

## Lesbia as Procuress in Horace's *Epode* 12

Through a series of innovative readings published in the last few decades, Horace's *Epodes* has emerged as a boldly experimental contribution to the iambic tradition as well as an incisive comment on Roman civic concerns during the fraught period leading up to Actium. In the light of these analyses, one corollary problem demanding re-examination is the Augustan poet's relationship to his "suppressed precursor" Catullus, who in the *Epodes* as in the *Odes* goes unacknowledged although his presence is constantly felt. Barchiesi (2001: 159–60) offers one suggestive observation: when composing iambics Horace "uses Catullan *libertas* as a foil." Contextually distorted echoes of Catullus may therefore call attention to poetic practices from which Horace dissociates himself. This paper tests that premise by attempting to clarify one hitherto unexplained detail of *Epode* 12: its mention of a go-between named "Lesbia," who in the reported words of the speaker's mistress is blamed for making the match.

Critical studies of *Epode* 12 have not properly exposed its operations at this specific point in the collection. It is still viewed as a pendant to *Epode* 8, that is, as the second of two exercises in abuse of old women and, in its nastier obscenity, ostensibly a mere elaboration of the first. Yet the metrical scheme of *Epode* 12, completely dactylic throughout, formally dissociates it from the iambic series to which *Epode* 8 belongs and locates it within the marked-off group of epodes 11 through 16. There critical opinion recognizes a major generic shift. Together with the polymetry of iambic-dactylic systems, *Epode* 11 introduces a new thematic concern, frustration in love, as the speaker recalls his past folly in language borrowing numerous motifs from elegy. Heslin (2011: 61–66) accordingly reads the epode as one move in an ongoing poetic dispute with Propertius. Because *Epodes* 11 and 12 are linked by references to Inachia, the speaker's onetime beloved, it is natural to posit that the two compositions have the same artistic agenda.

*Epode* 12 falls into balanced halves of thirteen lines each, the speaker's attack on his partner followed by direct quotation of the accusations that provoked him. If we approach this epode with Propertius in mind, we readily perceive a structural parallel with Propertius 1.3. At its conclusion Cynthia speaks for the first time in the *Monobiblos*, disrupting her lover's sensual and sadistic fantasies with a querulous rant against his supposed duplicity. In allowing his ventriloquized female to have the last word, Horace gestures toward Cynthia's dominant role in the Propertian elegiac plot.

Chronologically, however, progression from *Epode* 11 to *Epode* 12 seems anomalous. Ordinarily juxtaposition or close placement of paired poems in a collection locates the action of the second at a subsequent moment in time. Here the temporal movement is backwards to when the Inachia affair was still a reality. In its clash with the sequentiality of poem arrangement, this shift is unsettling. Metapoetically, meanwhile, *Epode* 12 enlists Catullus, an elegiac forbearer, to serve as its whipping boy: ironic echoes of his poetry in the speaker's harangue track elegy's histrionics back to their neoteric roots (Townshend 2016). In the light of that reading, Lesbia's function as bawd also takes on a poetological dimension. She trains Catullus' female readers, who identify with her as addressee, to find his poetic persona compelling. That the *mulier* imposes a Catullan coloring upon the liaison is evident from her own grievances steeped in his epigrammatic protestations of injured devotion.

Cynthia's outburst rounds off Propertius 1.3 by articulating the very suspicions of infidelity her drunken paramour had subliminally harbored about her. What was an amusing vignette in Propertius becomes in *Epode* 12 a no-holds-barred engagement with the elegiac *mentalité*. By appropriating the Propertian scenario and amplifying its piquant hints of sadism, malice and resentment, Horace's text mocks the egotistic bluster of both lover-poet and *puella*.

Upon its elegiambic version of the poetic mistress, the sexually available but wholly undesirable hag, it maps Catullan self-righteousness and injured pride. The resulting pastiche exposes the elegiac male's erotic abjection, his *mollitia*, as neoteric posturing run amok. If Horace is unwilling to grant Catullus primacy in iambic it is possibly because, as the documented inventor of the Latin elegiac complaint, his eligibility to speak in the authoritative voice of the iambicist has already been radically compromised.

#### Bibliography

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