

Chaste Penelope and Glassy Circe
Epic Gender Allegory in Horace *Odes* 1.17

In *Odes* 1.17, Horace employs the feminine form of the adjective *vitreus* to describe his literary Circe. This adjective has long perplexed scholars. What does it mean for Circe to be “glassy” or “translucent?” What does this translucence signify in conjunction with Horace’s literary Penelope, who is not characterized by any adjective? This paper seeks to address these questions.

I argue that this ode, in its entirety, is an allegorical representation of Homeric gender roles. The speaker of the ode—presumably Horace himself—is in competition with another man for a woman’s affection, a recurrent theme in Homeric epic. The woman herself is named Tyndaris, literally meaning “daughter of Tyndareus.” Epic daughters of Tyndareus include Clytemnestra and Helen, both of whom are implicitly referenced through the actions of the various characters in this ode. Like Helen, Horace’s Tyndaris is deprived of her agency and reduced to an object of desire for the speaker and his rival, Cyrus. Like Clytemnestra, Horace’s Tyndaris reclaims some of her agency through her cunning.

In addition to reinforcing Homeric female gender roles, Horace inverts Augustan male gender roles. The speaker and his rival are characterized as Penelope and Circe, respectively, who were in competition for Odysseus’ affection. This necessarily contradicts Augustan androcentrism. Further, in his characterization of the speaker as Penelope, Horace implies passivity and chastity, while Cyrus’ Circe is aggressive and forthright. Both of these characterizations are one-dimensional and, often, male interpretations of female characters. More specifically, these are characterizations offered by Odysseus himself about Penelope and Circe in turn.

This one-dimensional interpretation of Penelope and Circe requires the reader to acknowledge that these are not one-dimensional characters. In hyperbolizing Circe's (Cyrus) cunning with the ironic adjective *vitream*, Horace implies a personality outside of sorcery—a personality which is very likely known by Tyndaris, who can then be interpreted as this ode's Odysseus.

Ultimately, Circe's translucence in *Odes* 1.17 is not a question of her metaphorical cleverness, but a question of gender. The ode is itself an extended gender play that inverts the roles of the involved parties and undercuts the severe boundaries of Augustan gender expectations. Much like Circe's *vitream*, however, this gender play is not straightforward. Tyndaris enjoys both autonomy and oppression in equal turn, while the speaker and Cyrus are each empowered and emasculated in turn. Horace reinforces early imperial gender performance by blurring the lines of that very same framework within the verses of this ode.

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