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Going Soft on Canidia:
The Epodes, an Unappreciated Classic

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Written during the early years of Augustus’s consolidation of power at Rome (the period sometimes, though misleadingly, called the beginning of the empire), many of Horace’s Epodes display an aggressive combination of sexual, political, and social humor with connections reaching back to the archaic period of Greek poetry. Among the objects of invective in the collection is a certain Canidia, who is attacked in Epodes 3, 5, and 17 (she is attacked, also, in Satires 1.8, 2.1, and 2.8). In two other Epodes, 8 and 12, Horace writes about his own impotence, caused, he says, by the agency of an unnamed old woman (anus). I suggest that this anus can be associated with Canidia. If that’s true, the consequence is that Epodes 3, 5, 8, 12, and 17 make a single sequence in which attacks on the putative other are inseparable from confessions of impotence, both sexual and otherwise. Canidia, the ultimate target of Horace’s iambic venom, is not the symbol of his poetic power

2 Poems 5 and 17 are among the longest of the collection.
(as Lycambes is for Archilochus and Bupalus for Hipponax) so much as the ironic reflection of his powerlessness—symbolized, here, by his castration. The collection ends with Horace’s sudden surrender to the superior power of Canidia’s *mala carmina* and her declaration that she will not refrain from taking her vengeance lest all her power be held in vain (17.37–41, 74–81). This network of associations, in turn, extends beyond the series to the other poems in the collection, which are linked to it through a variety of textual and thematic echoes as well as through direct juxtaposition.

Using this network of themes as my guide, I argue that Horace uses irony in the *Epodes* both to discipline those he sees as inimical to the emerging political order and to create a sphere of indeterminacy and hence potential freedom (*libertas*), for himself and ultimately for the self writ large. In seeking to discipline others, he follows his iambic predecessors Archilochus and Hipponax (but also Lucilius and Catullus). But he goes beyond them by creating a sphere of indeterminacy or multivalence, delimiting an interior space that makes possible the cultivation of a private ethical self, which is fundamentally different from the iambic personae of his archaic predecessors or from the literary construct of Callimachus’s *Iambi*. This is a self that, while intimately connected to its symbolic community through ties of patronage, friendship, and politics, always finds itself at one remove from that community, a self that folds back on itself to create a space of reflection and difference.

Despite being poems about impotence, poems 8 and 12 feature some of the most violent invective of the entire collection.

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If Horace’s invective against Canidia, the only woman to receive such sustained abuse in the *Epodes*, and indeed in the entire Horatian corpus, can be read as an inverted reflection of his own *impotencia*, then, I would contend, every moment of other-directed, disciplinary irony also has the potential to become a moment of self-ironization in which the aim and object of the invective—in its very separateness from the speaking subject—becomes problematized in the moment of its utterance.\(^5\) Such self-ironization, in turn, establishes a necessary distance between the speaker within the poem and the speaker of the poem, forcing us to confront their lack of coincidence.\(^6\)

Moreover, poems 3, 5, 8, 12, and 17—the Canidia and impotence poems—are interlocked with a series of political poems (1, 7, 9, and 16) as well as with poem 4, a poem featuring the most explicit example of inventive irony being reflected back on the speaker himself, since it is an attack on the social climber.\(^7\) That social climber is himself a symptom of the civil discord that forms the object of the more explicitly political poems, even as in certain key respects he recalls Horace himself. The *Epodes*,


\(^6\) Thus, Joel C. Relihan contends that Horatian satire becomes a form of self-parody (“The Confessions of Persius,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 14 [1989]: 148–49). See also Maria Plaza, *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire: Laughing and Lying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169–70, 208. While this facet of Horace’s satirical work has become increasingly recognized, it has been less discussed concerning the *Epodes*.

