

Aging Women and Aging Men: Lydia in Horace's 1.25

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Ancient authors are not known for their sympathy towards women. The poet Horace in particular is usually seen as less interested in women and less sensitive to their concerns than other poets such as Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid. The subgroup within Horace's "women poems" most vulnerable to accusations of chauvinism is perhaps the collection of odes addressed to aging women, 1.25, 3.15, and 4.13, which attack their addressees with the accusation that they have outlived the possibility of being attractive to the poet. The portrait of Lydia in Horace 1.25 is particularly harsh, and responses to this poem have accordingly been difficult. Nisbet and Hubbard, for instance, dismiss Ode 1.25 with the assessment that, "in spite of its conventionalism and inhumanity, this is a good poem," yet further describing it as "ferocious" and "savage."¹ Ronnie Ancona, while rejecting both uncomplicated disgust at and uncomplicated assent to the poem's values, still sees it as a poem in which the male lover uses temporality as a tool to raise himself above the beloved.² This is not a view that lacks either for evidence or for adherents, and it cannot be easily dismissed. This view, however, is one that unnecessarily reduces the complexity of the poem's perspectives. In the following pages, I examine Ode 1.25 in detail, creating a reading informed by comparisons with passages from Horace's predecessor Catullus and with related passages elsewhere in the *Odes* where these are relevant. Michael Putnam, in his book *Poetic Interplay: Catullus and Horace*, argues that while Horace only mentions the poet Catullus once by name, echoes of Catullan text pervade his work and add an additional layer to the complexity of

¹ R. G. M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *Horace: Odes Book 1* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 291.

² Ronnie Ancona, *Time and the Erotic in Horace's Odes* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 30, 22.

the *Odes*.³ My approach is not only informed by this work, but also by another idea that echoes within a single book of the *Odes*, which is equally important and revealing. Ode 1.5, by my reading, is neither ferocious nor savage, nor is the speaker allowed to remain entirely untouched. Ode 1.25, when read within the context of Book 1 as a whole, reveals a deep sympathy for the figure of Lydia. Moreover, the relationship between Lydia's experiences and the poet's own further move this poem past mockery into an extension of imaginative sympathy.

Horace 1.25

Parcius iunctas quatiunt fenestras
lactibus crebris iuvenes protervi,
Nec tibi somnos adimunt, amatque
lanua limen,

Less and less frequently the brash youths rattle
Your joined windows with frequent tossed pebbles,
Nor do they take your slumbers from you
And your door loves the threshold

Quae prius multum facilis movebat
Cardines. Audis minus et minus iam:
"Me tuo longas pereunte noctes
Lydia dormis?"

Which formerly very easily moved
The hinges. Less and less often now you hear it:
"With me perishing for you through the long nights,
O Lydia, are you able to sleep?"

Invicem moechos anus arrogantis
Flebis in solo levis angiportu,
Thracio bacchante magis sub inter-
Lunia vento,

In your turn, a light old woman, you will weep
For the arrogant adulterers in a lonely alleyway,
With the Thracian wind raging more than usual,
Under a moonless sky,

Cum tibi flagrans amor et libido,
Quae solet matres furiare equorum,
Saeviet circa iecur ulcerosum,
Non sine questu,

While, for you, raging love and desire,
Such as are accustomed to enrage mares
Are savage to your ulcerous liver,
Not without complaint

Laeta quod pubes hedera virenti
Gaudeat pulla magis atque myrto,
Aridas fronds hiemis sodali
Dedicet Euro.⁴

That bright youth rejoices at blooming ivy
Rather than drab myrtle and that
It dedicates dry leaves to the East wind,
Companion of winter.

The poem begins with the familiar scene of the mistress' doorstep.⁵ However, it is clear from the outset of this poem that the female addressee is not the expected mistress. The first two poems addressed to

³ Michael C. J. Putnam, *Poetic Interplay: Catullus and Horace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1.

