

Unreliable Ability: *barrus* in Horace's *Epode* 12

The first line of Horace's *Epode* 12 mentions elephants: *Quid tibi vis, mulier nigris dignissima barris?* ("What do you want, a woman most fit for black elephants?"). Many scholars suggest *barris* here relates to the addressee's hypersexuality. For example, McCarter claims the word to be "clearly obscene, but difficult to decipher" (2020:93), whereas Watson (2003) that only an elephant's large organ can satisfy the woman or fit snugly into her. Mankin attributes the reference to the woman's "mammoth sexual appetite" (1995: 206). However, the meaning of *barrus* in Horace's earlier published *Satires* offers a different way of reading this word in *Epode* 12: in this paper, I claim that *barrus* symbolizes not just the woman's voracious sexual appetite, but also the speaker's unreliable sexual ability. Moreover, the elephant has been associated with Carthaginian incompetence and the war animal's lack of reliability in war (Livy 27.14.9; Shelton 2006). Thus, *barrus* acts as a double-edged insult, both against the woman and the speaker.

The word appears twice in the *Satires*: I.6.30 and I.7.8. *Satire* 6 critiques the veneer of the word used as a family name and suggests a lack of competence beneath the surface. Horace refers to a man named Barrus, whose sickness is his obsession with appearing flawless, though he lacks substance internally. Packed into the character Barrus is the notion that all the flair and show of personal appearance or a famous family name is an unreliable criterion for judging someone's abilities. This attribute of unreliability in ability, hidden by a pleasing appearance or report, maps well onto the speaker of *Epode* 12, who is equated to a *taurus* ("bull," 12.17), but arrives *iners* ("limp-dicked," 12.17), and who makes love three times with Inachia, but cannot get erect with the present addressee.

In *Satire* I.7.8, *barrus* represents unreliable ability as well. The reference here is to a *barrus* outdone by white horses marching at the forefront of a triumph (*Barros ut equis praecurret albis* “... would surpass an elephant as white horses do”). *Epode* 12 suggests a similar association between the speaker and the character Amyntas. While Amyntas has an *in indomito constantior inguine nervus quam nova collibus arbor inhaeret* (“a more reliable shaft on his undefeated groin than a young tree that clings to hills,” 12:19), the speaker admits he is not a *firmus iuvenus* (“a firm young man,” 12.3) and as the addressee claims, the speaker is *langues* (“limp,” 12.14).

This presentation reads *barrus* in Horace’s *Satires* against its usage in this instance in *Epode* 12 to reveal a common thread of symbolism. When *barrus* is read as connoting unreliable ability, that first line in *Epode* 12 becomes a double-dealing insult that implicates both speaker and the woman addressed. The word *barrus* insults the woman’s hypersexuality, but also the speaker’s hyposexuality, or his own impotence. An implication of this reading is that it shows Horace’s self-mocking style that offers a critique of the speaker himself, as though he is the true elephant in the room.

Bibliography

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