

"Humiles habitare casas"-- humble lodgings
in Latin Literature (Part I)

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A pleasant if undemanding (and scarcely scholarly) pastime for students of any literature is to collect up the scenery from the edges and the background of the picture, to use a metaphor from paintings rather than poems. Details which the author often seems to include rather in passing than because of their significance for the central theme, character or plot can have a peculiar charm, just as the pottery or the furniture in a Dutch interior have, or the landscape in the background of an Italian Renaissance portrait of mother and child.

Here I've collected together some scenes from Latin literature which present, usually quite briefly, some of the unpretentious urban or rural homes in which the farmer or the poor poet of Roman times enjoyed his off-duty moments.

One of the best known of all the small country cottages must be the home of Baucis and Philemon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VIII. Ovid describes it as small, thatched with straw and with reeds from the nearby marsh, and with a door-lintel so low that the two visitors (Jupiter and Mercury, who are in disguise) have to stoop to enter. Philemon puts out a bench for them on which Baucis spreads a piece of coarse cloth. Then she goes to the hearth, rakes the ashes aside, takes some kindling wood, split finely, and some twigs down from the roof -- presumably up in the rafters to keep it out of the way where it will dry off -- and blows on the coals still glowing from yesterday's fire. On goes her little bronze cookpot, and into it some cabbage and bacon, one from the garden, the other also stored in the rafters: for Philemon takes down "a smoked back of bacon hanging from a blackened beam with a forked stick and cuts a small piece from their long-preserved piece of pork" (lines 647-650). There is also a couch with frame and feet of willow-wood and a mattress stuffed with rushes or sedges, over which the best coverlet is spread, the one used only on holidays.

Baucis next sets the table. It has three legs and one of those is too short and has to be propped up with a potsherd. The menu for the meal she

serves sounds delicious: black and green olives, pickled wild cherries, endive, radishes, cottage cheese and eggs, then the bacon and cabbage, followed by dessert ("secunda mensa") of nuts, figs, dates, plums, apples and grapes -- and a honeycomb. Everything is served on earthenware dishes, and the wine ("not of any great age") is mixed in a decorated pottery bowl and served in cups carved out of beechwood and waxed inside (to make them less porous, clearly).

The two gods miraculously keep the winebowl filled, which naturally amazes and flusters the two old peasants. They apologise for their humble surroundings and meal, and then attempt to catch their only goose, so as to serve up a rather more impressive dinner. Luckily the gods intervene to save its life, and then again to save the lives of Baucis and Philemon from the flood which swallows up their cold hearted neighbours, who had all been too suspicious of the strangers to offer them any hospitality. The cottage is transformed into a temple with the old man and woman as its caretakers. Their request to be allowed not to outlive each other is granted as they are eventually turned simultaneously into a linden and an oak, their branches intertwined and their trunks as close as to appear one tree.

Hearthfires meant both warmth and good hot food, of course, and although most of Vergil's *Eclogues* are set in the woods, hills and fields, where the summer weather would entice any sensible shepherds to spend their days, there are a couple of references to fall and winter and the comforts of home. In Eclogue I, Meliboeus the goatherd grieves that he is forced to leave his "poor cottage with its roof-top piled with turf". His goats he is driving away with him, but he's forced to leave his little "kingdom", as he calls it, behind, for some godless soldier to take over his well-tilled grain field, his pear orchard and his vineyard. Tityrus the old shepherd, who is luckier than he and doesn't have to leave, suggests he might stay overnight at least:

Hic tamen hanc mecum poteris requiescere noctem
fronde super viridi: sunt nobis mitia poma,
castaneae molles et pressi copia lactis.
Et iam summa procul villarum culmina fumant
maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae (lines 79-83)

The "ripe apples and mealy chestnuts and plenty of cheese" sound very

attractive, while far away the roof-tops of farmhouses are smoking and the evening shadows of the mountains are lengthening.

By Eclogue VII, the winter has the singer Thyrsis to celebrate it, in contrast with his rival Corydon's praise of summer:

Hic focus et taedae pingues, hic plurimus ignis
semper et adsidua postes fuligine nigri.
Hic tantum Boreae curamus frigora, quantum
aut numerum lupus aut torrentia flumina ripas. (lines 49-52)

No wonder Thyrsis and his family don't worry about the freezing blasts of the North wind, any more than wolves worry about the carefully counted sheep or the rivers in flood about their banks! He has a hearth piled high with crackling logs, day and night, and doorposts black with soot to prove it.

Horace piles his logs on the hearth in stormy winter weather too. When snow lies deep on White Soracte, the forest trees are bending under their load and the rivers are frozen over, he is safe indoors, calling for a heaped up fire to chase the chills away:

Dissolve frigus ligna super foco
large reponens atque benignius
deprome quadrimum Sabina
O Thaliarche, merum diota. (*Odes* I, 9)

Just the right time to broach the Sabine winejar, when the gale is blasting sea and land alike. "Don't ask questions about tomorrow," he says -- use up the firewood, be generous with the wine, and leave everything else to the gods!

All these attractive country houses (and we have certainly strayed into something larger than a cottage with Horace) make city lodgings seem pretty poky, if not downright depressing. Perhaps as well known as Baucis and Philemon's hut is the attic in which Codrus the humble lover of poetry lives.

Juvenal's Codrus lives, as do half a million others, in an apartment in

Rome, no doubt one "propped up on a toothpick, with an old and gaping crack in its wall" and a landlord who glibly tells his tenants to sleep safe and sound in his profitable ruin of a building. Suddenly there's a shout below: "Water!" and a bustle as the downstairs lodgers move their belongings out. Smoke pours out of the third storey. Despite all the panic below on the ground floor, Codrus hears nothing, in his attic under the tiled roof:

Ultimus ardebit quem tegula sola tuetur
a pluvia, molles ubi reddunt ova columbae. (*Sat.* III, 201-203)

The doves may lose their nests, but Codrus stands to lose his all, his too-small couch, his shelf with six little earthenware pots and a tiny jug, a statuette of Chiron, an old trunk full of Greek books somewhat mouse-nibbled. "Codrus had nothing, who can deny that? But the wretched fellow has lost his entire nothing, all the same!" Juvenal goes on to argue that if Codrus and his ilk could only tear themselves away from these highly overpriced, dangerous, dark garrets (but oh so conveniently just around the corner from the races at the Circus!) they could buy a little house in some country town for just a year of Roman rents. There they can enjoy a little garden with its own shallow well to water their vegetables. It may be the back of beyond, but it's something to be able to call oneself the owner of even one tiny lizard, he declares:

Est aliquid, quocumque loco, quocumque recessu,
unius sese dominum fecisse lacertae. (*Sat.* III lines 230-1)

In the next issue of *Labyrinth*, I'll look at several more "domestic interiors" in Roman literature.