⁴ All texts of Horace in this paper are taken from Daniel Garrison's *Horace: Epodes and Odes, a New Annotated Latin Edition*. All translations are the author's own.

women in this book of the odes, 1.5 and 1.8, are addressed to women, Pyrrha and Lydia, who are other men's lovers; while the poet himself is not courting their favor, they still clearly are defined in the poem as the objects of male desire.⁶ In 1.11, 1.16, and 1.23, Horace is writing to women who either appear to fulfill or who are invited to fulfill the role of mistress or *docta puella*, whose song will grace the symposium. All the women, in fact, addressed in the odes preceding 1.25 are portrayed as attractive objects of male attention. In this context, the later Lydia's age strikes an especially dissonant note, and Horace opens the first line with the word *parcius*, "less and less," painfully emphasizing her deserted condition. This immediate disclosure of her decreasing attractiveness within the structure of the poem mimics the way time will betray her within the "reality" of the poem. Just as she will not be able to pretend to own the youth and beauty that are inevitably leaving her and stave off the loss of love, Horace, by locating Lydia's decreasing attractiveness in the first word of the poem, mercilessly prevents her from even briefly masquerading as sought-after to the reader.

The stanza is not free from the language of love, however. Horace presents the reader with a doorway that "loves the threshold" and *iunctas fenestras* which evoke the word *coniunx*, "spouse," and the "joining-together" that love and marriage provide. Horace shifts the affection present in the stanza from human interactions to interactions between the components of Lydia's house, emphasizing still more her increasing isolation. This isolation is particularly evident in the lineation of lines three and four: after the statements of Lydia's loneliness, line three ends with *amatque*, conjuring up the image of a human lover. The pause of the line break immediately following allows the reader to maintain that impression briefly before the next line makes it clear that this love is limited to the door and threshold. By personifying the physical elements of her house, the poet emphasizes the complete absence of human companionship for Lydia. Ancona's suggestions that *parcius* secondarily modifies *iunctas* as well

⁵ cf. Horace 3.10, 3.26.6-9, Catullus 67, Propertius 1.16.

⁶ 1.13, also addressed to Lydia, conforms to this pattern, though Horace's suggestion that Lydia should reject her current lover in favor of a more harmonious union seems to constitute an implicit invitation.

as *quatiunt*, and that Lydia is both less sought after and “more open to [her lovers’] advances,” no longer steadfastly barricading herself within the house, is well taken and anticipates the action of the following stanzas.⁷

In the second stanza, the poet reiterates the inevitability of Lydia’s aging and her loss of beauty, with *minus et minus*, “less and less.”⁸ This statement, though it addresses Lydia’s present, reaches into the future as well; she has become less sought-after, and this process will inexorably continue. The poet assumes the clarity of a god or of time itself, predicting her fall with complete assurance. Moreover, the bluntness of the statement does not seem overconfident; the reader accepts that Horace speaks with time’s authority and that this is simply one of time’s harsh realities. While the complaint of the young men ironically foreshadows Lydia’s later condition, the ironies tell as much against the melodramatic and self-absorbed claims of young male lovers as they do against the beloved ravaged by time. The reader readily assumes that these young men are relatively well-off, like the young lovers Horace addresses in other poems.⁹ Serenading women late into the night is a luxury that belongs to those not significantly exhausted by their labors at that hour. It seems unlikely that any of the *exclusi amatores* will suffer serious physical or even emotional damage. Lydia is replaceable in her old age, and probably was so even in her youth, if the wide variety of beautiful and musical young women named in the odes says anything about female interchangeability. Their language is chilling, however, in view of the fact that Lydia is much more in real danger of perishing than any of these young men. The madness of the young lover is trumped by the lonelier and more damaging madness of the abandoned beloved. Horace’s care in foregrounding her desertion ensures that the reader is fully conscious of these ironies when reading the formulaic complaint. The structure of the poem’s initial lines allows the reader to align himself with Lydia rather than the importunate lover.

⁷ Ancona, 24-25.

⁸ Horace, *Odes*, 1.25.6.

⁹ For example, in book 1 of the *Odes*, 1.9, 1.27, 1.29, and 1.33 are all addressed to young men well-off enough to be present at the symposium.

While Horace alleges that Lydia's sufferings come to her *invicem*, in return for all the suffering she has caused her lovers earlier, this claim, like the words of the complaining lover, is heavily undercut by the rest of the poem. This stanza carries particular echoes of Catullus. As Michael Putnam describes, Horace points to this with his use of the heavily significant words *angiportus*, "alleyway" and *moechus*, "adulterer."¹⁰ "*Angiportu*" seems to indicate a reference to Catullus 58, in which Catullus laments Lesbia's promiscuity, and "*moechos*" to Catullus 11, in which he does the same. The ethos of the poem seems also to find a distinct heritage in the Catullan Carmen 8, in which he addresses a string of rhetorical questions to Lesbia, "*Quae tibi manet vita?/ Quis nunc te adibit?...*"¹¹ intended to convince her—and himself—that she will be miserable if he finally turns from her. Horace's Lydia is now apparently in the position that Catullus imagined for Lesbia; however, she suffers this abandonment not through the desertion of a singular, all-important lover, but as the inevitable consequence of aging.