then, while for many years the most neglected part of Horace’s corpus, show themselves to be poems of great subtlety and complexity. These poems feature some of the poet’s most explicit invective and, in the impotence poems, some of his most disturbing sexual imagery. Invective and sexual imagery are both features of the iambic tradition from Archilochus through Catullus. But in Horace’s hands that tradition also becomes a complex medium for refined artistry and ironic reflection, without losing its capacity to disturb and discomfit, even as it is adapted to the realities of a new era.\(^8\)

I should define more precisely what I mean by irony, since it is often used in a vague and imprecise manner. Quintilian at 6.2.15 defines it as a form of speech that produces an *intellectum* or “understood meaning” that is at variance (*diversum*) from what it says (*dicit*). Irony is, on this definition, the production of an *intellectum* that does not coincide with the *dictum*, and hence is dependent on the simultaneous presence of at least two distinct levels of meaning: the literal and the ironic. On the pragmatic level, the ironic statement participates in this multiplicity of meanings not simply through the observed fact that multiple possible readings can coexist within a given text, but specifically through a moment of performative self-awareness that signals a conscious act of doubling an initial literal sense with a second, divergent sense. As everyone from Quintilian to de Man recognizes, irony is the *intentional* production of multiple meanings and the ironic speaker must signal that intentionality through a rhetorical wink or nod.\(^9\) Yet this performative moment of self-consciousness, as opposed to either the *dictum* (“utterance”) to

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which it is joined or the *intellectum* (“understanding”) to which it gives rise, falls outside the signification produced by the statement per se. That moment is not a property of the words themselves. Rather, it is a property of the enunciation, of the act as performed in a given speech or textual context. In any ironic speech act, there is a gap between meaning one and meanings two, three, four, etc., which must be made explicit. The ironist, who says one thing but means another, is ultimately then the master of non-meaning, of literal nonsense, of the gaps between meanings, which must be recognized if the irony is to be perceived. Horace is, in this sense, a master ironist, precisely because there is a level at which he makes no sense.

In general terms, we may say that Horace uses irony as an other-directed disciplinary form consonant with a traditional understanding of the function of invective in the ancient world. In this usage, the moment of non-meaning becomes a form of violence, which is deployed against the other. The violence of other-directed irony is not a function of multiple meanings per se, but of the gap between those meanings, of the moment in which we say so and so is not X but really Y. But in the midst of this use, Horace also creates a zone of non-meaning or aporia that defines a new space of interiority, a gap between the public and private self, between the speaking and spoken subject, between being and seeming. This new space of interiority is ultimately coterminous with what will become the new, ideal form of elite Augustan subjectivity and, as such, comes to serve as a distant ancestor of what modernity understands as the private

Irony becomes a kind of wall that makes possible the formation of what Pierre Hadot would term, when referring to the Stoic philosophy of the imperial period, the citadel of the self. As the study of words and what they mean, philology has then always been the province of the literal. It relies on semantics, grammar, or a historical reconstruction of the horizon of expectations. Too often, it has posed the problem of meaning in the following terms: “if I had said, x, y, or z, under conditions a, b, or c, I would have meant the following.” It has assumed that meaning is straightforward and that if only we had enough of the right kinds of information, we could establish it. Implicit in that assumption is the idea that we are all the same: that the speaking subject is a constant, which is plugged into different historical and linguistic circumstances, and which within those constraints then produces universalizable intelligible meaning.

Irony, consequently, has always proved particularly challenging for philology, because the ironic speaker does not mean what he says. Thus, when confronted with irony, the first impulse of the philologist is always to try to determine what the speaker “really meant,” to reduce irony to sincerity and hence literality. I will always remember a conversation with a brilliant scholar who professed to be interested in irony. I asked him about certain famous passages in Ovid’s exilic poetry where the poet avows his undying devotion to Augustus. Some read these passages as flattery, others as irony. I posed the question to this highly intelligent and sophisticated young man, “How can you tell the difference?” All these years later, I remember his


response: “It all depends on what Ovid really meant.” He was a philologist.

