

Romance across social barriers: Xanthias and Phyllis in Horace, *Ode* 2.4¹

TOR IVAR ØSTMØE

Horace's *Ode* 2.4 is a poem about love: an unnamed speaker addresses a certain Xanthias about the latter's attraction to a woman called Phyllis. At the core of this poem and its interpretations is the assumption that it is dealing with two lovers who have different statuses. In Roman comedies the intrigue is usually based on this kind of problem, and the ending is happy but unrealistic: their true identity having been revealed, the lovers are free to unite. My interest lies with the following question: Can the poem be interpreted as opening for a union of the lovers? If it can, how does it deal with the problem of status? I will approach this issue from a rhetorical angle.

Phyllis is identified in line 1 as an *ancilla*, a maidservant; as such she could be either slave or free. Further on, at line 20, her parentage is discussed, and reference is made to her mother and not to her father; this could mean that she is a slave, since in the Roman system slave status followed the mother. Xanthias' status is not made explicit but since he possesses Greek *paideia* and, moreover, places himself above his beloved, he is probably upper class.²

The poem is written in Sapphic metre and has six stanzas. In the first three, the anonymous speaker tells Xanthias not to be ashamed of his love; he refers to heroes in the *Iliad* who have fallen for slave women. In the last three stanzas he praises Phyllis' personality and looks, and he argues that obscure origins should not be an obstacle. He also assures Xanthias that, at forty, he is too old to be attracted himself.

What is the speaker's intention? The poem bears resemblance to Hellenistic epigrams and parodies Homer's epic style. On this basis, recent commentaries explain that the speaker's intention is to tease Xanthias for his love.³ I see three difficulties with this interpretation: first, it seems odd for an older man to tease a younger one about this subject; secondly, it seems especially odd if his implied message is, as it seems to be here, that the younger man should simply follow his urges; and thirdly, if the speaker is out to tease, his irony seems, at least to me, out of place.⁴

1 I thank the editors for their useful suggestions on the draft.

2 There being no indication of a real-life Xanthias or Phyllis in Horace's milieu, I read the poem as fiction.

3 This seems to be the consensus in Page [1881] 1960, Valle 1974, Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, Quinn 1980, West 1998, Syndikus [1973] (2001³) and Holzberg 2009, 138–9; see also Davis 1991, 19–22.

4 Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 68 find 'something disquieting' in the poem. In 1834, Peerlkamp proposed that part of it should be deleted; *Repertory of Conjectures on Horace* lists 17 more conjectures on the poem.

I shall attempt a rhetorical reading of the poem, one that starts not from its relations with earlier literary works but from its embodiment of a speech act, that of giving advice. In my reading, the speaker's intention is to give advice; in my interpretation of this advice, I shall pay special attention to his rhetorical strategies and his use of names.

I shall begin my examination with a translation issue. Halfway through, beginning with the fourth stanza (lines 13–16), commentators have pointed to a transition in the poem, from a mode of consolation to one of congratulation:⁵

nescias an te generum beati
Phyllidis flavae decorent parentes:
regium certe genus et penatis
maeret iniquos.

A recent translation reads as follows:

You never know: your flaxen-haired Phyllis may have well-to-do parents who would reflect glory on their son-in-law. Without a doubt the family she weeps for has royal blood, and its gods have turned unfairly against her.⁶

In this translation, the stanza's first word *nescias* is translated as 'you never know'; while in a second translation, we read 'for all you know'.⁷ As I read these translations, they convey a somewhat cynical form of irony, one that emphasizes Phyllis' lack of ancestry in order to belittle her. But, since the poem's motivation is that Xanthias loves Phyllis, this seems out of place. What if we try a different translation? As a second person subjunctive *nescias* can also convey a polite order.⁸ Furthermore, when used as it is here with *an*, *nescio* can mean not 'I do not know whether' but rather 'I am inclined to think that perhaps'.⁹ Thus, the stanza's first words could also be translated as 'you should think that perhaps your flaxen-haired Phyllis has ...'. In this translation, the phrase is a politely formed challenge to Xanthias to think the best of his beloved. With this translation, then, the second half of the poem opens not with ironic congratulation but with a recommendation, and the irony is milder because it makes Xanthias reflect on his own perception of the affair.

