Horace, *Odes IV.5.1-40*

Plea to Augustus to return

**Name of the author:** Horace  
**Date:** 1st BCE  
**Place:** Rome  
**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman  
**Literary genre:** Poetry  

**Title of work:** Odes  
**Reference:** IV.5.1-40

**Commentary:**
The fourth book of Horace’s odes, commissioned by Augustus, were written a considerable amount of time after the first three books, which had been published in 23 BCE. Indeed, he acknowledges this long gap in the opening verses. Having departed from it for a period, Horace now returns to the lyric style. The reasons for this are uncertain, however, it could be that he was pressured to. Between 16 and 13 BCE, Augustus was away from Rome fighting the Germans on the northern Rhine frontier, and addressing the financial situation of Gaul. In *Ode IV.II*, Horace wrote back to Iullus Antonius, an adoptive family member and close friend of Augustus, and turned down the opportunity to write a Pindaric ode anticipating the return of the princeps. Horace argued here that he would be foolish to try and rival the great Pindar, and instead would simply celebrate Augustus’s return as an onlooker. Here, however, in what Eduard Fraenkel praised as his most perfect example of a poem (see Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace*, p. 440), Horace writes a plea to Augustus to hurry back to Rome, as Italy is now well on its way to becoming a peaceful sanctuary of virtue and safety, waiting only for Augustus to come home and preside over it.

Augustus is addressed in the opening of the passage as both a guardian of the Romulean people, *Romula gens* (verses 1-2) and a son of the gods. Because Augustus was a member of the *gens Iulia* (through his adoption by Julius Caesar), he was therefore a descendent of Venus’s son, Aeneas. Horace therefore acknowledges these divine familial claims, but also implies that he is favoured by the gods in heaven. Moreover, the mention of Romulus reinforces the link between Augustus and the mythical founder of Rome, the letter wanting to follow firmly in the footsteps of the former, and be viewed as Rome’s second founding father. Verses 3-4 refer to the Senate, the “City Fathers” (*patres*), whom like the rest of the city, Horace suggests are in need of Augustus’s guidance and leadership. Indeed, Rome longs for her leader like a mother longs for her absent son, kept away from home by military service, and for whom she frequently prays and consults omens in hope that she will hear of his safe return (verses 9-16). Referring to Augustus as a bringer of light, who makes the sun shine even brighter (verses 5-8), subtly hints at the type of comparisons made in Hellenistic panegyric between kings and the sun god (see Daniel Garrison, *Horace: Epodes and Odes*, p. 351).

Horace details the joyous state of affairs under Augustus’s rulership, and catalogues the blessings that he can take credit for. As Ellen Oliensis points out, this poem represents the realisation of the prayers of the *Carmen Saeculare* (Ellen Oliensis, *Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority*, p. 117). It is these achievements that Augustus will revel in seeing when he returns from battle (verses 17-24). Farmlands are safe, the sea witnesses no conflict, and general morality is triumphing over sin. Morality was important to Horace, and is something that he laments the absence of during times of civil war (see *Odes III.6.1-20*). *Faustitas* in verse 18 is a poetic synonym used to refer to the goddess of fertility (translated by Anthony Kline as “Increase”), often called *Fausta Felicitas*. In this context, she can be understood symbolically with the figure of Pax on the Ara Pacis, which was built at around the same time as Horace wrote this poem, in order to celebrate Augustus’s return from his campaigns, as both goddesses stand for future prosperity and abundance (see Ian Du Quesnay, “Horace, *Odes 4.5,*” p. 166; see also Richard Thomas, *Horace: Odes Book IV*, p. 157, who translates *faustitas*, which is a hapax in the poem, as “fair weather”). Verse 19 likely refers to the abolition of pirates which previously troubled the Mediterranean, but also perhaps to an event related by Suetonius, wherein Augustus was hailed by sailors of a passing Alexandrian ship for bringing them freedom and peace (Suetonius, *Augustus* 98.2). Verses 20-24, while not referring to any specific legislation, reflect...
Augustus’s desire to improve general morality in Rome, particularly in relation to marriage and childbearing. It was for this reason that he put in place the Lege Iuliae of 18-17 BCE, a series of laws regulating various aspects of morality, including marriage and the use of wealth (see also the discussion of Horace, Odes III.VI.1-20). The “chaste house” of verse 21 confines women’s sexuality in particular to the Roman household, where it is specifically devoted to the production of legitimate, Roman offspring (Ellen Oliensis, Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority, p. 117; see also Thomas, Horace: Odes Book IV, p. 158, who specifically discusses the Lex Iulia de adulteriis in relation to this passage, which punished adultery with banishment, forced wronged husbands to divorce adulterous wives, and even gave them the power to kill the male partner in some circumstances).

While Caesar is alive and well, Horace claims, there is no need to worry about foreign enemies such as the Parthians, Scythians, Germans, or Spaniard (Iberians) (verses 25-32), and civil war will not force farmers off their land. What is more, the grateful Roman citizens will add Augustus to their household gods, and worship him as one of them (verses 33-36). The worship of Augustus began in just this manner, with the inclusion of his genius amongst the Lares (household gods) (on this issue, see Richard Lyne, Horace: Behind the Public Poetry, p. 197 n. 10). Castor and Hercules are mentioned here to remind the reader that theoretically, all gods were once mortal. The passage ends with a prayer to Augustus to bring eternal peace to Italy, and an insinuation that Rome’s people compare his absence to the setting of the sun (harking back to the subtle comparisons made earlier in the passage). Virtue is rewarded with the ceasing of labour, and Italy is able to rest safely, knowing that Augustus is in charge (verses 37-38) (see Ellen Oliensis, Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority, p. 117).

Keywords in the original language:

- bellum
- custos
- divus
- domus
- fidelis
- gens Romula
- Germanus
- Graecia
- Hercules
- Hesperia
- lares
- lex
- mater
- mos
- Parthi
- pater
- patria
- populus
- sanctus
- Scythae

Thematic keywords in English:

- Augustus
- Germany
- Greeks
- Hercules
- household gods
- Italy
- law
- morality
- omen
- Parthians
peace
prayer
Romulus
Scythians
senate
war


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**Ara Pacis (13-9 BCE)_Architecture**

**Reconstruction of the Ara Pacis**

*Ara Pacis: frontal view*

*Ara Pacis: side view*

*Ara Pacis: side view*
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The moral decline of Rome

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Realized by: Kimberley Fowler

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