- **Horace – *Ars Poetica***
- Ars Poetica is a poem offering literary and artistic instruction, written in the form of a letter to the two sons of the Piso family, which family acted as Horace's patron
- **On Unity of Form**
- Horace begins the poem with a discussion of unity and its relation to beauty
- He says "If a painter had chosen to set a human head on a horse's neck" one could not help but laugh at the result – for this disordered picture is laughable under classical conceptions of unity of form
    - Similarly, says Horace, a book will fail if it is not related to a unified form
    - This analogy to animals is interesting in that it recalls and seems to cut against what Aristotle said in the *Poetics* about form and artistic depiction
        - For Aristotle, it was a graver artistic sin to paint something inartistically, without skill, without proper unity, then it was to paint something absurd
        - Aristotle says it is a less serious matter to paint a doe as having antlers (which they do not have in real life) than it is to paint the doe inartistically
        - Thus Aristotle might be willing to go along with a human head on a horse's neck so long as it was otherwise artistic and faithful to conceptions of a unified whole (meaning the parts support the integrated whole and do not diverge in meaning)
- Horace, in arguing for unified form and orderly arrangement, anticipates the objection that painters and poets, far from being unified and orderly, have always claimed the right to dare anything in their work
    - Horace acknowledges that this is true, and claims such right of daring for himself and grants it to others as well
    - But, Horace says, this license to daring does not extend to a free mixing of elements: wild ones and tame ones, say
    - Further, these attempts at daring and making grand declarations and constructing weighty passages often lead to "purple patches" in the text, sections that fall flat
- Horace does not mind daring but advises the poet to nevertheless remain within the bounds of her chosen form and work to create a unified text
    - As Horace says: "Perhaps you know how to draw a cypress tree: so what, if you've been given money to paint a sailor plunging from a shipwreck."
- **On Choosing Subjects and Authorial License**

- The artist should let the subject be what she wishes but whatever it is it should be whole and natural
    - "You who write, chose a subject that's matched by your powers, consider deeply what your shoulders can and cannot bear"
    - Horace says that if the poet chooses correctly then eloquence and clear construction will not fail her
    - For Horace, charm and excellence in construction is "to say here and now, what's to be said here and now"
        - Thus, the author must retain, and omit, much in order to serve the present
- Horace talks about the ability to renew a common word and praises this skill
- He says the author proceeds with writing by "liking this, rejecting that, [being] cautious and precise, weaving words together"
- Horace says that license will be given the poet but the poet must use it wisely or it will be taken away
- Horace defends the right of the poet to coin new words: "It's been our right, ever will be our right, to issue words that are fresh-stamped"
    - Old words perish, while the latest ones, like infants, are born and thrive
- **On Tradition and Established Forms/Genres**
- Horace moves into talking about poetic tradition and established forms and asks: "How can I be called a poet if I ignore, or fail to observe, the established functions and styles in my work?"
    - He says that prior poets like Homer and Archilochus helped establish conventions
        - Homer in establishing the proper meter for heroic action, Archilochus for establishing iambs
            - Horace comments on how perfectly suited iambs are for both tragedy and comedy, for dialogue, and for narrating action
- In terms of what is already established and forms that are widely used, Horace encourages the poet to learn these rules so as to understand all conventions
    - For example, the poet ought to know why comedy can't be played in the tragic mode but how comedy can be elevated and how tragedy can speak in common prose and eschew bombast
    - The poet must experience these forms and conventions
- Horace advises poets to "Either follow tradition, or invent consistently"
    - With well-known characters like Achilles, Medea, Io, Orestes, it is best to write them by their well-known attributes
        - The writer must beware of being inventive with well-known figures

    - If the writer is attempting fresh characters, the writer should keep those characters "self-consistent" from start to finish
- It is hard to make the universal specific; thus it is better to begin with the specific
- Horace says "it is better to weave a play from the poem of Troy (the *Iliad*) than be the first to offer something unknown, unsung"
    - As a caveat to this, Horace warns that the writer must not keep circling the broad beaten track
    - Horace separately addresses translators at this point and tells them it would be pedantic and style-less to translate a text literally and word for word
- **Affecting an Audience**
- Horace says it is not enough for poems to have beauty: they must also have charm
    - This charm, he says, lets the poet lead the hearer's heart wherever the poet wishes
- On moving the audience, Horace says: "As the human face smiles at a smile, so it echoes those who weep: if you want to move me to tears you must first grieve yourself…then your troubles might pain me"
    - But, warns Horace, "speak inappropriately and I'll laugh or fall asleep"
    - "Sad words suit a face full of sorrow, threats suit the face full of anger, jests suit the playful, serious speech the solemn"
        - Thus, the poet's words must harmonize with her state
    - "Much depends on whether a god or human is speaking, a mature old man or one still flush with first youth, a powerful lady, or perhaps a diligent nurse, a wandering merchant, or a tiller of fertile fields, Colchian or Assyrian, from Argos or Thebes"
- **Structuring a Text**
- Recalling his advice from earlier, that the writer should choose a subject that matches his or her powers, Horace warns that the writer should be careful not to overly promote his or her story with a sweeping introduction like "Of Priam's fate I'll sing, and the greatest of wars"
    - It is unlikely that the rest of the text can live up to so boastful and lofty an introduction
    - Horace contrasts this overdone introduction with that of Homer's *Odyssey*
    - In the *Odyssey* Homer begins modestly: "Tell me, Muse, of that man, who after the fall of Troy had sight of the manners and cities of many peoples"
        - This humble opening does not boast or promise too much
    - Horace goes on to compliment Homer for always beginning his narration at the apt moment, always hastening the outcome, and snatching the reader into the midst of the action