Recent commentators on the poem assume that it was acceptable for an elite

5 Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 68.

6 Rudd 2004.

7 West 1998.

8 Menge 2000, 161, §111.

9 *OLD* 1173, s.v. *nescio* 4a.

Roman male to have affairs with servant girls.¹⁰ Older commentators do not. In the 19th century, Mitscherlich (1817) and Doering (1838) both explained that the speaker is trying to persuade Xanthias that the opprobrium attached to these affairs is unfounded. Thus, although they find the poem witty, they see Xanthias' love as problematic.

Two 12th-century accessuses (introductory texts to Classical authors for use in schools) take different approaches. The first explains that the poem 'teases and censures' (*deridet et uituperat*) Xanthias 'for being deeply in love' (*quod [...] graviter estuabat*). The message to Xanthias, which reflects an ideal of self-restraint that could be both Christian and pagan, seems to be to be responsible and to stay away. The second accessus, which constructs a narrative around the poem, turns the poet into a villain: Phyllis has cheated on Xanthias and he has left her; she, offering any service he wants, asks for the poet's help in winning him back; he complies. The poem 'brands all those who take bribes to give advice to friends that they know to be neither useful nor honourable for them' (*notantur omnes illi qui precorrupti ea commendant amicis, in quibus sciunt nichil eorum esse utilitatis nec quicquam honestatis*).¹¹ Both the first and the second accessus, then, see love between persons of different status as problematic; moreover, assuming that he has authority vis-à-vis Xanthias, they see the speaker as fundamentally offering advice.

In Roman Italy, people of different status lived next to each other. In wealthy households there seems to have been less of an 'upstairs-downstairs' division than in some modern cases, and in the city landscape the rich and the poor did not live in separate zones but rather resided in the same blocks.¹² Thus, it may have been common for *jeunesse dorée*-persons to be in love with persons from other social groups, and vice versa. The late Republic and early Empire were also characterized by social mobility. Records from Herculaneum documenting conditions in Horace's time indicate how so-called 'Junian Latins', who were freedmen, gained access to Roman citizenship.¹³ Upward mobility in the Late Republic is also documented by funerary reliefs of freedmen. Although the iconography used by aristocrats is imitated in these reliefs, the freedmen's origins are not concealed; instead their ascent is highlighted by displaying the privileges of freedom such as the right to marry, the right to wear a toga, and the right to hang a *bulla* from a son's neck.¹⁴ It seems then that in Horace's time social barriers remained important but also became more permeable.

10 Syndikus [1973] 2001³, 358; Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 67.

11 The texts are edited in Friis-Jensen 1988.

12 Beard 2008, 61–2, on Pompeii.

13 Wallace-Hadrill 2011, 138–40.

14 Zanker 2007, 44–5; Stewart 2008, 65–8.

That would have made life more difficult for Xanthias: he could marry Phyllis (although, if she was a slave, she would have to be freed), but would that mean a loss of status for him?

I now continue my exploration of the poem as advice by discussing the speaker's rhetorical strategies and his use of names. I begin with its disposition. In conventional rhetorical disposition, the speaker first tries to secure the audience's attention and next recommends a course of action. In my reading, *Ode* 2.4 follows this disposition. In the first half, the speaker sympathizes with Xanthias' plight and cites exempla from the Greek epic tradition (Achilles, Ajax, and Agamemnon, who all loved slave women); in the second half he recommends a course of action. Thus, following a conventional rhetorical disposition, the speaker first positions himself, and next goes on the attack.

Also interesting with regard to the poem's disposition is the manner of address, the vocative forms *Xanthia Phoceu* at line 2. In Rome, by virtue of the system of the *tria nomina* (three names = full citizen, one name = slave), your status could be inferred from the length of your name. Thus, when Xanthias is addressed with two names, this confirms his social position, and by implication his superiority to Phyllis.¹⁵ However, the second name is not a name but a poetic-sounding epithet; in the poem's conversational setting, it jars. Thus, while confirming Xanthias' status at first, the speaker is hinting that it will be qualified eventually.