Catullus 58

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa.
illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam
plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,
nunc in quadriuis et angiportis
glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.

Catullus 58

Caelius, our Lesbia, that Lesbia,
That Lesbia whom alone Catullus
Loved more than himself and all his own,
Now at the cross-roads and in the alleyways
Peels the descendents of great-souled Remus.

Catullus 11.15-24

pauca nuntiate meae puellae
non bona dicta.
cum suis vivat valeatque moechis,
quos simul complexa tenet trecentos,
nullum amans vere, sed identidem omnium
ilia rumpens;
nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,
qui illius culpa cecidit uelut prati
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam
tactus aratro est.¹²

Catullus 11.15-24

Announce to my girl
A few unpleasant words:
May she live and prosper, together with her lovers
Whom she holds, three hundred at a time in her embrace
Loving none of them truly, but again and again breaking
The loins of all;
Nor let her look for, as before, my love,
Which her crime has cut down, just like a flower
Of the furthest meadow, after it
Is touched by the passing plow.

¹⁰ Putnam, 11.

¹¹ "What sort of life remains for you? Who will come to you now?"

¹² My text of these poems is taken from Daniel H. Garrison's *The Student's Catullus* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989). Translations are my own.

Putnam mainly draws a distinction between how the two poets handle time—Catullus’ “brisk distinction between then and now” and the “Janus-like present in the life of Lydia that glances at once forward and backward in time.”¹³ However, this poem’s allusions to its predecessors also create a contrast between feminine guilt and suffering in the poems. The use of the Catullan *carmina* conjures up a specific paradigm of feminine guilt and punishment. In Catullus 58 and 11, Lesbia is charged not only with unfaithfulness, but also with a level of promiscuity that is excessive and disgusting. He uses highly graphic language in each poem to describe her behavior. Lesbia, in 58, “now at the crossroads and in the alleyways peels the descendents of great-hearted Remus,” while in 11 she “holds three hundred adulterers at once in her embrace, truly loving none, but over and over breaking the loins of them all.” In these poems, Catullus enacts a sort of disfigurement of Lesbia, who, morally corrupt, can no longer be allowed to remain beautiful to the reader. In poem 58 in particular the grotesqueness of the image seems to transform Lesbia into some sort of monster, a hundred-handed Briareus, able to clasp three hundred lovers at once.

While Horace’s references allow the reader to be aware of these echoes, his choice to not use these motifs more strongly in this poem emphasizes the difference between his Lydia and Catullus’s Lesbia. Catullus seems to indict Lesbia for being disinterested in him in poem 2. While she can easily find comfort for her sorrow so that “her heavy passion subsides,” he cannot so lightly dismiss the cares of his “sad spirit.”¹⁴ Similarly, in poem 8 Catullus characterizes the relationship as one in which she flies and he chases after her.¹⁵ It is unclear whether Catullus’s Lesbia suffers loss of love at all, since the poet portrays himself as devoted throughout the whole corpus, despite his attempts to break away.¹⁶ If she does, however, as he imagines in poem 8, she does so because she is allegedly guilty of gross

¹³ Putnam, 15.

¹⁴ Catullus 2.7-8, 10.

¹⁵ Catullus 8.10.

¹⁶ While Catullus in the epigrams is ambivalent and critical of Lesbia, he nonetheless consistently portrays himself as in love with her. This is apparent most famously in poem 85, *odi et amo*, but also in 70, 75, 76, and 87.

unfaithfulness to one lover, embracing three hundred adulterers at once, and is also guilty of some degree of apathy towards him. Horace's Lydia, on the other hand, suffers this punishment of desertion without ever having clearly committed the crime of unfaithfulness. Not located within a family or social world, Lydia seems to be a courtesan, and the fact that she has *moechi* can hardly be construed as shocking. Unlike Lesbia, she is not weighted down with a history of graphically perverse sexuality; all the reader perceives in Lydia's case are the commonplaces of the *paraclausithyron*: the sleeping mistress and the importunate lover.¹⁷ While the *angiportus* is the setting of Lesbia's crime and emphasizes her unnatural promiscuity, in Horace's ode, the alley is no longer a scene of even tawdry pleasures; rather, it emphasizes Lydia's place on the outside. This setting is particularly isolating because the reader has already been presented with Lydia's house. Horace has, in fact, taken care to present it to the reader in some detail, mentioning the windows, the doorstep, and the door, complete with hinges.