But irony is always in some sense meta-philological, para-philological, or even ’pataphilological. A ’pataphilologist would read not only literal meaning, but also the nods, winks, and moments of radical non-meaning that occur in the midst of irony’s semantic plurivocity. Ironic meaning by definition produces an intellectum that is diversum from its dictum. Irony, in other words, is founded on its own internal difference, its self-division. Any reading that seeks to close that difference is inherently un-ironic, is inherently “untrue.” Irony, as Sean Gurd so eloquently put it to me (per litteras), “eats its own children.” Only a ’pataphilological perspective, at once profoundly philological in its attention to linguistic detail and deliberately perverse in its rejection of all gestures of closure, in its attention to the irreducible materiality of language, in its refusal of all reductions to the ideal and universal, to “meaning,” could do justice to irony’s cannibalistic instincts. This is the type of reading, I want to argue, that Horace’s Epodes demands.

Before examining in more detail the connections between the Canidia poems, the impotence poems, and their collective relations with the more political poems in the Epodes, I want to begin by reading Epode 3, in many ways the ironic core of the collection. Of the poems in the collection where Canidia appears by name, this one seems the least significant. It is primarily concerned with the poet’s gastric distress caused by Maecenas serving a dish heavily laced with garlic. Yet, this seemingly minor poem on an off-color subject is, in fact, of particular importance since it is the only one in which Canidia and Maecenas both appear. Thus, Poem 3, from a structural point of view, represents the nodal point where the political sequence and the Canidia/impotence poems come together.

The poem begins with an exclamation on garlic as an appropriate punishment for parricides. It is, says Horace, a potion
more noxious than Socrates’ hemlock. The hyperbole is so over the top that it is impossible to take literally. We have all eaten garlic, but few of us have died from it. Literal truth is not a viable option. Enter Canidia.

What kind of venom rages in my guts? Has viper’s blood stewed into these greens deceived me, or has Canidia trafficked in evil feasts?\(^{16}\)

While there has been much speculation about Canidia’s identity from Porphyrion to the present, some of it quite suggestive of the way this sole recurring female character in Horace’s *Epodes* and *Satires* might have been received by its initial audience, none of it is conclusive. Canidia has no identity attested outside of the Horatian corpus. Even if we assume her name represents a pseudonym for a real person — a large assumption — that person is never made clear.\(^{17}\) Canidia is a signifier without a clearly recognized signified, a kind of fantasy object who, on the linguistic level, can receive whatever meaning the poet or reader wishes to attribute to her. She is, in the end, the sum total of the poetic contexts in which she appears. Canidia’s initial role in *Epode* 3 is to serve as the object of gratuitous invective. She is the iambic target *par excellence*. There is no reason intrinsic either to the poem itself or to her extra-poetic “reality” why the name *Canidia* should be associated with poison, vipers, or severe gastric distress. Canidia did not serve or prepare the offending dish, nor was she present at the meal. If this poem were read outside the collection, you could substitute almost any name and the poem would be just as effective. If, however, we look at Canidia in the context of the lines coming before and after this passage,

16 *Quid hoc veneni saevit in praecordiis? num viperinus his cruor incocutus herbis me fefellit, an malas Canidia tractavit dapes?* (3.5–8).

17 Even if we accept Porphyrion’s identification of Canidia with Gratidia, the sole ancient evidence we have, all we are told is that she was a Neapolitan maker of ointments and a witch, in short, she is Canidia.
as well as the larger collection, a more complex and interesting set of associations appears. In many ways, Canidia functions as the placeholder of the ironic. She is the moment of joining between separate, even opposed, but nonetheless intertwined sets of meanings. It is through her presence that Horace’s impotence becomes associated with both his role as an iambic blame poet and with Maecenas as metonym for the larger political world depicted in poems 1, 7, 9, and 16.