The thrust of the speaker's argument is to be found in the fourth and fifth stanzas. Here the speaker tells Xanthias that Phyllis is a good woman. The stanzas are also formally connected. The fourth was reproduced in full above, and its first word is *nescias*, which I interpret as a polite recommendation. The fifth stanza also begins with a recommendation, the imperative verb form *crede* 'believe'. Together, the two form a chiasmus – the fourth stanza treating Phyllis' money and parentage in that order, and the fifth treating the same topics but in reverse order. In terms of argumentation, however, the stanzas present a progression. The fourth stanza challenges Xanthias to think the best of Phyllis, even for no good reason; the fifth stanza tells him that he does have good reason, namely his own feelings and admiration for her. Furthermore, while the fourth stanza is fanciful and entertaining, the fifth is realistic and insistent. I paraphrase: 'Believe that your choice is not from the rabble, that her mother is not a disgrace to somebody who is so true and so unselfish'. Thus, the stanza presents the facts and incidentally exposes Xanthias' prejudice: he has been too focused on appearances. In the second half of the poem the speaker is on the attack, going step by step.

¹⁵ Hall 2009, 8–13 examines strategies of politeness used in the conversational style of Roman aristocrats in Cicero's time, focusing inter alia on 'politeness of respect' that acknowledges an interlocutor's status.

The speaker's irony should be connected with his intention to give advice. The fourth stanza, with its spin on Phyllis' background, has already been discussed, but commentators have found irony in two other places. The first consists of the exempla in the first half of the poem, which are 'mock-grandiloquent',¹⁶ i.e. they are stylistic parodies of Homer and ironical in the sense that they compare Xanthias, an ordinary man, to the grand heroes of epic. However, assuming that Xanthias is in love with Phyllis, it seems odd to use these exempla just to make fun of him. If we read the poem as advice, however, these exempla could have functions beyond that of teasing. One function has already been mentioned: they help secure his attention. A second function would be that they help him gain the insight that his situation is different from that of the Homeric princes: for them, concubines were primarily status symbols and marriage was not an option, but Phyllis has the right to expect a stronger commitment from him.

The second place where irony has been found is in the poem's last stanza, where the speaker says that he is too old to be attracted himself. This sounds unconvincing.¹⁷ In the commentaries, two explanations are to be found: the stanza is taken as a reference to the poet's age at the time of writing,¹⁸ which to my mind seems unreasonable if we consider the poem as a whole; or it is viewed as part of the speaker's teasing.¹⁹ As a form of teasing, however, it would be an attempt to make Xanthias jealous; if he is the speaker's friend, this is odd. What I would also like to emphasize is that with both these approaches the speaker's implied message to Xanthias in this stanza would be to follow his urges and not think of the consequences. Again, that seems unexpected from a friend and older man.

Focusing on humour, I shall try to ascribe a different message to the speaker's words in the last stanza. If his irony is meant to make Xanthias laugh, he will probably not succeed. But a flat joke could be a way of signalling that a discussion is at an end. Thus, the denial of self-interest can perhaps be interpreted as the speaker's signal that his advice (which Xanthias has presumably asked for) has now been delivered. However, the denial of self-interest could also serve a different purpose, since the stanza also refers to Phyllis' sexy looks. If the speaker turns to this topic after the subjects of money and parentage, the aim could be to rouse Xanthias to action by making him visualize something which is most tantalizing. Rousing the audience to action is of course one of the main tasks at the end of an advice-giving speech.

16 Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 70; also West 1998, 30.

17 Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 68.

