that same speed
Departed? Do you flee ambition? Do
You not fear death? Lack anger? And do you
Belittle dreams, magic anxieties,
Ghosts, wizards and Thessalian prodigies?
Do you greet every birthday happily?
Pardon your friends? As seniority
Approaches do you mellow? Once you take
One thorn out of your foot, how does it make 250
You better with so many lurking there?
If you don't know how to live right, take care
To yield to those who do. You've had your fun,
Your feasting and your drinking are all done:
Perhaps, therefore, you should be taking off
Before the younger generation scoff
At all your maudlin prodigality
And send you packing from society.

If a painter wished to place a human head
Upon a horse's neck and then to spread
Feathers on various limbs that they may show
A woman, fair above, seeming below
To be an ugly fish, could you restrain
Your laughter, friends? Dear Pisos, I maintain
A poem's like that: a poet's fantasy,
Just as a sick man's dreams can seem to be,
Is able to invent a foot or head,
Neither with its own form. It may be said 10
That poets and painters have the liberty
To do whatever they like. That's true, and we
Require that right for our poetic class,
Though not to mix the placid with the crass
Or have a snake mate with a winged thing,
A tiger with a lamb. Though opening
With weighty promise, bards will sometimes write
A purple patch or two, flashy and bright,
Perhaps Diana's shrine and woodland brake
Or country streams as rapidly they snake 20
Through lovely fields, the rainbow or the Rhine,
But these do not belong to poems of mine.
Do you know how to draw a cypress tree?
What good is that if you are paid a fee
To paint a sailor as he swims away
In panic from a sinking ship? Or say
You start to make a jar but when you quit,
The wheel shows you a jug. Whatever it

Could be, let it be pure and naturally
Itself. Most people who write poetry, 30
Fathers and worthy sons, are misled by
That which appears to be our aim. I try
To be concise, though unclear I remain:
While seeking a light touch, one's heart and brain
Deceives one: while we aim for grandeur, we
Creep safely on the ground too timidly,
Avoiding storms. If one within his range
Attempts to make a monumental change,
Dolphins in woods are painted, boars in the sea:
When you are lacking art, if you should flee 40
An error, there's a fault. Within the school
Of Aemilius was a workman who could tool
Toenails and wavy hair in bronze, but he
Could not complete his work – regrettably
The whole frame was beyond him. If my aim
Was penning a poem, I'd hate to be the same
As him, as much as I could spend my days
With an unsightly nose, though earning praise
For jet-black hair and dark eyes. So decide
Upon subjects that can be justified 50
By your abilities, and take great care
To find out how much pressure you can bear
And eloquence will evermore be near
At hand and your construction will be clear,
You writers. For its beauty is to say
What needs now to be said (unless I stray
From truth) while putting other things aside.

Let him who plans to write a poem decide
 Priorities. You'll write outstandingly
 If you will cautiously, with subtlety 60
 Weave words by adding clever meanings to
 Expressions that are well-known, and if you
 Must add new words because the poem you write
 Is cryptic, terms that never saw the light
 In the Cethegi's time you may invent.
 And you will be allowed entitlement
 If wary; coined words in poetry
 Will find success, but they should always be
 From a Greek source, but you must never stray
 Too far. Why should the Roman take away 70
 From Varius and Vergil what's agreed
 For Plautus and Caecilius? Indeed
 Why should there be some folk who envy me
 For adding words to my vocabulary,
 Since Ennius and Cato have endowed
 Our language with new names? It is allowed
 (And always will be) to inaugurate
 New-minted words. It is a forest's fate
 To shed its leaves each year: similarly
 Do words themselves die through infirmity 30
 While new ones rise and thrive. We, too, must fall,
 And all our works. Though Neptune keeps each squall
 Away from ships, though the long-sterile slough,
 Fit for rowboats, now feels the heavy plough
 And nurtures all its neighbouring cities, though
 The river leaves its hostile ways to flow