Let us try then to describe more precisely the context in which Canidia takes her shape within this poem. If we look just a line above our quoted passage in *Epode* 3, we find the exclamation *o dura messorum ilia!* (“oh the tough guts of reapers!”; 3.4). On one level, this phrase simply acknowledges garlic as a peasant food and contrasts Horace’s refined (Callimachean) inards with the intestinal fortitude of the typical agricultural laborer. On another, however, it implies that Horace suffers from *mollitia*, the opposite of *duritia*, implying not only refined softness but also effeminacy and even impotence. This association whereby the *dura ilia* (“tough guts” but also “hard loins,” — *ilia* can mean both) of the reapers contrasts with the implied *mollia ilia* (“tender guts” or “soft loins”) of the poet provides a subtle linkage between the present text and poems 8 and 12, which, as we have already noted above, deal explicitly with sexual impotence, and which, as we will argue below, are to be read in conjunction with the Canidia poems, 3, 5, and 17. Thus, a poem whose primary object appears to be to unleash a torrent of presumably good-humored invective against Maecenas for serving Horace an over-spiced dish, and whose secondary object is to inveigh against Canidia, takes on a self-ironizing edge where Horace becomes an impotent and self-reflective, rather than a violent and other-directed, iambist. This set of associations in turn implicates *Epode* 3 in a much broader field of associations that spreads throughout the collection.

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19 See Catullus 11.20, *ilia rumpens*. 

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Horace, it turns out, is a softy, an odd pose for the wielder of iambic venom who is normally associated with masculine sexual aggression. Who precisely then is being made fun of here? Maecenas? Canidia? The poet himself? The answer, of course, is “yes.” This iambic dart swerves to penetrate its thrower and inflicts no small amount of collateral damage on the way. To the astute reader of the collection, this turn of events will come as no surprise. The poet’s mollitia was already highlighted in Epode 1. There, in a poem that looks forward to Actium, the poet contrasts Maecenas’s willingness to undergo any danger for Caesar (1.3–4) with Horace’s own nature as imbellis ac firmus parum (“unwarlike and none too firm,” 1.16). For the reader familiar with the conventions of elegy, such a pose would have nothing surprising about it. Mollitia is an occupational hazard for many of Horace’s contemporary poets. Nonetheless, the image of softness and refined passivity sorts ill with that of the hypermasculine poet of iambic, often priapic, violence. All the same, it is a recurring pattern within the Epodes. In Epode 14, Maecenas directly accuses Horace of mollis inertia. There, it is for his failure to complete the Epodes, but the association echoes the charge of sexual impotence made against the poet just two poems earlier, as well as in Epode 8. Now, neither lines 1.16 nor 3.4 deal explicitly with Horace’s sexual inadequacy, as we will see in poems 8 and 12, but we need not wait until poem 8 before the topic rears its head (or fails to). At the end of poem 3, the next time Maecenas is mentioned after the opening of poem 1, Horace wishes on his friend and patron sexual failure, although admittedly of a different sort:

But if ever you will have strongly desired any such thing, Maecenas you joker, I pray that the girl will ward off your kiss with her hand and will sleep at the very edge of the bed.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, the poet who begins this epode with the image of a criminal who strangles his father using his own \textit{impia manus} concludes it with bad breath and an image of frustrated desire. Maecenas’s mouth replaces the paternal \textit{guttur} (3.2) and the courtesan’s \textit{manus} with that of the tough-minded criminal (3.1). This ironic doubling both implicitly softens the opening image and places the poet’s hand on his symbolic father’s throat (“just kidding, of course — \textit{really}”). In the end, though, it is only the tough peasants of the Italic countryside who have hard loins (\textit{dura ilia}) and the ability to use them. Horace’s are soft and Maecenas’s might as well be. In between, we find Canidia and the question of whether she is in some way responsible for the poet’s discomfort: \textit{an malas/ Canidia tractavit dapes} (“or has Canidia trafficked in evil feasts,” 3.8)?

