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Horace AP 139: *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*

By Howard Jacobson, Urbana

This famous and familiar verse is perhaps not as straightforward as it looks. Difficulties and problems are widely ignored or unnoticed. Commentaries are inadequate. They expend energy and learning on two matters in this verse, the tense of the first verbe, and the sources or parallels for the apparently proverbial statement. In so doing, they pay little or no attention to the key question, namely the relationship of Horace's bon mot to the original Greek proverb and the actual sense of the words. In fact, the best commentary on this verse is to be found not in the literature on Horace, but in Otto's *Sprichwörter*¹. Here I want to clarify important issues by expanding on what Otto tells us; the latter of course was not writing to illuminate the Horatian text for the reader of Horace. Minimally, my purpose is to point out just how unclear and problematic this verse is.

Several later sources provide us with Greek examples of the Horatian sentiment. They come in two forms, a succinct aphoristic-like saying, and (once) a verse in Sotadean metre. Plutarch (*Ages.* 36) and Athenaeus (14.616 d) both tell a story of the reception of Agesilaus by the Egyptians, centering on the amazement of the latter at the mediocre appearance of the reputedly great man: τοῦτο ἦν τὸ μυθολογούμενον ὠδίνειν ὄρος εἶτα μῦν ἀποτεκεῖν. So Plutarch, while Athenaeus has the metrical ὠδινεν ὄρος Ζεὺς δ' ἐφοβεῖτο τὸ δ' ἔτεκεν μῦν. The Plutarchean version occurs in several other texts, with insignificant variations: ὠδινεν ὄρος εἶτα μῦν [ἀπ]έτεκεν, several times in the *CPG* (1.320, 378; 2.92, 733); ὠδινεν ὄρος καὶ ἔτεκε μῦν (Galen *CMG* 5.9.2, p. 104, sect. 702). Lucian, like Horace in a literary context (*Conscrib. Hist.* 23), makes allusion to the proverb by simply citing its opening words: ὠδινεν ὄρος. It is generally, if not unanimously, believed that the proverb goes back to Hellenistic times. If the associations with Agesilaus is true, then of course it did (see e.g. *Coll. Alex.* [ed. Powell], p. 244 § 22; FGrHist 115 F 108.4). Whether the metrical form of the proverb is original or a later adaptation is hard to say. The metrical form could point to its earliness, but the brief form is certainly more pointed and effective, and, one might say, more proverbial.² Horace's verse seems to be straightforward, though one may wonder about the plural *montes*. He writes, 'mountains will be in labor, a laughable mouse will be born'. I suspect that this means that Horace either changed or misunderstood the original Greek proverb

* I am indebted to Professors E. J. Kenney and David Sansone for valuable suggestions.

1 A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und Sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig 1890) 234–235.

2 The clause about Zeus in the metrical version is impossible to explicate without the larger context that it seems to presuppose.

he knew. I think that in the Greek proverb ὄρος is accusative, not nominative.³ Thus, ‘it was in labor with a mountain, but just produced a mouse’, or ‘it labored mightily, but just produced a mouse’. That is to say, the pregnant entity had a difficult and long labor, but the results were ordinary or even less than ordinary. The superiority of this view is apparent in Lucian’s application of the proverb: the historian writes a lavish introduction, but the body of his work is trivial. It is not the identity of the historian (= ‘a mountain’) that is at issue, but rather the expectations aroused by his preliminary actions, like the mother who labors greatly but produces disappointing results. In *CPG*’s citation of the proverb at 2.733, it adds a gloss that makes this point: ὅταν ἐλπίσας τις μεγάλα μικροῖς ἐντύχη. It is not the identity of the person that is at issue; it is the expectation that he arouses by his actions. Interestingly, Phaedrus (4.24) creates a fable out of the proverb, almost certainly based on his knowledge of Horace. Thus, because he knows his Horace, the subject is *mons* [*parturiebat*], but in keeping with the actual meaning of the proverb he adds, *gemitus immanes ciens*, as well as *magna cum minaris*. Two Patristic texts, cited by Otto but without comment, need to be noted in any discussion of the proverb and of Horace’s verse. Jerome (*Epist. adv. Rufinum* 3 [CCL 79, 75]) writes, *parturis mihi montes criminum*. While not certain, this looks like an echo of the Horatian verse and suggests that Jerome took Horace’s *montes* as object, not subject. Indeed, when Jerome quotes the Horatian verse directly, *parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus* (*adv. Iovinianum* 1.1 [PL 23,211]), he uses it to mock Iovinianus, after telling us that the latter *attollit se per singula, altius quiddam aggreditur*. The quote of Horace seems to apply to the grandiose actions of Iovinianus and this suggests that Jerome indeed is taking *montes* as accusative. Even more illuminating is a passage in the fifth century writer and translator Marius Mercator, echoing Horace (this is undeniable: note both the plural *montes* and the phrase *ridiculus mus*). He writes: *tibique coaptabit dictum hoc: parturisse te montes unde nasceretur ridiculus mus* (*Subnotat. In verba Iuliani*, PL 48, col. 172). That is to say, recognizing that the proverb (note *dictum hoc*) talks not about a pregnant mountain, but rather about a pregnant person in great labor, Marius takes Horace’s *montes* not as nominative but as accusative.

One last thought. When one reads the Horatian text and context, it would seem reasonable to conclude that Horace himself did in fact mean *montes* as accusative, as later readers seem to have taken it. For he brings the proverb when

3 ὠδίνειν with an accusative is not problematic. See e.g. Eur. *IA* 1234, Ael. *NA* 2.46. It is also so used, when the accusative is not meant literally, e.g. Soph. *Trach.* 325, ὠδίνουσα συμφορᾶς βάρους. The only instance of the proverb where the view that ὄρος is accusative may raise suspicions is Athenaeus’ metrical version, where τὸ δέ looks like a nominative subject. However, abverbial τὸ δέ is quite common (often in Plato), ‘but nonetheless’, ‘but in fact’. See e.g. Schwyzer/Debrunner 2, 562 (“während hingegen”); also, Slings on Plato *Apology* 37 a 4. Porphyrio in his comment on *AP* 139 gives an abbreviated version of the verse and τὸ δέ here is an emendation grounded in the Athenaeus version.

speaking of writers who make grand beginnings and then fail to live up to initial expectations. The problem of course is that the plural verb leaves us without a clear subject. Had the text read *parturiet*, no reader would blink an eye. Unless we are willing to take *parturient* as referring to the class of writers to which his designated target belongs – and that is not easy to do – we will have to keep believing that Horace thought that in the Greek proverb ὄρος was subject, not object.

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