

Canidia's Debut: Horace *Satires* 1.8

The witch Canidia, a recurrent bogey in Horace's *Epodes* (3.8; 5 and 17 *passim*) and *Satires* (1.8 *passim*; 2.1.48; 2.8.95) has received considerable attention in recent scholarly literature. Dismissing the scholiasts' identification of her with a certain Gratidia, a perfume-seller from Naples (Porph. on *Epod.* 3.7–8; Fraenkel [1957] 61–64), many readers now approach her as a metapoetic figure, a “written woman” embodying “an indecorous poetics against which Horace tries to define his own practice” (Oliensis [1991] 110; cf. Oliensis [1998] 94–96). Essential to such readings is the complex metaphorical significance of her name, which could have multiple resonances: *canere*, referring to the imprecations (*carmina*) she chants; *canis*, both vile bitch and dogged iambicist; *Canicula*, the dog-star that saps virility; *canities*, a senescence afflicting not merely her and her fellow hags but Rome itself (Mankin [1995] 300–301).

Though it does not contest any of those serendipitous meanings, this presentation follows a more pragmatic line of inquiry. Whatever its metaphoric function in subsequent works, I will argue, in *Satires* I, Horace's earliest poetic collection, “Canidia” is a topical reference. When the witch materializes in the eighth satire, she bears the rare *gentilicium* of P. Canidius Crassus (*cos. suff.* 40 BCE; Münzer *RE* III 2 [1899] 1475–1476), a partisan of Antony known for his rapid but irregular rise in the military and political spheres. She is therefore a negative foil to Horace, whose own problematic ascent through the patronage system the collection charts, for her name evokes ruthless careerism, a charge against which the satirist scrupulously defends himself.

In the chaotic years of the Second Triumvirate, cases of parvenus—provincials, sons of freedmen, alleged former slaves—climbing the ranks through military service, obtaining extralegal magistracies and being put in charge of armies were frequent enough to arouse both aristocratic outrage and popular scorn (Wiseman [1971] 8–9; Watson [2003] 148–150). As a

novus homo elevated to the consulship, doubtless as a reward for loyalty before and during the Perusine War, Canidius was an easy target of contempt. Declaiming a *suasoria* on the theme “Should Cicero Purchase Immunity from Antony at the Cost of Burning his Writings?” Cestius Pius contended that for the orator death in the company of the great men of the past would be better than life *inter Ventidios et Canidios et Saxas*, a reference to three of Antony’s trusted partisans (Sen. *Suas.* 7.3). To the senatorial class such upstarts typified the status confusion produced by civil disturbance (Ferrière 2000: 430).

When *Satires* I was published Ventidius and Saxa were already dead. For a writer intending to exploit such resentments, however, Canidius was still very much in the public eye. His successful campaigns in modern Georgia and Armenia were stark reminders of what the contemporary historian Sallust had denounced as a disgraceful path to magistracies and military promotion: *potentiae paucorum decus atque libertatem suam gratificari* (“to make a gift of one’s honor and liberty to the power of a few,” *Iug.* 3.3). While Sallust lays blame on the “few,” i.e., the Second Triumvirate, for the constitutional irregularities that allowed followers to bypass the normal electoral process, Horace concentrates upon the depravity of individuals so sponsored, doing so by associating his fictitious witch with abuses still fresh in memory.

In a volume published around 35 BCE and focused on proper and improper social mobility, the name “Canidia” therefore served a precise satiric purpose, reminding readers of the author’s dubious counterpart, the formerly undistinguished P. Canidius Crassus. Fictive characters can take on a life of their own, however, and we observe that development in Canidia. Within the next five years, she mutates into a symbol of more widespread anxieties: an impending conflict with Antony in the immediate future and a pervasive miasma of guilt arising from a century of civil wars. Yet she never fully loses her connection with undeserved

preferment. Although her rich metaphoric and poetological implications may overshadow her topical significance, we lose something, I think, if we do not recognize in Canidia a continuing mark of the *invidia* unfair success can generate—and a personal embodiment of the imposter syndrome.

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