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Horror in the fifth Epode of Horace

Introduction

In *Epode* 5, Horace presents a grim scene in which a group of witches has captured an unnamed boy. They plan to use his body parts to create a potent love potion. Much debate around *Epode* 5 focuses on its tone and to which genre the poem belongs. Quite often, scholars look to the centre of the poem, the description of the witch Canidia and her attempts to enchant her desired lover Varus, to determine the tone and genre. Thus, Robert Carruba claimed that the mood is dark humour, while Lindsay Watson concludes that the poem is a predominantly humorous mocking of Canidia and her art. These interpretations may be correct, but the process seems fundamentally flawed; it relies upon reading in an unnatural way, moving from the centre outwards and allowing the humour and mocking therein to influence the beginning and the end. Yet there are perhaps reasons to avoid this tempering; as we will see, the beginning is full of anxiety, for the boy and audience both, and the finale is too disturbing and complex to be moderated by the humour of Canidia's ineptitude. As I argue, Horace varies the tone of the poem in order to heighten our horror in the finale.

As I mentioned, a great deal of consideration is given to Canidia. Some posit that we could learn much about the epode if only we knew more about her. That she appears elsewhere in Horace (such as *Epode* 17 and *Satires* 1.8) aids in this search for her identity and relationship to Horace, but her appearance in other poems appears to impair the discussion on *Epode* 5. The other works in which she is portrayed are consistently recognized as humorous. As a result, the tone of these poems has influenced the discussion on the fifth. Yet if we are searching for the tone of *Epode* 5, I would elevate the role of the boy and the natural progression of the poem. Canidia, I argue, is only there to distract us, to force our guard down before the real horror of the poem is revealed.

The poem opens and closes with two powerful scenes that illustrate a remarkable change in the most

sympathetic character. Although it is possible that the audience views the middle section as humorous, it is difficult to imagine that the witch's victim sees it in that light; the victim does not appear to consider the matter jest worthy, even though he is the primary witness to the failures and absurdity of Canidia.

The boy's confusion and fear

At the outset of the poem, and here I direct your attention to handout 1, the boy, stripped of his garments, stands before the witches and questions what is happening around him (5.1 – 4).He is confused by the commotion (*tumultus*) and by the looks that the witches cast upon him (*quid omnium vultus in unum me truces?*) as he asks: “By the gods in heaven, what is this commotion and why are all these wild faces turned upon me?”. He singles out one of the witches, presumably Canidia, and begs her (*precor*) by her children, if she has ever given birth” – which she has not, and thus the plea is in vain. He continues his plea, begging by means of his cloak, thus signifying his youth and his status, which we may have expected could protect him from such terror. The boy invokes Jupiter, promising that the god will certainly condemn this act (*improbaturum haec Iovem,* 8). He finishes by again questioning the visage of Canidia, asking her why she looks upon him like a stepmother or a wild beast that is threatened by a spear (*noverca* or *ferro belua*, 9 - 10).

The boy thus appeals to pity and, though perhaps to a lesser extent, divine law. He is defenceless before the witches and, what may be more pitiful, is not aware what the witches intend for him. The opening of the poem features a great deal of uncertainty for the child: where is he? Who holds him captive? What is the intent of his captors? Horace concludes this opening by drawing out the pitiful aspect, as the boy ceases his prayers (*constitit*), which were spoken with a trembling lip (*questus ore*, 11).

Thus, Horace introduces the audience to the poem without any indication of what is about to occur. The first phrase in the poem is a prayer from the boy. He makes no mention to whom he may be, what upsets him or who has forced him here. The audience is similarly unsure of the situation: when the boy asks "what is this tumult?" we may well ask the same thing. When the boy questions why the witches look at him so, we stand alongside him, trembling, awaiting some indication of what will come. We eventually learn that the subject of this impassioned plea is a boy, yet Horace does not give to the boy such individuality as to exclude the possibility that any *puer* could have such misfortune. Thus Horace creates a high degree of uncertainty, which causes the tension that we the spectators and the boy experience. At first, we are unsure of why we are even at the scene and who the speaker is. When we learn that the speaker is an unnamed boy, our fears are alleviated only somewhat; we can imagine that the boy could well have been our own child, or perhaps even us ourselves. Thus, when we consider the topic of genre at the outset of the poem, we are certainly not inclined to consider that this poem is jocular. The beginning of the poem is disturbing, full of tension, and we advance to the next section of the poem anticipating answers to our basic questions, still uncertain what is happening.