Lydia weeps in the alleyways, a *levis* old woman. The use of the word *levis* here evokes the dry leaves that describe her at the end of the poem—she is dried-up and thin—but also makes her seem more fragile and pitiful. She, a frail and distraught old woman, is no match for “the Northern winds, reveling more on a moonless night.” *Levis* also carries connotations of fickleness or inconstancy. For instance, in Catullus 61, the speaker reassures the bride, telling her that her intended husband is not a “*levis... vir*,” a fickle man, who will be unfaithful to her. The character overtones of the word *levis* ironically drive home further the tragic realities of Lesbia's situation: it is her male lovers, not she, who are fickle. In this stanza, in fact, she is lamenting the reality that the *moechi* have moved on. Lydia is unchanged in her desires and expectations, and it is the mutability of the inconstant world that undoes her. Horace's use of the word *bacchante* here is also suggestive, as it emphasizes the extent of Lydia's

¹⁷ If this poem and the other two poems in this book of odes addressed to Lydia are meant to be imagined as all directed toward the same woman, admittedly she has slightly more to answer for. Even if this is the case, however, the tone of 1.8 is amused and friendly rather than accusing, and 1.13 appeals to her as the better partner in an “uneven bond.” Distracting one's lover from manly pursuits and being foolish in one's choice are, at any rate, the faults of an unwise woman rather than a depraved one.

exile: the *moechi* are presumably happy and warm in some other woman's house, and even the North Wind is rejoicing. She alone is helpless prey to the conditions of the physical and social weather. The participle *bacchante*, however, makes the idea of the bacchant an inescapable association for the reader. The bacchant seems another half-model for Lydia. While these followers of Dionysus are certainly associated with madness and extremes of passion, they, at any rate, travel in a troop. The basic level of companionship they experience contrasts tragically with Lydia's loneliness; she is here presented as deeply isolated, weeping not in the house which the reader has already heard described, but in the alleyways.

Perhaps the most demeaning moment for Lydia within this poem occurs in line 15, in which her *flagrans amor et libido* is compared to the lust of mares in heat. She is profoundly dehumanized; here her passions, like those of the erring Lesbia, are characterized as bestial. Moreover, the circumlocution *matres...equorum* instead of mares further emphasizes Lydia's increasing age.¹⁸ However, animals are commonly compared to women within the odes. It is important to note, however, that comparison to an animal is not always a negative mark in Horace's moral schema. Chloe is a fawn, *inuleo*, in ode 1.23, while the girl in 2.5 is a heifer, a *iuvenco*; in both poems, the figure reflects the youth and delicacy of the young woman. In 3.15, the addressee's daughter carries herself as a desirous she-goat, *lascivae caprae*, in contrast to her aging mother. While the daughter is engaging in conduct natural for her age, the mother is too old for such things. Certainly comparison to a raging mare is less flattering than comparison to a young heifer, with its accompanying associations of freshness and fertility. Still, for Lydia, it is not her desires themselves that are culpable or shameful; she becomes the object of contempt because her desires are not aligned with the reality of her age and decreasing attractiveness.

Furthermore, Horace counteracts the distancing simile of the first few lines in the second half of the stanza. His depiction of Lydia as suffering from an *iecur ulcerosum* draws the poem into conversation

¹⁸ Ancona, 29.

with ode 13 of the same book, in which the dominating figure also suffers from liver problems and which also contains a woman named Lydia. Horace 1.13 here evokes Catullus 51, which itself imitates and translates Sappho 31. In both poems, the speaker experiences intense emotion at the sight of the beloved, specifically the sight of the beloved as belonging to another. However, Sappho and Catullus's speakers view both the woman and her male companion as objects of wonder—*Ille mi par esse deo videtur,/ ille, si fas est, superare divos*—while Horace is spurred to fierce jealousy as Lydia praises her new lover to him.¹⁹ Sappho and Catullus's speakers feel passive and paralyzing symptoms—they cannot speak, they cannot see, and a thin flame runs under their flesh.²⁰ Horace's persona, on the other hand, turns pale, as Sappho does, but also sheds a tear and primarily suffers from a *fervens...iecur*, an ailment that more closely parallels Lydia's "symptoms" than anything described in the poem's Sapphic model.²¹ Just as Lydia suffers the agonies of burning love, *flagrans amor*, the poet himself, in 1.13, is disclosed by his tears to be worn down by "*lentis...ignibus*," slow fires.²²