More sweetly, mortal things will fade away
 And speech's splendid beauty cannot stay.
 Many things will be reborn that are no more
 At present, though what's now a gorgeous store 90
 Of words will die, if Use, which holds the code
 Of language, should decide. Blind Homer showed
 How savage war could live in poetry
 With kings' and generals' deeds: originally
 Laments were penned in iambs; later there
 Came recognition of an answered prayer;
 Who was the first to write short elegies
 Is argued still by the authorities –
 The verdict lingers. Old Archilochus
 Employed iambs when he was furious; 100
 It fitted comedy and tragedy
 For converse, drowning out successfully
 Spectators' noisy coughs and forwarding
 The plot. The Muse gave to the lyre's string
 Gods and their kin, a boxer's victory,
 Racehorses coming first, anxiety
 In lovers, and booze-ups. If I don't know
 The contrasts and complexions that all go
 With verse, why should I, through false modesty,
 Chose ignorance, preferring not to be 110
 An expert? Comedy would not take delight
 In tragic measures. It would not be right
 If King Thyestes' feast were to display
 A comic style, the mode of everyday
 Events in comedy. Each category

Should keep to its own style. Occasionally
Will Comedy raise its voice as on the stage
Chremes bawls out his son in a towering rage
And common speech is used in tragedy
Sometimes when heroes show their misery 120
In penury and exile and must part
With vaunting words and touch the watcher's heart.
A poem must not be beautifully wrought
Alone but touching too: indeed it ought
To act upon the soul. Our smiles appear
Whenever the language smiles, but then a tear
Is shed when it laments. If you should thirst
For me to weep, you heroes, you must first
Lament yourselves – I'll feel your misery;
But if you speak your part defectively 130
I'll laugh or nod off. Somber words require
A somber face, those full of threatening fire
An angry one, those showing wantonness
A sportive one, those filled with soberness
A somber one. All folk are naturally
Made fit for every eventuality;
It cheers, irks, grieves us, then articulates
Our moods in words; but if your acting grates
Against the matter, everyone throughout
The theatre cackles. There must be no doubt 140
About who's who up there, whether it be
A god, hero, a noted dame of Rome,
A nurse, a merchant wandering far from home,
A farmer, a Theban or Assyrian,

A man from Argos or a Colchian.
Obey convention, but if something new
Is what you wish to write, be sure that you
Make it organic; If you plan to write
Of famed Achilles, give him anger's bite, 150
And make him brisk, eager, impetuous,
Above the law, solely solicitous
About the war. Medea you should see
As harsh and cruel, I no watery
With weeping; Ixion you must portray
As crafty, I no wandering astray,
Orestes mournful. If something untried
You introduce while daring to provide
A new persona, see that he will stay
Consistent in himself throughout the play. 160
It's difficult to write appropriately
About what we all know: more happily
You'll split in acts your poem about the war
In Troy than write what was not known before.
A public tale is yours if you don't stall
While treading pathways that are known to all
Or put foot after foot too faithfully
And fall into the well of mimicry
Lest shame or the logic of your tale forbid
Retreat. Don't write what the Cyclic poets did – 170
"Of Priam's fate and noble war I'll sing":
What can ensue from such a boastful thing?
From mountains thus a silly mouse is bred.
A poet does much better if instead

He labours less ineptly: "Muse, tell me
 Of him who after Greece's victory
 In Troy surveyed a host of different folk,
 Their manners and their cities." Thus from smoke
 He visions light, not the reverse, and brings
 A plethora of supernatural things 180
 To us, for he tells of the Cyclopes,
 Scylla, Charybdis and Antiphates.
 To tell of Diomedes he won't write
 Of Meleager's death. That ten-year's fight
 He won't begin with Leda's egg. Always
 He leaps straight to the tale *in medias res*
 To grab his listeners. If he should doubt
 That some piece will not shine, he'll leave it out.
 He'll mix false with what's true – thus everything
 From first to last will always have the ring 190
 Of plausibility. Now hear what we
 Expect, we Romans: if we wish to see
 The audience waiting for the curtain, when
 The singer cues them for applause, why then
 You must attend to all the different ways
 That folk of different ages show their praise.
 A boy who's learnt to speak and make his way
 On foot with confidence delights to play
 With playmates and has tantrums which are spent
 In a twink. The beardless youth, more than content 200
 His guardian is gone, takes his delight
 In hounds and horses out upon the bright
 Campus. He's given to iniquity,

