

Speech and Silence: Canidia in Horace's Epodes 5 and 17

In the poetry of Horace the witch Canidia is a recurring figure. The strong animosity with which Horace seems to regard her and the complex nature of her character have led to much scholarly interest regarding her role in Horace's poetry. A topic debated in recent scholarship is the extent to which Canidia renders Horace impotent, or vice versa. In this paper I propose to examine the relationship of the poet Horace to the character of Canidia, arguing that aspects of the magical context in which the character of Canidia consistently appears indicate that Horace ultimately triumphs over Canidia. Two poems of significance for this discussion are *Epodes* 5 and 17, in both of which Canidia plays a central role.

Many scholars have been hesitant to allow that Canidia is the truly impotent character in Horace's work. William Fitzgerald argues that the curses of the boy in Epode 5 have no effect, since "the present is not susceptible to the power of the speaker's words" (1988). Similarly, Timothy Johnson, in a discussion of *Epode* 17, suggests that "it is hard to extract from an ironic perspective (the potency of impotency) a pure positive value for Horace's iambic criticism that would validate the power he claims in epode 16" (2012).

My argument, although taking into consideration such recent scholarship on the relationship of Horace and Canidia as that cited above, is unique in that it contextualizes the character of Canidia within the Roman understanding of witchcraft and magic. Warrant exists for this study; C.E. Manning argues that, based not only on the detailed discussion of witchcraft in *Epodes* 5 and 17, but also on the scattered references throughout Horace's work, the poet would have directly encountered rituals of sorcery

and would have taken them seriously as a legitimate concern of evil (1970). Likewise, Lindsay Watson points out that, given Roman hostility towards magic, Horace's discussions of magical rites ought not to be disregarded (2003). Yet, despite these claims, the implications of the context of witchcraft for the character of Canidia and the degree to which she has power over Horace have not been fully addressed.

A careful reading of *Epodes* 5 and 17 indicate that the way in which Horace addresses the magical contexts of these poems leads to an ultimate triumph of the poet over the character of Canidia. Canidia's other appearance in Horace's writings also bolster this claim (*Satires* 1.8, 2.1, 2.8; *Epode* 3), but *Epodes* 5 and 17 constitute her most significant appearances in his work. In *Epode* 5, Canidia is attempting to regain control over her lover through magical uses of a young boy's internal organs. Despite the boy's initial appearance of impotence, his words leave the reader questioning Canidia's power (*Venena maga non fas nefasque, non valent/convertere humanam vicem, Epode* 5.87-88), opening up the possibility that the true impotence belongs to Canidia. In this context, then, the use of words on the part of the youth calls into question his own apparent powerlessness.

Epode 17 also presents a situation in which the attempts of Canidia to exert power can ultimately be viewed as ineffectual. Horace writes:

sub haec puer iam non, ut ante, mollibus

lenire verbis inpias,

sed dubius unde rumperet silentium,

misit Thyesteas preces: (Epodes 17.83-86)

The phrase *rumperet silentium* is of great interest when considered in relation to the understanding of *silentium* as an integral part of magic rites, as explained by Watson (2003). The breaking of Canidia's silence leads to uncertainty as to whether her spells are effective or whether she is rendered impotent by both the treatment of silence both within the story of the poem and by Horace himself in the writing of the poem.

Although the character of Canidia in Horace's work is complex, and the degree to which she is to be viewed as powerful is unclear, the argument can be made that she is not as much in control as many readers of Horace have assumed her to be. Because Canidia is presented as a witch, situating her appearances in Horace's work within the context of magic in the Roman world serves to cast light on her apparent power. This examination calls into question Canidia's abilities and reaffirms the strength of Horace and poet; Canidia emerges as the true impotent character.

Works Cited

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