

Peior serpentibus Afris: Canidia as Cleopatra in Horace's Satires and Epodes

Canidia is the witch-hag who appears throughout Horace's poetic corpus (*Satires* 1.8, 2.1.48, 2.8.95; *Epodes* 3.7, 5, 17). She is mistress of both enchanting song and deadly poison: *quantum carminibus quae versant atque venenis / humanos animos*, *Sat.* 1.8.19-20. Her very presence underscores the two types of *carmina* constantly at odds in Horace's iambic and satiric verse: *carmina bona*, "good (i.e. Horatian) poetry," known for its wit and brevity embodied by the mantra *iam satis est* (1.1.120); and *carmina mala*, "bad poetry," dripping with *venenum*, "invective," associated with Canidia's curses but also indicative of the abundant, "muddy flow" of Lucilius which Horace eschews (*cum flueret lutulentus*, 1.4.11). She is Horace's personal antagonist and in occupying the final lines of *Satires* 2 and *Epodes* she is his "anti-dedicatee" and foil to Maecenas (Welch 2001: 185).

The Republican civil wars are contemporaneous with the composition and publication of Horace's *Satires* (book 1 published in 36-5 BCE, and book 2 in 30) and *Epodes* (30), and they lend inspiration to several poems in the collections (*Sat.* 1.5; *Ep.* 7, 9, 16). In *Sat.* 2.8 Canidia, "worse than African serpents" (*velut illis / Canidia afflasset peior serpentibus Afris*, 94-95), releases her fetid breath onto the food at Nasidienus' party, alluding to Cleopatra's suicide by snakes. On the surface Canidia and Cleopatra represent a similar archetype: they are strong, female antagonists to Roman men, they wield *venenum*, and appear with snakes. While the connection between Horace's Canidia and Cleopatra has been suggested by some scholars (Oliensis 1998: 77; Henderson 1999: 104) and discussed at length by others (Sharland 2011: 94-98), the topic requires another look and further refinement. In particular this paper reevaluates the connection between these figures through the lens of Horace's construction of the female

body as a locus of opposites: human and animal, masculine and feminine, *potentia* and *impotentia*.

Horace likens Canidia and her witch-hag companions to wild, feral animals: they claw at the ground and dismember animals with their teeth (*Sat.* 1.8.26-8); Canidia has snaky hair (*brevibus implicata viperis / crinis*, *Ep.* 5.15-6) and Sagana is bristly like a sea urchin or charging boar (*horret capillis ut marinus asperis / echinus aut currens aper*, 27-8). The women also act contrary to the expectations of traditional Roman *matronae*: they pursue amorous relationships with a “masculine sex drive” (*masculae libidinis*, 41); they run barefoot and loose haired like Maenadic worshippers (*Sat.* 1.8.24); and they are old and ugly (*obscenas anus*, *Ep.* 5.92; *anus*, *Ep.* 17.47; *horrendas aspectu*, *Sat.* 1.8.26). Furthermore Canidia is accused of faking childbirth (*Ep.* 17.50-52). And in the ultimate inversion of matronly expectations, the women commit infanticide (*Ep.* 5).

This portrayal of Canidia and her cohort finds a counterpart in Cleopatra from *Ode* 1.37. Horace weaves imagery of drinking and inebriation to convey Cleopatra’s insanity (*ebria*, 12; *mentemque lymphatam Mareotico*, 14). Horace emphasizes characteristics that distance her from her femininity. She is *fatale monstrum* (21), “baleful monster,” followed by the correct gendered relative pronoun *quae* (21) to contrast the neuter noun. Additionally she is “not seeking to die like a woman” (*perire quaerens nec muliebriter*, 22). Instead she possesses the qualities of a Roman male hero: bravery and accepting defeat “with a serene expression” (*vultu sereno, fortis*, 26). And notably Horace uses ambivalent word order to suggest she is not a woman: *non humilis mulier* (32). In the end Cleopatra “drinks” the snakes’ deadly poison grotesquely “with her body” (*ut atrum / corpore combiberet venenum*, 27-28), reminiscent of Canidia’s own *venenum* and mirrors the physicality of her earlier descriptions. Literary females Canidia and Cleopatra

threaten Roman ideology, masculine *potentia*, and the integrity of Horace's poetry. As a result Horace uses different and overlapping strategies to neutralize the threat they pose by stripping the women of their power, their femininity, and humanity.

Bibliography

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