Prickly with suggestions, cursory
With future plans and careless with his cash,
Ambitious, lustful, ready in a flash
To leave his girlfriend. But once he has grown
Into maturity, he's keen to own
Some property, keen, too, to ferret out
Friendships: he covets praise but harbours doubt 210
About committing to something that he
May have to labour momentarily
To change. An old man has his own distress:
Although he greedily seeks wealthiness,
He doesn't touch it, fearing what he'll see
If he should use it; he acts timidly
And coldly in all things, lazy and slow
In hope, lethargic, desperate to know
The future, obstinate, curmudgeonly,
A great admirer of the times when he 220
Was just a boy; he's always censuring
The young, the passing years will with them bring
Good things but take them back when they abate.
So just in case we start to allocate
An old man's attributes to a youth and make
A child seem like an adult, we must take
Our time to dwell upon what fits each age.
An event, then, will be acted on the stage
Or read aloud. One's stuck more languidly
By what one hears than what one's made to see 230
On stage. But don't show what should be concealed:
Keep it from people's eyes, to be revealed

In words through thespian craft; you must not show
Medea to the audience below
Slaying her children; do not openly
Display King Atreus cooking cruelly
His nephews' flesh; don't let Procne mutate
To a bird or Cadmus to a snake; I hate
Such monstrous things. You must present your play
Exactly in five acts that it might pay 240
With audience demand that you produce
It once again; and do not introduce
A deus ex machina unless the theme
That you've conceived cries out for such a scheme.
Three actors may converse – no more than three;
The chorus, though, may energetically
Play an actor's part, although it may not sing
Between the acts if it is conflicting
With the plot; its fellow-man it should defend
While favouring the good, a constant friend, 250
Restrain the anger, cherish those who shy
Away from sinning and identify
Themselves with reasonable sobriety
At banquets; it must praise morality
And law and peace, and it should not display
The secrets that it knows, and it must pray
That Fortune leave the arrogant and bless
Instead those who are fraught with wretchedness.
The flute was not then as it is today –
Fashioned of brass – but easier to play, 260
With few stops, able to facilitate

The choral action and to resonate
Across the scanty rows (the audience
Was modest, chaste and blessed with providence
Back then). When Romans started to extend
Into the countryside and to defend
The city with broader walls and tippling
On festal days was an accepted thing
During the day, poetry's melody
And tempo were allowed more liberty. 270
How could a rustic, set free from the sweat
Of labour, show some taste when he is met
With honest folk and poetry's entangled
With the base? The flautist added some new-fangled
Gestures and frill as he sashayed around
The stage, his costume trailing on the ground.
The simple lyre received elaboration
And there were now new ways of recitation
Through hasty rhetoric; the prophecies
The chorus made rivalled the auguries 280
Of Delphi. He who wrote a tragedy
With hopes to win the goat would presently
Stage Satyrs, jumbling the serious
With comedy – the watcher, riotous
And drunk at festivals, would take delight
In pleasing novelty. But it is right
To bring in laughter, then to change the key
To serious lest some divinity
Or hero, whom the audience has just seen
In regal dress with gold and purple sheen, 290

