



Eduqas GCSE Latin

Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources (Themes)

Superstition and Magic



HORACE

Omens good and bad

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the following:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

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Information about several of the pictures in this booklet, together with useful additional material for the Theme, may be found in the support available online for **Cambridge Latin Course, Book I, Stage 7** and **Book III, Stages 22-23**.

HORACE *Omens good and bad* (*Odes 3.27. 1-16*)

The poet light-heartedly describes the bad omens which may befall a traveller.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 BC – 8 BC) was a lyric poet writing under the emperor Augustus. Horace was born in southern Italy, at that time an area still closely associated with the Greek world, and he grew up steeped in Hellenistic culture. Although as a young man he lived in Rome, he soon moved to Athens where he continued his education. The turbulence of the era impacted upon him greatly: following the assassination of Julius Caesar he was recruited by Brutus to fight against Antony and Octavian (the later Augustus). Horace later accepted a pardon from Octavian and returned to Italy, but his family estates had been confiscated. He was able to turn his hand to writing and real success followed when he received the patronage of Maecenas, one of Augustus' closest advisers.

This selection is taken from the beginning of *Ode 3.27*. The full poem is 76 lines in total and our part focuses on a journey being undertaken by Galatea, a one-time love of Horace. She is making her way south from Rome, along the Appian Way, past Lanuvium, and towards Brundisium where she will sail for Greece. It seems that Horace is teasing her gently for her superstitions whilst writing a poem which is also an affectionate farewell (a *propempticon*). She should not worry about bad omens, they are for the wicked. The omens, good and bad, which Horace refers to are frequently jumbled up and less than serious: his Roman audience would have recognised this and enjoyed the silly spookiness of the poem.

The text is unadapted.

Notes

metre: Sapphics

1 **impios:** usually a *propempticon* (sending-off poem) would start with good wishes. Horace is subverting this by wishing *bad* omens upon the wicked.

parrae: an ill-omened nocturnal bird, probably an owl. The owl is often used in Latin poetry as an omen of death.

2 **ducat:** here a jussive subjunctive ('let...escort'), the verb **duco** would usually suggest a protective escort. By using it alongside the ill omens, it sounds mocking.

2-4 The translation here is **rava lupa** (the tawny she-wolf) **decurrens** (running down) **ab agro Lanuvino** (from the region of Lanuvium). The interwoven words add interest to the lines, and also start us on a very specific journey. Galatea would have set out from Rome along the Via Appia, and Lanuvium is about 20 miles south of Rome on a low hill. The poem references points along Galatea's imminent journey.

praegnans canis...rava lupa...fetaque volpes: the animals in this series are all supposed ill omens, although most ancient texts seem to focus on birds rather than mammals. They are all female (women are more closely linked to magic in the ancient world than men) and two are mentioned as being pregnant (in the ancient world there was a pollution or stain associated with birth, similar to that surrounding death). Notice that it is a list of three (*tricolon*), this also being a number associated with magic and power. The string of conjunctions (known as *polysyndeton*) adds to the impression of the negative omens piling up.

feta and **praegnans** are not quite synonyms. **feta** has more of a sense of 'having just given birth' or being in the act itself.

- 5 **rumpat:** the subjunctive ('let it interrupt') again suggests Horace imagining ill omens befalling others, especially those who did not heed the earlier signs and actually continued their journey. The verb **rumpat** is violent and suggests not a polite interruption but an aggressive halt. The emphatic position at the beginning of the line and sentence mirrors the sudden 'jumping in' which the snake is doing in the text.

serpens: whether a snake was a good or a bad omen depended in large part on what it was doing and where. They were considered protective, and often featured on *lararia* (shrines to the household spirits); here, however, it is clearly less favourable as it is causing problems for the traveller. Most omens required contextual analysis.

- 6 **per obliquum:** there is an implied verb of motion here.

similis sagittae: the *sibilance* (repetition of s sounds) conjures up both the hissing snake and the whistling arrow. The *simile* suggests the speed of the snake darting across and also the shape.

- 7 **cui** is here standing for **ei cui**. **ei** is dative with **suscitabo** (line 11), 'I will bring forth for her'. **cui** is dative with **timebo**, 'for whom I am worried'.

mannos: these were the fast ponies used for pulling carriages.

- 8 **providus auspex:** an *auspex* performed a similar role to an *augur*. They watched for bird signs, but they did so for private occasions such as weddings. The *augur* carried out the duties for public ceremonies such as a general leaving for battle. The **providus** seems a little redundant, but stresses the ability of the **auspex** to see the future. The phrase is clearly meant to be humorous: Horace does not want us to really imagine he is able to tell the future, he is still teasing Galatea and her superstitions.

- 9 **repetat:** potential subjunctive – the action will be forestalled by Horace's prayer.

stantes...paludes: the poem continues to follow Galatea's route towards Brundisium: the Pomptine Marshes were about 50km down the Appian Way, until they were drained by Mussolini's regime in the 1930s. They are described as **stantes** ('standing'), still and stagnant. The gloomy place is a suitable location for gloomy omens.