At no point, however, does this question represent an actual request for information. It can only be read rhetorically and never truly literally, except to the extent that the literal meaning must be present for the figurative levels — the levels on which the \textit{intellectum} remains \textit{diversum} from the \textit{dictum} — to come into view. The poet’s ironic rhetorical question is at once irrelevant to the basic information \textit{Epode} 3 ostensibly seeks to convey (“damn you, Maecenas, and your spicy cuisine”) and enfolds that information in a much larger associative field that requires us to reread this seemingly simple poem in an ever expanding set of contexts, since naming Canidia evokes the poems in which we have either already met her (\textit{Satires} 1.8) or will soon (\textit{Epodes} 5 and 17). By the same token, however, it is only the presence of a moment of performative non-meaning, of the ac-

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{at si quid umquam tale concupiveris,}
\textit{iocose Maecenas, precor}
\textit{manum puella savio opponat tuo}
\textit{extrema et in sponda cubet.} (3.19–22)
tual difference between these possible meanings, exemplified in the very gratuitous nature of Canidia’s naming, that ensures that these various levels of signification are neither collapsed into a single “true meaning” (i.e., Horace really meant X, the rest is just rhetorical window dressing, please ignore the man behind the curtain) or sublimated into some kind of grand synthesis (e.g., the political, the sexual, or the biographical as the master form of all readings).

But in fact, there is another associative chain that further implicates Horace, Maecenas, and Canidia in the same field. Horace develops a lengthy comparison between the person who confected the offending dish and Medea’s poisoning of Creusa as well as her subsequent escape on a winged serpent or dragon (*serpente…alite*, 3.14). The appearance of the winged serpent pulls through an earlier reptilian image implicit in the viper’s blood. At the same time, the image of the fire consuming Creusa evokes the burning sensation searing the poet’s innards, anticipating the next couplet’s image of the Dog Star baking Horace’s native Apulia (3.15–16). Each of these associative chains creates an alternative *intellectum* that both reinforces the structure of the poem and reveals it as always meaning more than it says. At the same time, the dissonance between the lowly content of the epode — indigestion caused by overly spiced food — and the high-flown mythological exempla creates still another level of metapoetic irony.

When Horace later writes “nor ever did so great a heat/exhalation/warmth/ardor of the stars settle on parched Apulia,” the sharp shift back into an autobiographical register forces the reader to reengage with what he knows about the historical Horace, not as something external to the poem but as an integral part of its structure. *Siderum,* moreover, is poetic plural for the *sidus fervidum* or the Dog Star, in Latin the Canicula.

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23 *nec tantus umquam siderum insedit vapor siticulosae Apulieae* (3.15–16)
the brightest star in the constellation Canis. Thus, *siderum*, by evoking *Canicula*, echoes phonetically (on the level of the *intellectum* but not the *dictum*) the Horatian neologism *siticulosae*. Likewise, the *Canis* and the *Canicula* themselves evoke *Canidia*, who is posited as the source of the heat melting the poet’s soft innards, but whose scorching fire is on the level of diction transformed into “thirsty Apulia,” the poet’s parched place of birth. But the key word here is *vapor*. Insofar as one of its commonly accepted meanings is an “exhalation,” the burning heat of the Apulian Canis becomes the channel through which Horace’s inflamed guts at the beginning of the poem metamorphose into Maecenas’s frustrated loins at its end: a noxious vapor rising from within. Moreover, insofar as we know that the dog and the wolf were common figures for the iambist, the *vapor of Canis/Canidia* becomes a figuration of the voice of the iambist himself, the foul exhalation of parched Apulia. Horace’s dyspepsia is transformed into Canidia’s black magic, her *mala carmina* (“curses,” but also “libelous, personal attacks,” an ambiguity that parallels the meanings of *epodē*, “incantations” but also “a form of iambus”). Those *mala carmina*, which we see exhibited in *Epode 5*, are then compared to the burning heat of Medea’s poi-