Is found in some dark tavern, chattering
In vulgar talk, or else, abandoning
The earth, snatching at clouds. For tragedy
Does not deserve frivolous poetry –
Think of a lady forced to join a throng
Of dancing Satyrs: though she plays along,
She feels ashamed on such a festal day.
Dear Pisos, if I write a Satyr play
I'd shun a vulgar style, for I would cast
A tragic tone on it from first to last, 300
For then it wouldn't matter if the scene
Involves a conversation held between
Davus and Pythias, who recently
Had conned Simo of a talent, or maybe
Silenus, Bacchus' guardian. I'll take
A subject that is known to all and make
It verse so that another may aspire
To do the self-same thing – though he'll perspire
Immensely if he dares, but fruitlessly.
For such is the potentiality 310
Of form and contrast: from what's trifling
Grace may be found. The Fauns, when entering
Out of the woodlands, should take care that they
Don't sing disgusting songs or overplay
Their role with filthy jokes and hullabaloo
As if they were true Romans. Those men who
Are of the knight class surely would resent
Such things, nor would they ever be content
To recommend those things that folk who eat

Chickpeas and nuts endorse. A double beat 320

That's short plus long is well-known by the name

Of iamb, while the trimeter has the same

Two beats times three. Into this family

The grave spondee was brought just recently

(The fourth and second feet, though, would not hold

The spondee). This style Accius of old

And Ennius rarely used, for then they'd bring

Onto the stage weighty and thundering

Verse born out of a nasty carelessness

Or an embarrassing unconsciousness 330

Of their own craft. Not everyone can see

In poems a lack of musicality.

Thus Roman bards are given a too-free rein.

Therefore should I run riot and not restrain

Myself from license, too? Should I beware

That all will see my faults and thus take care

In hopes of pardon? Well, I've kept away

From blame, although not praised. Both night and day

Study Greek models! Plautus' repartee

And metrics have been praised historically, 340

Although his readers loved them both too well,

To tell the truth, if you and I can tell

Tasteless from stylish and, by listening

And finger-count, discern the rendering

Of genuine music. Thespis, so they say,

Invented tragedy: he made his way

On wagons whence his cast would act and sing,

Their faces smeared with wine dregs. Following

This trend Aeschylus grappled with the task
Of forming splendid costumes and the mask, 350
Then built a small stage and his company
Was taught to speak in buskins loftily.
Old Comedy came next, much adulated
By everyone; but latitude mutated
And turned to violence, which was restrained
By legal means: the chorus then maintained
A silence, made benign. Our company
Of bards tried every style, especially
Deserving praise when daring not to tread
Greek pathways but acknowledging instead 360
Rome's deeds in tragedy and comedy.
In valour and in conquest we'd not be
Greater than in the writings that are penned
If wearisome rewrites did not offend
Those bards who pen them. Therefore, Romans, flout
A poem that's not had many crossings-out
Through countless days, ten times twisted around
To make it pat. Democritus once found
That genius is better than hard-earned skill
And banished from the Heliconian hill 370
All poets who are sane. Since then there've been
A number of our poets who aren't keen
To pare their nails or shave their beards – they shun
The baths and fellowship. Should anyone
Seek out poetic fame, he shouldn't obtain
The offices of a barber since his brain
Cannot recover with draught after draught

Of hellebore. I have indeed been daft
To purge myself of bile when spring came round!
If I had not done that, I would be found 380
To be the greatest bard. But it's not worth
The cost. Therefore I'll find another berth
In this profession – I will be a kind
Of whetstone, whose objective is to grind
Down steel, although itself is powerless
To cut, and so I'll teach the business
Of writing, though I will not write. I'll speak
Of all the sources where a bard may seek
Material, the shape, the nourishment
He needs, what's good, what's bad, what's relevant 390
And what is inappropriate. The spring
Of writing well is the acquiring
Of knowledge. The arguments of Socrates
Will show the way, and when you've studied these
The words will surely follow. He who knows
What to his country, friends, kin, guests he owes,
A statesman's or a judge's obligations,
A general's function after "Action stations",
Learns how to represent successfully
The characters he writes. Here's my decree 400
To poets who are well-prepared: observe
All ways of life – your studies then will serve
Your turn and give them voice. Occasionally
A play that's fine in parts and fittingly
Provides good roles, although it's lacking weight
And beauty, will more strongly titillate