18 Page [1881] 1960; Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 76–7.

19 Syndikus [1973] 2001³, 360.

Since they belong to different parts of the poem and have different targets, the three cases of irony may now be interpreted as reflecting the poem's rhetorical disposition, as outlined above. The speaker starts with an apostrophe to Xanthias to secure his attention; next he discusses Phyllis and tries to broaden Xanthias' perception; finally, he uses self-irony to 'defuse' the situation and at the same time draw attention to Phyllis' good looks. All in all, then, several of the poem's rhetorical strategies seem compatible with its interpretation as a form of advice, and as I read this advice, Xanthias should treat Phyllis right. He should also see that although she has neither money nor ancestry, she does have characteristics that should count for more in a wife: a good personality and healthy looks.

I shall now discuss the speaker's use of names. One such case, the apostrophe *Xanthia Phoeu*, has already been discussed as an indicator of status. But since the poem plays out in a setting that is Roman, but both lovers have names that are Greek, there is also a cultural subtext.

As mentioned previously, the poem is structured in two parts which are of same length. In the first half of the second lines, both parts have a name and an adjective: in line 2, *Xanthia Phoeu*; in line 14, *Phyllidis flavae*. The name Xanthias is related to the adjective ξανθός, which like the Latin *flavus* means 'blonde', and so one interpretation of these word-pairs is that the lovers are a good match. But the placement of the pairs could also suggest a transition from one culture to another. In the poem's first half, we find Greek place names and heroes' names and epic Greek social organization, but in the second everything is Roman: household gods (line 15, *penatis*), social (line 18, *plebs*) and family organization (lines 14 and 15, *generum, parentes*). There is also a stylistic break when the complex Homeric syntax in the first half gives way to simple, end-stopped stanzas in the second.²⁰ It seems, then, that we pass from a Greek context that is mythological and remote to a Roman one that is practical and centred on household and home. Reading the poem as advice, the transition may suggest that Greek *paideia* as represented by epic poetry is not quite suited to guiding Xanthias in his present life in Rome.

The names also suggest something about Xanthias' and Phyllis' more personal attitudes. Let us assume that they have both moved, or have been moved, from Greece to Rome. In the 1st century BC it was common for enfranchised foreigners to take the *praenomen* and *nomen gentis* of the person or family responsible for their citizenship and keep their original name as a *cognomen*.²¹ If Xanthias is a Roman citizen, he probably also has a Roman

²⁰ Nisbet and Hubbard 1978, 71; Quinn 1980 on 13–24.

²¹ Dickey 2002, 47–8.

name. But if he does, the speaker does not use it, and instead it is replaced with the Greek, poetic-sounding epithet *Phoceus*, ‘from Phocis’. The effect is to highlight Xanthias’ pride in his old homeland and culture. However, while *Xanthia Phoceu* are Greek vocative forms that seem learned and artificial in a Latin context, Phyllis’ epithet *flavae* is native Latin, and although her name is Greek, it is inflected with a Latin genitive ending: *Phyllid-is*. Thus, of the two, Phyllis is perhaps more at home in Rome.

Finally, the names can signify a reversal of roles. The first half’s Homeric heroes are identified by personal names and patronymics: *Achillem*, *Aiacem Telamone natum*, and *Atrides*, whereas their women are identified by common nouns: *serva*, *captivae*, *virgine*. The same pattern applies in the first reference to the two lovers: *Xanthia Phoceu* vs *ancillae*, thus confirming Xanthias’ social position and revealing the asymmetry of his relation to Phyllis. But in the second half the *ancilla* reappears, and with a vengeance: now she also has a name and an epithet, she is *Phyllidis flavae*. In official contexts, Roman slaves were listed by their first name followed by that of their owner in the genitive. If we place the names of the two lovers next to each other, we get *Xanthia Phoceu Phyllidis flavae*, ‘O Xanthias from Phocis, [slave of] flaxen-haired Phyllis’. The reversal of roles could refer to Xanthias’ romantic subjection to Phyllis, to Phyllis’s skills as the leader of a household, a *matrona*, or to both. In any case, in the second half of the poem she is not a Homeric concubine but a woman with a name – somebody to be reckoned with.

In my reading of Horace’s *Ode 2.4* the unnamed speaker has a message for Xanthias. That message is the following: Rome is now your home; when in Rome, do as the Romans do; if you love Phyllis, treat this good woman right and ask her to marry you.

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