Horace Epode 3: Poetry, Sorcery, and …Garlic?

Horace's Epode 3 has never been the most popular or highly referenced of his works or even of his epodes. Due to its garlicky topic and its stomachache-induced, melodramatic griping, many scholars have overlooked this epode and its purportedly tenuous mythic connections, deeming it non-substantial and lacking profundity. A closer look reveals that Horace crafted a poem that weaves together a deeply-rooted tradition of magic and sorcery, a metaphor for the iambic genre itself, and the hint of a more genuine comradery between a poet and his patron. He accomplishes this by combining a garlic flavored ambiguity for healing and harming with iambic acerbity, and in so doing, flips the expected ending on its head.

Turning to this first point of tradition, Ager asserts that the "poem exists within a tradition in which garlic's spicy odor as well as its flavor led to its reputation as a magical herb", which legitimizes Horace's utilization of magical myths (Ager 2019). Specifically in his laments about his garlic-fueled stomach pain, he brings up the myths of Medea and Hercules. These in turn are connected to each other due to their shared tales of magic and violent, fiery death. This word is used for various drugs and magics sorceresses employ, and beyond just the two myths mentioned, is found in Homer's *Odyssey* in connection with Circe. This paper discusses the elements that tie all these tales together and how in turn, that makes Horace's epode remarkably consistent with literary tradition.

Secondly, as mentioned, a key element of iambic is its biting, invective style, which pairs well with the burning spice of raw garlic, and allows the epode to exist at a metaphoric level along with its place in the ladder of rich tradition. Similarly, a better understanding of Roman society's view of the twofold nature of garlic as something that serpents flee and heals their bites

and something that is both an aphrodisiac and a soporific allows one to realize exactly how Horace's epode fits in with the wider literature of magic and that this ambiguity and his use of it throughout the poem truly makes the piece what it describes.

Finally, one of the most discussed elements of the epode is Horace's parting curse to Maecenas. Breaking from the usual harsh ending threat, many commentators note the seemingly joking and playful character of Horace's curse. Fraenkel goes so far as to claim that it "sounds a lot like an affectionate compliment to Maecenas" rather than a curse (Fraenkel 1957). Agreeing with the levity of the situation, if not quite Fraenkel's sentiment, Watson calls it a "comfortable picture of close friends sharing a private joke in the unbuttoned atmosphere of the dinner part" (Watson *1995*). There is debate about exactly why the curse appears as it does, with a girl's temporary disdain for Maecenas set as the equal to Horace's alleged excruciating stomachache, but this uncertainty is part of why it fits in perfectly with the rest of the epode and suits garlic's double nature.

Keeping these things in mind, one can safely state that Epode 3 deserves to be given this closer look, as it reveals in Horace the clever writer visible in his other, more acclaimed works, through his ability to seamlessly combine jocosity and thematic depth.

Works Cited

Various excerpts from the works of Apollodorus, Euripides, Homer, Pliny, Sophocles, and Vergil are cited throughout the paper.

Ager, Britta. “Magic Perfumes and Deadly Herbs: The Scent of Witches’ Magic in Classical Literature.” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, vol. 8, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 1–34.

Fraenkel, Eduard. *Horace*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1957.

Watson, Lindsay C. *A Commentary on Horace's Epodes*. Oxford UP, 2003.