The audience than trivialities
 Well-spoken and weak words that try to please.
 The Muse gave Greek bards wit and fluency,
 Who cared for nothing but celebrity. 410
 Our boys in Rome learn how to calculate
 By long division, splitting a one-pound weight
 Into a hundred. "You, Albinus' son,
 If from five-twelfths you should eliminate one.
 What's left? Speak up!" "A third." "Exemplary!
 You'll nicely supervise your property.
 Add one instead and...?" "Half." Once we debase
 Our souls with greed, how can we hope to grace
 A book with poems, with cedar oil applied
 And with smooth cypress polished well and dried? 420
 A poet wants to gladden or to teach
 Or, better still, a little bit of each.
 Be brief in your instruction that you may
 Seize quickly and hold on to what you say:
 From a full mind a superfluity
 Of words spills out; stay close to reality
 If you would please. Let not just *anything*
 Take in the people who are listening
 To what you wrote: what fails to edify
 Old folks reject, austere poems are passed by 430
 By knights. The man who mixes what is sweet
 With what is educational will meet
 With everyone's approval in that he
 Delights and educates concurrently.
 A work like this will more than pay its way:

Abroad as well it will for many a day
Bring glory to its author. There are flaws,
However, which should never give us pause:
The lyre may not produce a sound the hand
And mind intended and what should sound grand 440
Will often screech, the arrow that's let fly
From the bow not always reaching the bull's-eye.
But since it's mostly brilliant poetry
A blemish or two will never ruffle me,
Since they are there because of carelessness
Or human nature. / could not care less.
The scribe who keeps on making the same mistake
Is censured, while the harpist prone to make
The self-same ugly sound in time will be
A laughingstock: a poet, similarly, 450
Becomes a Choerilus when time and again
He errs – if twice or three times from his pen
A passable line appears I laugh in wonder;
I am annoyed when Homer makes a blunder,
Though nodding is allowed with poetry
That's long. Art mirrors verse – one piece will be
Pleasing close-up, another when one stands
A little further off. This one demands
To be in shade, that one illumination,
Not fearing any close examination; 460
This pleases once, that, although ten times seen,
Still brings delight. Young man, though you have been
Raised duly by your father, being wise
Yourself, learn this which you should memorize –

Some things succeed though merely middling:
A so-so ;lawyer may not have the zing
Of eloquence Messalla has or be
As clever as Cascellius, yet he
Is something worth; but no pedestrian
Poet can interest one single man 470

Or god – bookstores don't want them. A soirée
Is spoiled when strident music starts to play,
The oil is viscous and the poppyseed
Is served with second-rate honey – guests indeed
Can do without that. Thus in the same way
A poem which, meant to gladden, goes astray
Sinks to the bottom. He who does not know
Of martial arts and has not learned to throw
A ball or quoit or play at hoops, sits tight
Lest all the others in the circle might 480

Laugh at him. Some have the audacity,
However, though they can't write poetry,
To do so. Why not? He may be a knight
With means, his record free of any blight.
To cross Minerva you would do or say
Nothing – you've too much sense – but if some day
You write, then let it reach wise Tarp's ears
Or either of our fathers', for nine years
Secreting it: what's not yet published may
Then be destroyed - a work that's sent away 490

Cannot return. Orpheus, who clarified
Gods' words, taught early man that homicide
And violence should be shunned, and therefore he