The Witches

(Here I refer to handout, section 2) When we finally take the first proper name that is not invoked in prayer (15), we find that the boy is a victim of Canidia, who is suitably described for her witch-status when Horace tells us that her hair and head are entwined with vipers. Subsequent witches follow in the painting of the scene: high-girt Sagana, who sprinkles water from lake Avernus through the whole house and bristles with her rough hair like a sea-urchin or a charging boar; Veia, who is deterred by no sense of conscience as she huffs and puffs while digging the hole; and, according to

Naples and all the neighbouring towns, Folia was there.[1]She, who is described as having manly desires, can bewitch the stars and moon and snatch them from the sky. We finally learn what the witches intend for the boy: he is to be buried and forced to gaze upon a meal that he will never be able to eat. Here his marrow, liver and eyes will dry, and the witches will use these parts in a love potion. The witches emerge are horrible hags, and the amplification of their awfulness should make us wonder if Horace is in fact satirizing the witches. If at this point in the poem we consider it to be a parody or attack, we can see how Horace establishes the tension in the opening and, when we are at the height of that particular emotion, his defusing of the tension is that much greater when we finally see the boy‟s captors.

If we accept that Horace is now lightening the tone of the poem, then it is clear that he continues this tact when Canidia speaks. And here I draw your attention to handout item number 3. For while it may be questionable whether Horace‟s description of the witches lampoons its objects through its exaggeration, it seems more certain that Canidia's speech parodies her (or witchcraft), primarily by illustrating her failed attempts. Her speech is full of confidence: she invokes Night and Diana[2] who rule the silent times when the arcane rites occur. She is seemingly secure that they will help, calling them the loyal witnesses of her deeds.[3] She refers to her target as he who is anointed with an unguent. In fact, she claims that never before has she made such a perfect potion (59 – 60). Yet as we see in handout 4, the spell fails suddenly and completely (61). She asks, bewildered, what has happened? She wonders why her potions – so perfect a moment ago – do not work. The comedic moment is clear: Horace has created an elaborate scene and Canidia, bursting with confidence, fails spectacularly.

Yet as we see in handout item 5, she quickly regains her form, (a *venefica scientiora*, 71 – 72). „Aha! He walks freed by the incantation of a more knowledgable witch!” she cries, thus placing the blame for the failure of the spell not on herself, but upon a witch greater than herself. At this point, she promises to prepare a stronger potion against which Varus will not be able to stand (77 - 82).

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[1] She was notorious in the Naples region.
[2] Probably just means the dea triformis Selene-Artemis-Hecate, a composite being regularly addressed in magical texts.
[3] only the lesser gods, such as the Penates and the Lares, could be so counted upon.

Before I move to the final part of the poem, I would call attention to how Horace has distracted us from the plight of the boy. Canidia‟s ineptitude naturally draws our attention; she has achieved nothing, and stands there, comically, waiting for an event that will never happen To the audience, she is now powerless; we have no reason to fear her. Yet it is uncertain whether we should project this fearless state back to the boy, physically held hostage by the witches. When we witness the incompetence of Canidia, we may believe that nothing horrible will occur. Yet it should be obvious that her initial potion was bound to fail; the narrative made it so that it could be no other way. Otherwise, we are forced into considering, had the first potion succeeded, whether Canidia would have released the boy. If we imagine that her first attempt had any chance at success, there would be several questions: why bring the boy at all; why not test the potion before going to the risk of capturing a Roman and forcing poor Veia to dig a hole (groaning as she does, 31). Rather, that the boy is there at all means that her initial attempt must fail. As soon as we know that she is going to attempt to the lure back Varus without the boy's innards, we may hope for the child but we must be somewhat aware that the boy is there for a reason in the narrative. I suggest that the final speech of the child should indicate whether or not *he* still fears the bungling witches.

4. The Boy‟s Final Speech and Transformation

(Here I refer to handout, section 6). Finally, after observing the failure of Canidia, the boy returns as the focus of the poem. He has been uncertain how to break the silence (*dubius unde rumperet silentium*, 84), but now the boy gathers himself and casts curses at the witches. As Horace tells us, the puer no longer (*iam non*) attempts to soften (*lenire*) the witches; and rather than beg, he threatens with “Thyestean curses”. He begins his curse (in line:) by acknowledging that potions may mix right and wrong, but also asserting that there is a power that not even the witches can turn aside, namely “human

retribution" (*venena miscent fas nefasque, non valent / convertere humanam vicem*). Further, he promises that he will attack them with curses and that his haunting cannot be called off by sacrifices (89 – 90). He states that, although he is doomed to die, he will return to the sight of the witches much more terrible than before, as fury (91 – 92) at night.[4] He promises that he, a ghost, will attack their faces with his crooked claws, a power that is granted to the shades. Sitting on their breasts, he will steal away their sleep by terrifying them. "The crowd, attacking the witches with stones street by street will crush them. The boy then foretells a horrible fate, that their unburied limbs will be scattered by wolves and birds (99 – 100). Finally, he calls attention to his parents, noting that they will be witness to the spectacle, and recalling the sad fate that, in inverse of the regular course of human life, *they* will outlive him.

