Old Hags and a Narrative Snag: Horace's Persona in the *Epodes*

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The narrative voice of Horace is perhaps nowhere more complex than in his Epodes. In this collection of poems, the narrative voice of Horace is frequently buried in a morass of mimesis, in the classical sense. That is, after the relatively secure identification of the persona loquens of the first poem with "Horace," the author of the collection immediately subverts that expectation in the second poem, by presenting a persona loquens who, the reader will discover, is not Horace. Similar mimetic contortions continue leaving the reader unable and unwilling to identify the narrator of a given poem with the author, Horace.

This mode of representation and the discursive strategies that enable it are especially prominent in Epode 5, where the persona loquens yields the opening remarks to a defenseless boy who is being ravaged by a coven of terrifying witches. Though the boy's desperate pleas at first sound like they originate from Horace's mouth, the reader soon discovers that the boy's is just another pretty face Horace wears in the course of this book. The narrator silences the boy and proceeds to describe, in bristling detail, the planned torture and murder of this tender child at the hands of one Canidia and her band of crones. The narrator, then, assumes the voice of Canidia herself, who narrates the reasons for the boy's demise—her lover is roving and she needs powerful magic to draw this Varus back into her arms. The narrator introduces her speech with an arresting question: "What did she say or what didn't she say?" Why the address to the reader at this point? Why break the relatively unproblematic flow (for this collection) of the narrative?

In this paper, I will suggest that the narrator's breach of the mimetic situation, this snag in his representation of the actions of the old hags against the boy, reveals the multivalent character of his personae loquentes. By injecting his voice into the narrative, he forces the reader to reflect on what constitutes that voice. This manipulation of the reader's expectations has two main implications in the context of this collection. First, in propagating an ill-defined and diffuse persona loquens, the narrative style mirrors the atypical masculine stance of "Horace" (qua persona loquens). Second, by juxtaposing this "Horace" with the several voices of his characters, the collection creates a situation that encourages the reader to see the competing discourses that constitute both "Horace" and the collection itself.