Tamed lions and tigers, says the history,
And Thebes's founder Amphion would play
His lute to move the stones, or so they say,
And build its walls. Thus knowledge would explain
To men the difference between profane
And sacred, private and public, and suppress
All kinds of dissolute licentiousness, 500
Set marriage-laws, build cities and proclaim
Decrees, and thus to bards came lasting fame.
The famous Homer and Tyrtaeus spurred
Men on to warfare; oracles were heard
In verse; the ways of living, too, were taught;
In music monarchs' patronage was sought;
Delight was found after work's drudgery,
And thus we should find no ignominy
To hear the lyre or Phoebus' songs. Does art
Or nature, it is queried, form the start 510
Of a worthy poem? No learning, I would guess,
Can be successful without the largess
Of nature, while innate ability
Needs learning, for they work amicably
Together. He who wants to win the race
Has suffered much, forcing himself to face
Hard training since a boy, and to abstain
From sex and wine; a flute-player will strain
To reach the Pythian Games, holding in dread
His coach. Is it sufficient to have said 520
"I write fantastic poems"? The devil take
The hindmost! To be left in someone's wake

Is vile and to confess one understood
 Nothing about the things one really should
 Have learned but never tried. As dealers tell
 The crowd to gather round that they may sell
 Their goods, a poet rich in property
 Or one who's made a pile through usury
 Will gather round his flatterers to say
 He has rewards for them. But if he may 530
 Provide a feast or give security
 To some poor man or set another free
 From some grim lawsuit it would make me doubt
 If he was ever able to pick out
 The liar from the friend. If you should send
 A gift to someone or if you intend
 To do so, don't invite this happy fellow
 To hear your poetry, for he would bellow
 "How marvellous! How wonderful! Dead on!"
 With sympathetic looks he'll turn quite wan 540
 And then with dewy tears he'll duly weep
 And beat his feet upon the ground and leap
 About. As hired mourners do and say
 More than the grieving kin, in the same way
 A hypocrite seems more to like a thing
 Than one who truly does. They say a king
 Who wants to know a person's worthiness
 In being a loyal ally first will press
 The man with jars of unmixed wine: if you
 Should write a poem, don't let that foxy crew 550
 Deceive you. If you read a poem you'd penned

To Quintilius, he'd say, "Change this, my friend,
 And this." Then if you said you couldn't do it
 In several vain attempts, he'd then say, "Screw it!
 Shred it! Reshape it!" Then if you preferred
 To challenge him, he'd say not one more word,
 Waste no more time with you since obviously
 You loved your verses with no rivalry.
 A good and honest man will criticize
 Harsh or dull verse and thoroughly excise 560
 It all with one black line, erasing, too,
 All fancy stuff, and he will pressure you
 To clear up what's obscure and make a fuss
 About a passage that's ambiguous
 And mark what should be changed. Indeed he'll play
 The role of Aristarchus. He'll not say,
 "Over such trifles why should I displease
 A friend?' Well, it is trifles such as these
 That very well may lead to tragedy
 If people hate and mock his poetry. 570
 Wise folk flee crazy poets in their fright
 Of touching them, as if they had some blight –
 The itch, the king's disease, a frenzied bout,
 Diana's curse – while children jeer and flout
 And reckless people follow him. While he
 Is belching out his verses loftily
 And straying, he, like one who has an itch
 To catch a bird, falls down a well or ditch:
 Although he yells for help, there's no-one there
 Who's keen to free him; if *someone* should care 580

To drop a rope, I'd say, "Who knows if he
Did not fling himself down deliberately?"
I'll then speak of the bard Empedocles
Of Sicily who, coolly as you please,
Leapt into flaming Etna. Let it be right
For bards to choose the way they die. You might
Save one of them from death against his will,
But, doing so, you actually kill
The man. Others have fallen down a well,
But if you pull *him* out no-one can tell 590
If he'll acquire some sense and put aside
His wish for the famous death he might have died.
It's not exactly clear why he became
A poet: did he defile his father's name
By pissing on his ashes? Or did he
Disturb a gloomy temple sinfully?
Whatever it was, he's mad and, like a bear
Who's broken from his cage, runs here and there
And all the folk he meets he scares away
With his horrendous readings. If one day 600
He actually catches someone, he will read
At him...and read...and read until indeed
He dies, a leech who won't let go until
He's drained him and of blood has had his fill.