The connection between Lydia and Horace is strengthened by the fact that the speaker of 13, presumably Horace, finds himself in a situation parallel to that of Lydia in 1.25: himself middle-aged, he becomes violently jealous at the sight of a woman, also named Lydia, infatuated with a new lover. Horace seems to indicate that Telephus is specifically a younger man. The characteristics Lydia praises him for, his *cervicem roseam* and *cerea...bracchia* stress the youthful beauty of his body; as Garrison states, "[h]is complexion is that of a very young man."²³ Like Pyrrha's lover in 1.5, Telephus is described as a boy, *puer*, and his age also seems to be reflected in his lack of emotional and physical control: he strikes Lydia in drunken quarrels and marks her skin.²⁴ Since the speaker of this poem is not only a

¹⁹ Catullus, 51.1-2.

²⁰ Sappho 31.9-12; Catullus 51.9-12.

²¹ Horace 1.13.4.

²² Horace 1.13.8.

²³ Horace 1.13.2; David Garrison, *Horace: Epodes and Odes* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 223.

²⁴ Horace 1.5.1; Horace 1.13.11.

critical observer but also a deeply emotional one, it seems reasonable to foreground this poem in a prior relationship between the speaker and the woman Lydia. The speaking figure within the poem has been replaced with the new lover, Telephus, for reasons that are not stated but could plausibly include Telephus' youth and impetuousness. Horace's situation in this poem has much of the same distress as Lydia's in 1.25. He bears the same sense of having grown old and being unable to stop a former lover from finding a new and younger partner. His final exhortation to Lydia to forgo Telephus' lip-bruising affection for a more tranquil and harmonious bond mirrors the complaint that Lydia utters at the end of 1.25: young men's affections are predicated on the appearance of the love object, and women are rejected as they grow old. Both Horace and Lydia experience this rejection and both react to it with emotional distress.

The women in *Odes* 1.13 and 1.24 are both named Lydia, and the woman who seems to reject Horace in the earlier poem finds herself rejected in the final one. It seems, therefore, at least possible, to view 1.25 as a poem exacting revenge. However, unlike a similar situation in 4.13, Horace does not express satisfaction or state that his prayer has been answered in Ode 1.25. He, in fact, does not record his own emotional response at all. Similarly, in Ode 1.13, Horace does not warn Lydia of future desertion or in fact seem particularly at odds with her. His point seems to be rather that her hypothetical future distress will be caused by the unreliability of her partner than that she herself has done something that should incur punishment. While Lydia's sufferings are more extreme in character, they fundamentally share the nature of Horace's own torment at the hands of middle-aged jealousy in 1.13.

This note of sympathy is reinforced by the vegetal imagery with which Horace ends the poem. Lydia complains that young men prefer green ivy to dull myrtle and have no use at all for the withered leaf. Lydia, poised as she is between a youthful past and an aged future, would seem to correspond to the dull myrtle, scorned but still intact. Intriguingly, the myrtle is chosen as Horace's poetic emblem in Ode 1.38. In this final poem of the first book of odes, Horace forbids his young slave to seek out the late-

blooming rose for him, preferring the simplicity of myrtle as more suitable to them both. This is hardly an encoded declaration of love. However, it does present a very real tension of values which bears on 1.25. While Pyrrha in 1.5 might well be the feminine emblem of the alluring rose, and in fact meets her lover *multa...in rosa*, on a bed of many roses, Horace has long since ceased to worship at her shrine. Pyrrha is as inconstant as the sea, and he informs us that he has already made his sacrifice at the sea-god's altar, hanging up his dripping, shipwrecked clothes. In Ode 33, by contrast, the poet narrates that though a "better" love was offered, the freed woman Myrtale held him *grata...compede*, "with a pleasing fetter." The system which penalizes Lydia is the one which pursues the rose's gaudy and brief beauty. While Horace records her pain without regret, he also distances himself from the demanding appetites which cause her pain. Horace himself is a veteran of rose love-affairs and now chooses, as Lydia will be forced to do as well, to forego the summer rose and be contented with the more attainable myrtle.

Horace 1.25 is not simply a savage attack on Lydia, but combines its censure with a deep sense of sympathy. Horace's echoes of Catullan language pit Lydia favorably against Catullus' Lesbia, while other details link Lydia with the poet himself.

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