

Horace's Favorite Inspiration: Sappho vs. Alcaeus

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Introduction

In *Odes 2.13*, Horace chooses to highlight Alcaeus and Sappho specifically in the underworld, showing that they are influential figures for him. Throughout his *Odes*, Horace prioritizes influence from the Greek lyric poets Sappho and Alcaeus (eg. 2.13, 1.32, 2.12, 1.1, 3.30). Scholars including Lyne, Woodman, Clay have hypothesized that Horace took inspiration from both lyric poets and integrated their styles into his writing. I argue that although Horace's *Odes 2.13* shows that he takes inspiration from both authors, he favors Sappho over Alcaeus.

Alcaeus and Sappho



A vase depicting the Greek lyric poets Alcaeus (left) and Sappho (right) by Brygos Painter (Greece). 5th century BCE
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alkaios_Sappho_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen_2416_n1.jpg

The Sweet Sound

dulci labore decipitur sono

The monsters in the underworld are soothed by a sweet sound, “*dulci labore decipitur sono*” (2.13.38), which suggests that Sappho’s music calmed the monsters.

quid mirum, ubi illis carminibus stupens

Additionally, Horace says that the monsters are stupefied by those songs, “*illis carminibus stupens*” (2.13.33). Clay notes that the *illis* most likely refers to Sappho as Sappho was mentioned more distantly than Alcaeus.

Allusion to Orpheus

Horace’s description of the Greek lyric poets seems to allude to Orpheus in Greek mythology. In his myth Orpheus, the son of Apollo, traveled to the underworld to rescue his wife Eurydice and successfully calmed Cerberus and Hades with his playing of the lyre (MacKail 349-350).

Since Orpheus was known as the best lyre player in Greek mythology, Horace comparing Sappho and Alcaeus to him suggests that Horace respects the work of both Sappho and Alcaeus deeply.

The allusion to Orpheus becomes more evident when the monsters are calmed by the music at the end of the poem, as Orpheus also soothed the beings in the underworld during his visit.

Orpheus in the Underworld



Ancient Greco-Roman Mosaic Depicting Orpheus playing his lyre and calming monsters. Dated in the 4th century AD.
Source: <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/Z49.2.html>

Keep the Common Crowd Away

Horace describes Alcaeus’ topics as drunk more by the common ears, “*bibit aure vulgus*” (2.13.32). Horace admits that Alcaeus writes about topics that are more widely received by the public.

In *Odes 3.1*, Horace mentions that he hates the common crowd and keeps them away: “*Odi profanum vulgus et arceo*” (3.1.1). Thus, he shows that he does not want to appeal to the common people as Alcaeus does in 2.13. Instead, Horace would try to emulate Sappho more by writing about the topics he enjoys, even if they are not interesting to the general public.

Conclusion

I argue that Horace shows a preference for Sappho over Alcaeus in *Odes 2.13*. While scholars have generally agreed that Horace takes inspiration from both Sappho and Alcaeus, scholars disagree on who Horace strived to emulate more. The motivation for discovering which inspiration had more influence is that the major inspiration may have affected the topics that Horace decides to write about. I argue that Horace’s preference for Sappho influenced his numerous topic choices in his writing.

Further research could find more instances of Horace’s direct mentions of Sappho and Alcaeus in his *Odes* and other works to see if Horace shows any other preferences for either Greek lyric poet. These mentions (*Odes 4.9*, *Epistles 1.19*, *Epistles 2.2*) could be compared with *Odes 2.13* to see if Horace describes them very differently.

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