- 10 imbrium...imminentum:** according to Cicero and others, when birds whose habitat was the sea or marsh splashed into water it was a sign of impending storms. Horace imagines that he will forestall the bird on its way to the marshes. The *hyperbaton* (inverted or discontinuous word order) and rhyming of **imbrium** and **imminentum** draw attention, whilst the delay of the participle also mirrors the fact the rains are awaited in real life also.
- 11 oscinem corvum:** the adjective **oscinem** means ‘prophetic through cries’. Its sounds were observed as well as its flight. The repetition of ‘c’ in these words suggest the ‘caw’ of this prophetic bird.
- suscitabo:** if we were unsure as to whether Horace was being playful or sincere his exaggerated claim here surely puts that question to rest.
- 12 solis ab ortu:** a direction signalling good omens.
- 13 mavis:** irregular form of the 2nd person of **malo**
- 14 memor nostri...vivas:** **memor** is an adjective describing Galatea, **nostri** the genitive (‘mindful of us’), with the poetic plural **nos** standing for Horace himself. **vivas** is subjunctive, expressing a wish.
- Galatea:** we finally have the name of the addressee, presumably a love-interest as is typical of women in poems by Horace! She is leaving Horace and Rome, but there is no ill-will in this poem, just teasing and affection.
- 15 te...vetet ire:** accusative and infinitive construction. **vetet** is subjunctive, expressing a wish.
- te:** emphatically placed at the start of the line to emphasise the contrast between the ill omens for the wicked, and the good omens which *you* (Galatea) will have.
- nec...nec:** the emphatic negative stresses the contrast again between the luck Galatea will have and the bad omens which befall others.
- laevus...picus:** this ill-omened woodpecker is described as being **laevus** (‘on the left’). Horace is following the Greek tradition of the left being unlucky.
- 16 vaga cornix:** the arrival of this stray magpie (or crow – see Further information) with no clear flight-path, could be worryingly ambiguous to the traveller.
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Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each line, phrase or sentence, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin.

lines 1-4:

- What kind of people is Horace talking about here? What is the omen he is wishing upon them?
- What are the three other animals mentioned in these lines?
- What detail is given about the dog?
- What colour is the wolf? Where is the wolf running down from? Why do you think Horace mentions specific places?
- What detail is given about the fox?

lines 5-8:

- What animal is mentioned in the first line? What is this animal going to break or interrupt?
- Where is it coming from? What is it described as being like? (*the simile could be followed up here*)
- What has it done? How does Horace feel? Who does he feel this for? (*This will need some unravelling, as he does not care about the **impious** mentioned in line one but Galatea, who has not yet been mentioned. Students may be able to extrapolate that he is worried for someone he considers **pious** – the opposite of those **impious** travellers*)
- He describes himself as an **auspex**. What is this and why might they be considered **providus**? Do you think that Horace is really an **auspex**?

lines 9-12:

- In line 10 we have another animal – what is it? How is it described? What kind of weather does it predict?
- In line 9 we find out how it predicts the weather. Where does it go?
- In line 11, what does Horace say he will do? How will he do this? What kind of creature will he conjure up? What direction will this come from? Is this a good or a bad sign? *Students should be able to work out that this is a good sign, based on the fact that Horace is attempting to look after a person he worries about.*

lines 13-16:

- What does he wish upon this person?
- What is her name? What does he want in return? For how long does he hope she will remember him?
- What two birds are mentioned here? What detail is given about the woodpecker? What detail is given about the magpie? What does Horace want them **not** to do? Do you think these are good or bad omens?

Questions on Content and Style

1. (lines 1-4) How does Horace create an exciting opening to this poem through his choice and arrangement of words?
 2. (lines 5-7) How does Horace, through his choice of words and style of writing, create an exciting description of the snake and its actions?
 3. (lines 7-8) For whom is Horace concerned?
 4. (lines 9-10) Explain the omen being described by Horace here.
 5. (lines 11-12) Is Horace describing a good or a bad omen here? Explain how you know.
 6. (line 13-14) How do we know from the content and style of these lines that Horace and Galatea are friends?
 7. (lines 15-16) Explain why these would have been considered bad omens by the Romans.
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Discussion

Themes: omens, the work of an *augur*

Students could start by thinking about the ‘bad omens’ they have heard of (e.g. a black cat crossing your path). They may also know the old counting rhyme ‘one for sorrow, two for joy’, based in superstition surrounding the observation of magpies. Horace’s poem can then be used to create a similar list for the Romans. Depending on the time available, students could carry out their own observations of animal behaviour (perhaps on their walk to school) and interpret either in line with Horace or contextually (like the interpretation of the snake in the poem). This activity will help them to appreciate the omnipresence of omens in Roman life, if you were attuned to looking for them.

General questions on the passage and theme

1. What does Horace describe as being bad omens? Do any of them have specific meanings?
 2. Do you think that Romans took omens such as these seriously, or not? What evidence is there for both points of view in this poem?
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Further Information and Reading

Journeys were dangerous undertakings in the ancient world and omens concerning them would have, in general, been taken seriously. Other authors do not mention mammals often as being propitious, it is much more commonly birds. There were different types of signs in the ancient world: some signs were deliberately watched for (such as when an *augur* watched the skies in response to a particular question); others just happened (such as most of the ones listed here). With these latter signs, the context would tell whether it was a good or a bad sign and what it indicated.

There is some uncertainty over the exact birds being specified in this text. From other sources it seems that **cornix** may indicate a common crow and **corvus** a raven. Crows and ravens were both prophetic birds, and both were oscines, birds whose cries were observed for signs.

R.G.M. Nisbet and Niall Rudd, *A Commentary on Horace Odes Book 3* (Oxford University Press 2004)

David West, *Horace Odes 3: text, translation and commentary* (Oxford University Press 2002)

Gordon Williams, *The Third Book of Horace's Odes* (Oxford University Press 1967)