    - Homer also is a genius for so effectively blending fact with fiction
    - Additionally in Homer: the middle agrees with the start, and the end with the middle
- Horace says the writer must portray varied characters, that is, portray young and adult and old characters, those with spirit, those with troubles, those who are foolish, those who sin
    - To do this the writer must note "the behavior of every age-group" or, in other words, be a student of all types of people
- "Events are either acted on stage, or reported. The mind is stirred less vividly by what's heard than by what the eyes reliably report, all that the spectator sees for himself"
    - But Horace also warns not to reveal on stage what should be kept hidden
        - For example, Horace says we should not see Medea slaughter her children on stage, nor see Procne turn into a bird
            - As Horace says: "Any such scenes you show me, I disbelieve, and hate"
- No play should be longer or shorter than five acts, says Horace
    - This suggests that he believes there is a necessary length that must attend a proper drama and that shorter than this length does not leave enough space for proper development and that longer than this length is too prolix
- There should be no *deus ex machina*, no plot that is resolves neatly by the intervention of the gods
    - Unless the play specifically calls for this type of resolution and it has been properly set up
- Continuing his discussion of dramatic form, Horace questions the role of the chorus in drama
    - He says the chorus ought to act its part but it should not play a part unless that part advances the plot or is closely related to the plot
    - The chorus ought to present a good conscience; "it should favor the good, and give friendly advice, guide those who are angered, encourage those fearful of sinning: praise the humble table's food, sound laws and justice, and peace with her wide-open gates: it should hide secrets, and pray and entreat the gods that the proud lose their luck, and the wretched regain it."
- **On Style and the Education of the Poet**
- The poet must know the style (today we might call it genre) that he or she is writing in
    - The comic style is not suited to tragedy and vice versa

    - While comedy and tragedy can borrow occasional elements and tones from each other, overall, they must preserve their discrete natures
        - And when they do borrow elements, say when comedy employs some of the characters or incidents of tragedy, this interweaving must be done skillfully and cannot stick out as inappropriate to the occasion or context
- On the simple style – perhaps it is the most difficult for how plain and straightforward it seems, and yet it is so hard to write well in this style
    - Horace says he will "pursue poetry made of what's known" (i.e. in the simple style) and this way lead people to conclude that because his poetry is so straightforward and simple, it must be easy to produce
        - He says he will then delight in the toil of people who think it is easy, who must learn that good writing is so incredibly difficult and the evidence for this is the dearth of truly good writers
- Horace says the poet must mind his or her audience, and by knowing what the audience wants and approves of, be in the best position to deliver it
- Horace encourages all poets to go back to the masters
    - "As for yourselves, have Greek models in your hands at night and in your hands each day"
- The critic must also have taste just as the poet must, and must be able to distinguish good style from bad
- Horace is a student of his craft and knows the history of dramatic form, including the development of masks and fine robes as part of the production, and the origins of the comedic form and its role as social commentary
    - He invites all poets to be students of their form and its history the way he is
- In addition to form and its history, the poet must also know life – only this content will give the poet something to write about
    - Where there is content, words will quickly follow
    - And by being an observer of life, the poet will know how to write each role and incident
    - "I'd advise one taught by imitation to take life, and real behavior, for his examples, and extract living speech"
- **The Content and Aim of Poetry**
- The content of the work matters, and means something to the audience or reader – it is not just ornamentation
    - "Often a play with fine bits, good roles, through without beauty, substance or art, amuses the public more and holds their attention better, than verses without content, melodious nonsense"