The Audience

We may be surprised at the alteration in the boy as he changes tact, once he realises that he can no longer soften (*lenire*) the witches. It is possible that the witches require silence from their victim in order to complete the spell (*and in this we may think of Aeschylys' Iphigenia gagged to prevent a curse from being uttered*) and that this moment represents the boy seeking a way to free himself. Yet if this is an attempt to escape the curse that he spews forth to free himself does not strike us as a conditional statement, threatening that unless they release him they will suffer the horrible fate that he foresees. The speech moves from a promise that he will return, because their magic is powerless over *humanam vicem*, to a prophetic foretelling of the witches‟ deaths.

At this point, we may also recall that we expected to see some indication of the witches‟ perceived threat in this speech. We must note that the boy does not comment upon their blunder; in

[4] Furor is the male equivalent of Furia, but there is also a suggestion that the boy will hound them to madness. Prop. 1.18.15 and Verg. Ecl. 10.38

fact, he admits that they *do* have a certain power to mix *fas* and *nefas*. To the boy, the witches‟ power to kill him is real and actual. What he does assert is that they do not have any power over the divine affairs of Jupiter, specifically retribution.

Throughout this speech, the audience is privy to the transformation of the boy from harmless to harmful, from the weaker to the stronger. What is striking is that we receive little notice that this change is about to occur. At one point before he speaks, the boy is *dubius,* as he has been the whole poem; but at the next instance, as soon as he opens his mouth, he receives some sort of divine inspiration and calls down curses upon the witches. In the boy's final speech, there is neither doubt nor fear, though there may be a final touch of pity as he laments that his parents will outlive him. Rather than with doubt, the audience is confronted with a sort of horrifying brashness from the boy. He does not appear to fear death; he does, in fact, appear to embrace it, anticipating his revenge.

I would briefly make two comparisons that illustrate how startling the boy‟s transformation is. As a character who curses his foe, the boy may remind us of Ariadne in Catullus 64, invoking the wrath of heaven as Theseus sails away without her. Yet Catullus depicts the outcome of Ariadne‟s curse, leaving no doubt that divine vengeance strikes Theseus. As the audience of *Epode* 5, we receive no such explicit insurance from the poet that there will be vengeance on the witches. Further, Ariadne is, for better or for worse, rescued from her island of despair by Bacchis. Conversely, we are left entirely uncertain as to the fate of the boy though, he appears to believe that he is about to die. Thus Horace concludes the poem as he opened it, with a haunting sense of uncertainty.

As a character who transforms from weak to strong in the course of a narrative (thereby enabling his acceptance of death), we may compare the boy to Seneca‟s Astyanax from the *Troades*. As we see in handout, item 7, Astyanax, who is forced up a tower from which the Greeks will throw him down, is at first depicted as a young fearful bull, asking for his mother‟s pity. Andromache questions why he clings to her breast and seizes the vain protection of his mother‟s hands. She compares him to

the timid young bull when the roar of a lion is heard. Yet he eventually takes comfort from his mother‟s belief of a blessed, heroic afterlife in which he will exist by the side of his father. As we see in handout item 7, she has encouraged him to go free and look upon the free Trojans and, at the end of her speech in lines 801, has told him rush to his father‟s side.

And thus at the end of the play (and I draw your attention to handout, item 8) the prince becomes the threatening and bold offspring of a great beast (lines 1091 – 1098,) and leaps to his death willingly. “As he stood on the height of the tower, he turned his keen gaze here and there, fearless in his heart. As the small and young offspring of some great beast, not yet able to be ferocious with his teeth, he still threatens and tests his vain bites and swells in his spirit; thus the boy, although caught in the hands of the enemy, was boldly proud” and finally “ By his own will he leaped into the midst of Priam‟s kingdom.” Astynax, in contrast to our *puer* of poem 5, accepts his death because he envisions a heroic afterlife for himself, seated by his father – a life considerably better than what now awaits him on earth. Our boy has no such idyllic hope. His only satisfaction will be if he returns from death as a terrible fury; there is no blessed afterlife for him.

In sum, I have tried to stress the importance of reading the poem as presented, working from beginning to end and in the process elevating the boy‟s position in the poem. The start and the finale are rather remarkable in that they feature an incredible change of character. That the centre of the poem may contain a mocking attack is possible, and even likely, but we should be cautious against allowing the centre to overflow its set area. I maintain that Canidia‟s appearance is there to force us to relax after the tense beginning. She is a distraction, meant to draw our attention away from the real focus of the poem. When we then reach the finale and the dark tone returns, we see that this movement along tones has heightened our sense of horror.