

Prop. 4.1

4.1a The poet plans to sing of Rome

All that you see here, stranger, where mighty Rome now stands, was grass and hill before the coming of Phrygian Aeneas; and where stands the Palatine consecrated to Apollo of the Ships, the cattle of exiled Evander there lay down. These golden temples have grown up for gods of clay, who deemed it no shame that their huts were crudely built. Tarpeian Jupiter thundered from a bare rock, and the Tiber was an alien to our cattle. Where upon a flight of steps yonder house rears itself, once did that of Remus: a single hearth was the total realm of the brothers. The Curia, which now stands high and resplendent with its hem-frocked senate, then housed a rustic company of Fathers clad in skins. A horn summoned the old-time citizens to parley: a hundred of them in an enclosure of the meadow formed the senate. Nor did billowing drapes hang over the hollow theatre or the stage reek of ceremonial saffron.

No one then felt the need of foreign gods, when the tense crowd thrilled at the ritual of their fathers and bonfires of straw celebrated the annual festival of Pales, just as now purification is renewed with the docking of a horse. Vesta was poor and rejoiced in garlanded mules, and it was lean cattle that led the procession for a paltry sacrifice. Humble were the crossroads that fattened swine purified, and to the sound of the pipe the shepherd made acceptable offering of a sheep's entrails. The skin-clad ploughman waved his shaggy whip, whence derives the wanton rite of Fabian Lupercus. Nor gleamed their rude soldiery with threatening weapons: unprotected by armour they fought with stakes hardened by fire.

The first captain's tent was pitched by Lycmon wearing a wolf-skin helmet, and Tatius' wealth lay largely in his flocks. From such origins came the Tities, the warrior Ramnes, the Luceres of Solonium, from such came Romulus to drive his four white steeds. Bovillae, to be sure, was less of a suburb when Rome was small, in days when it was a long journey to Fidenae; and Alba stood and was mighty, born of the omen of a white sow, and Gabii, which now is nothing, was then a vast multitude. The Roman of today has nothing from his ancestor but his name: he would never imagine that a she-wolf nurtured the blood from which he sprang.

To a happier destiny, O Troy, you sent hither your exiled gods. Ah, what blessed augury attended the sailing of the Dardan ship which carried to victory the arms of Troy reborn! Blessed indeed was the land that received your gods, Iulus. Even then the omens boded well, for the opened belly of the Wooden Horse had done those gods no harm when the trembling father hung on his son's neck and the flames feared to burn those dutiful shoulders. Then came the heroism of Decius and the axes of Brutus, and Venus herself bore her Caesar's arms, if indeed the Avernian tripod of the quaking Sibyl told that its fields were to be sanctified by the blood of Remus of the Aventine, or if the predictions of the Trojan prophetess, late fulfilled, were truly announced to the aged Priam: 'This is my report: "Troy, you will fall, and rise again as Trojan Rome; I prophesy proud dominion over land and sea. Turn back the horse, ye Greeks! Yours is a ruinous victory! The land of Ilium shall live, and to these ashes Jove will furnish arms."

She-wolf of Mars, best of nurses for our fortunes, what walls have sprung up from your milk! For I would fain lay out those walls in duteous verse: ah me, that a voice so feeble sits upon my lips! But still, whatever the stream that gushes forth from my puny breast, the whole of it shall be given to the service of my country. Let Ennius crown his verse with a ragged garland: Bacchus, give me leaves of

your ivy, that Umbria may swell with pride at my books, Umbria, the home of Rome's Callimachus! Let whosoever describes the citadels that climb up from the vale esteem those walls by my genius. Rome, smile on me; my work rises for you; citizens, give me a fair omen, and let a bird on the right augur success for my undertaking. I shall sing of rites and deities and ancient names of places: this is the goal to which my foaming steed must press.

4.1b The poet's horoscope

Whither do you hurry so thoughtlessly? Seek not to learn your fate, Propertius! From no auspicious distaff have its threads been spun. You are bringing sorrow on yourself: unfavourable is the response of Apollo. You are asking a reluctant lyre for words it is loth to grant.

Sure things I shall tell on sure authority, or I am a seer unskilled at moving the constellations on the sphere of bronze, the planets of benign Jupiter and rapacious Mars, and the star of Saturn malign to one and all. Horops of Babylon, of the line of Archytas, begot me, Horos, and my house is derived from its ancestor Conon. The gods are my witness that I have not disgraced my kin and that in my books nothing comes before truth. Nowadays men have made profit of the gods and (heavens!) we even falsify for gold the revolving signs of the tilted zodiac.

I said, when Arria was sending off her two sons (she was giving her sons arms against the advice of the god) that they would not bring back their weapons to the family hearth: and, sure enough, two graves now confirm my truthfulness. For Lupercus, in shielding the wounded face of his horse, slipped, alas, and failed to beware of the horse. And Gallus in camp, minding the standards entrusted to his charge, fell in front of his own eagle and stained its beak with his blood. Ill-starred lads, both brought to death by a mother's greed! That prophecy of mine found fulfilment, though I would it had not!

So too when Lucina was prolonging Cinara's labour-pains and the burden of her womb was slow and caused delay, I said: 'Let her make a vow that shall prevail with Juno!' She gives birth: victory was awarded to my almanacs! What portend the Fishes and the Lion's fierce sign and Capricorn bathed in the western ocean is not revealed by the desert shrine of Libyan Jove, or by the entrails that communicate the godhead within them, or by him who understands the winged flight of the crow, or by the dead shade who comes forth from magic waters: you must observe the paths of heaven and the road of truth that lies in the stars, and seek trust from the five zones.

Calchas will prove a salutary warning: for he released from Aulis the fleet that had been well tied to merciful rocks; so doing he stained his knife with the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter and gave the sons of Atreus bloodstained sails; yet the Greeks came not home: dry your eyes, ruined Troy, and think of the bays of Euboea. Nauplius beckons with his vengeful beacon at nightfall, and Greece is shipwrecked, sunk by its booty. Triumphant son of Oileus, now seize and make love to the prophetess whom, clinging to the goddess's robe, Minerva forbids to be wrenched away.

Enough of these stories: now I shall come down to your horoscope; compose yourself for fresh sorrows. Ancient Umbria bore you in an illustrious home—do I lie, or have I hit upon the borders of your native land?—where misty Mevania sheds its dew on the low-lying fields, and the waters of the Umbrian mere send forth their summer steam, where a wall rises on the peak of soaring Assisi, the wall made more famous by your genius. And you gathered, not to be gathered at that age, your father's bones, and were forced to move to a humble home: for whereas many a steer ploughed up your acres, the rod of the pitiless surveyor robbed you of well-tilled estates. Next when the golden locket was removed from your innocent neck, and you donned the toga of manhood before your mother's gods, then Apollo dictates a little of his song to you and forbids you to bawl forth speeches in the bedlam of the law-courts.

Now you must compose Elegy, an alluring task (here lies your camp), so that the rest of the throng will write after your example. You will suffer active service in the tender warfare of Venus, and you will be a profitable adversary for Venus' boys. For whatever victories you win by your toil, one girl will mock your triumphs. Darkness and daylight you will see at her dictation: not even a teardrop will fall from your eyes save at her command, and though you dislodge the hook that is well fixed in your chin, this will prove no gain: the gripper will secure you fast by your snout. Nor shall a thousand watches help you, nor all the seals you place upon her doors: a chink is enough for a woman determined to deceive.

Now though your ship be struggling in mid tempest, though you go an unarmed fighter against an armed host, though the earth should tremble and open up a gaping chasm: the sinister back of the eight-footed Crab is what you must fear.