- Horace is critical of his Roman countrymen as compared to the Greeks, whom he reveres
    - The Greeks, Horace tells us, were given talent and "rounded eloquence in their speech" by the muses, and, possessed of these gifts, the Greeks hungered only for glory
        - Whereas the Romans, Horace says, only learn things that will help them accumulate wealth
            - This type of greed has stained the Roman spirit and thus how can the Romans ever hope to make great poetry
- "Poets wish to benefit or to please, or to speak what is both enjoyable and helpful to living"
    - This is a key quote from Horace and from *Ars Poetica* and became a central discussion point for medieval and Renaissance commentators who analyzed Horace and the classical period generally
    - During the medieval period and into the Renaissance, there was an interest in defining (and defending) the utility of poetry and its function among other branches of human inquiry
        - The idea that poetry could instruct readers in living a good life – the argument captured in the above quote – helped connect Horace's poetry and classical, pre-Christian poetry generally to the Christian tradition (because this type of instruction in living a good life is conducive to the moral teachings of the church)
        - As most commentators were Christian, and many even formal members of the clergy, the fact that classical poetry is now an appropriate topic for Christian commentators sparks a proliferation in written commentaries on Greco-Roman literature and greatly influences both literary criticism and the spread of the Renaissance overall
        - Additionally, the idea that poetry could also take as its sole aim the creation of something pleasing or beautiful (and not necessarily instructive), as Horace says, inspired the humanists of the early Renaissance to begin conceiving of art in this vein and it had an enormous impact on the development of aesthetics
    - On combing utility and beauty, Horace says "Who can blend usefulness and sweetness wins every vote, at once delighting and teaching the reader"
- "When you give instruction, be brief; what's quickly said the spirit grasps easily, faithfully retains: everything superfluous flows out of a full mind"
- Horace says that even fiction meant solely to amuse, even this type of fiction should be close to reality

    - And thus Horace appears skeptical of an audience's willingness to suspend disbelief no matter what, saying "your play shouldn't ask for belief in whatever it chooses"
        - This hints that Horace doesn't believe the poet can just assume the audience will go along with the master conceit of the poem
- Horace declares his sympathy for the plight of the poet, noting that what the poet desires to create is not always what he or she actually creates
    - In support of this, Horace makes an analogy from playing music: "The string doesn't always sound as hand and mind wish, you call for a bass and quite often a treble replies: the arrow won't always strike the mark it's aimed at"
    - Nevertheless, Horace says, "where there are many beauties in a poem, a few blots won't offend me, those carelessly spilt, or that human frailty can scarcely help"
        - Even if the errors are many, a fine line will still produce a smile, even if it is a startled smile
- As for length, Horace says that somnolence may result if a work is too long
- **The Pleasure of Poetry**
- On the pleasure of reading a poem, Horace says that not all poetry pleases the same way or for the same amount of time
    - Horace: "Poetry's like painting: there are pictures that attract you more nearer to, and others from further away. This needs the shadows, that to be seen in the light, not fearing the critic's sharp eye: this pleased once, that, though examined ten thousand times, still pleases"
- Mediocrity in poetry is unacceptable – the reader won't accept it, and the publisher certainly won't accept it
    - "A poem, born and created to pleasure the spirit, sinks to the depths if it falls short of the heights"
    - Just as in the middle of a fine meal one poorly-cooked dish can ruin it, a great poem can be similarly ruined by a poor component
- **The Life and Training of the Poet**
- Horace mocks the unskilled poet who just goes off and writes without ever bothering to dedicate him or herself to learning the principles of poetry
- Poetry comes from a glorious and noble tradition, Horace reminds us, and the poet should take pride in that
    - Before civilization life was chaotic – and then poetry tamed the wild; Orpheus, the poet and sacred medium of the gods tamed the wild with his poetry
        - Then came civilization and people needed to be shown "the way of living" and poetry filled this need

- A classic question about poetry is whether the best poems are due to nature or to art
    - On this question, Horace says: "I've never seen the benefit of study lacking a wealth of talent, or of untrained ability: each needs the other's friendly assistance"
- The poet, Horace says, will have worked hard, and suffered much, and abstained from many enjoyable pursuits
    - And the poet will have a healthy fear of his master: the profession of poetry
- The poet must not court flattery and must be able to see through it when it presents itself
- Listening to Critics
- Horace concludes the poem with the story about a critic who refused to offer any more suggestion, commentary, or help once the writer attempted to defend the writing in question (in other words, if the writer was more interested in deflecting and defending against criticism than actually hearing it, then why should the critic even bother)
    - It is a reminder that if the writer wants to receive the best, most helpful critiques, the writer must know how to receive them
    - The writer who defends his or her work from criticism instead of listening to the criticism is the writer who loves him- or herself too much
        - This writer ends up with bad verse, and no true critiques that might lead to improvement
            - Horace says some poets do this on purpose: they set themselves up as victims of excessive criticism so that they can play the role of suffering artist (all to seek sympathy and attention on account of pity and unfortunately not by the strength of their verse)
            - Many poets crave fame and will do many misguided things for it, Horace warns
                - These poets desecrate the sacredness of poetry and their actions are sacrilegious
    - When a critic sees a poet who is in love with their own verse and not open to criticism, the critic must pass on by and not bother with that poet or try to save the poet against his or her will
- When you are the critic, when you are reading your own or someone else's work with a critical eye, you must not hold back any criticism, even over the smallest point
    - Do not say: "Why should I offend a friend for a trifle?"
        - Because, Horace says, such trifles lead to serious trouble in the work
        - "An honest, sensible reader will condemn lifeless verse, fault the harsh, smear the inelegant with a black stroke of the pen, cut out pretentious

adornment, force you to elucidate where it's not clear enough, denounce the ambiguous phrase"