

## What Makes a Happy Ending: Responses to Europa in *Ode 3.27*

In this paper, I address how an audience should react to Europa's situation in Horace's *Ode 3.27*, and whether or not we should believe that this poem has a "happy" ending. Ought we to assume that Venus' confirmation of Jupiter's identity as the bull suddenly makes Europa's circumstances more bearable? Perhaps more importantly—should a modern audience concern themselves with the happiness of one of Jupiter's rape victims? I will suggest a new model for reading Horace's version of this myth: as a kind of tragicomedy, incorporating elements of humor, which—rather than eliciting laughter—reinforce pity for Europa and critique traditional rape myths, while drawing attention to the real distress experienced by women entering into marriage and adulthood.

Fraenkel (1957) is one of few scholars that does view Europa's story as serious and dignified, arguing that the language of epic and tragedy elevates the narrative in a way that shows Horace's regard for mythical figures. Bradshaw (1978), though he believes that her distress is genuine, argues that her emotional response is exaggerated in light of her "splendid prospects." Garrison (1991) writes that Europa's pain is real and her journey has somehow gone awry, but that ultimately there is a happy ending. Strauss Clay (1993) argues that Venus' mockery of Europa is in fact malicious, but reflects a realistic reproach of young women who act childish in the face of their transition to womanhood. Sticker (2014) notes that both Jupiter and Venus play with her maliciously, and that her fate is described more as a burden than a blessing.

My approach will build upon these previous arguments by incorporating modern humor theory. I assert that parody need not always evoke laughter or mockery, and that humor does not necessarily imply that a topic should not be taken seriously. The term "tragicomedy" illustrates

this idea well: that a medium designed to elicit laughter may also force the audience to reflect with discomfort upon tragic events and characters. I view this poem with the framework of Morell's Relief Theory (2009): "Laughter, and by implication humor, are not anti-social or irrational, but simply a way of discharging nervous energy found to be unnecessary." *Ode 3.27* is meant to elicit laughter from the reader, but a nervous laughter rooted in both amusement and in discomfort.

The poem's ending is "happy" in the sense that Europa will be honored as Jupiter's chosen mate and as the mother of heroes, but following Venus' speech the poem ends without any more attention to her. Rather, the ending is ambiguous, because Horace never confirms how the rest of the myth turns out. All we know of Europa is that she is ashamed and upset enough to consider suicide. While she is unaware of the entire truth of her circumstances, she is aware of the damage to hers and her family's reputations that would occur should she have illicit sex. This anxiety over maintaining sexual purity must be taken seriously, and therefore I do not believe that we should view Europa's considerations of suicide as melodramatic. Perhaps the most overt source of humor in the poem is that Europa has not already assumed that the bull is divine: she calls upon the gods to punish her for her abandonment of her homeland, somehow without acknowledging that a god has been responsible. Nevertheless, the notion that Jupiter's divinity somehow makes up for the trauma of the rape should be dismissed.

Horace's Europa is a tragicomic heroine, whose transition into sexual maturity and womanhood is rife with fear of the unknown, despair, loneliness, and shame. Her experience of "marriage" is perhaps not much different from what any Roman girl experiences upon leaving her home to live with her husband. We may be invited to laugh at Europa for her highly tragic language and willful ignorance, but her situation remains profoundly sad and universal. The

ending is not happy, but it is expected and inevitable—and so we respond with the laughter of disengagement.

### Bibliography

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