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soned gifts, which are in turn identified with the heat of the Dog Star in Apulia or the scorching breath of that other Apulian dog, Horace, who in turn prays that his own searing exhalation becomes the offending *spiritus* of Maecenas himself, from which his *puella* must shield herself with a hand (manus) that necessarily recalls the one that crushed the paternal throat (guttur) at the opening of the poem. In the end, we no longer have a clearly delineated set of speaking subjects and their respective objects of invective, but a kind of circulating metapoetic irony in which the poet speaks against what he himself appears to embody in his speech, becoming both one with and opposed to Canidia and, through her, identified with Maecenas himself.\(^28\)

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There is no clearer example of this self-ironizing phenomenon than in the immediately following poem, *Epode* 4. On the one hand, this is among the most strongly iambic poems in the collection. It has a clearly delineated target of invective, and it squarely claims the iambic poet’s right to exercise his *liberrima indignatio* on behalf of and as the voice of the larger community of right-thinking Romans (4.10; cf. *libera bilis* 11.16). Poem 4 is an exercise in social discipline against a freed slave who has become wealthy and acquired social respectability in the form of a military tribuneship and hence equestrian rank, positions that by custom were not open to freedmen.\(^29\) On the other hand, as almost every commentator has noticed, there are numerous resemblances between the unnamed object of Horace’s wrath and the poet himself.\(^30\) In some cases, these resemblances are acknowledged by critics only to be argued away, but the fact that

\(^{28}\) Cf. ibid., 162–63, 181–82.


such arguments need to be made unveils the possibility of the identification and hence the impossibility of definitively excluding it from the reader’s understanding.31 Whatever details may be invoked to suggest the illegitimacy of the identification, they remain just that, individual details at variance with a perceived resemblance, a moment in which the understood meaning (*intellectum*) remains at some variance (*diversum*) with the letter of what has been said (*dictum*).

The opening sentence of the poem does two things at once: it establishes *Epode* 4 as the first fully-fledged invective poem of the collection, the true heir to the Archilochian and Hipponactian tradition, and reflects that tradition back against itself and the poet.32 It opens squarely with a declaration of personal enmity as well as an insult aimed at the social standing of the invective target:

Discord as great as what has fallen to wolves and lambs obtains for me with you, you who are burned on the side with Spanish ropes and on the shin by the hard shackle.33

As I noted in my discussion of *Epode* 3, images of wolves and dogs were associated with the iambic tradition from the very beginning with Archilochus’s Lycambes or “Wolf-stepper” and in the earliest traces of the oral tradition in figures like the tricky Dolon in *Iliad* 9 who wears a wolf skin.34 The wolf is the symbol

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31 D.R. Shackelton Bailey, *Profile of Horace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 4. Mankin goes so far as to argue without proof that the object of the invective in this poem is not simply a freed slave like Horace’s father but a criminal, yet the resemblance is still too close for comfort, and he then feels compelled to go on to argue that the speaker is not Horace (Mankin, *Horace: Epodes*, ad loc).


33 *Lupis et agnis quanta sortito obtigit,*
   *tecum mihi discordia est,*
   *Hibericis peruste funibus latus*
   *et crura dura compede.* (4.1–4)

of iambic aggression and the dog his domesticated cousin, the image of a possible taming of that aggression as a tool for social discipline. But the dog still bites and sometimes nips his master (on dogs and wolves, see Epodes 2.60, 6.1–10, 7.11–12, 12.26). Nonetheless, a question immediately arises as we read these lines: who is the wolf and who is the sheep? The animal imagery indicates a clear distinction between victim and aggressor, yet the human drama is more confused. Horace appears at best to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing. If the object of Horace’s attack is cast as the wolf, then the poet is clearly a sheep that bites back. But if Horace is the wolf, then we are forced to imagine the object of the attack as the hapless victim of the iambist’s predatory aggressions.35 The term discordia is particularly loaded in this context. It bears with it the concept of civil conflict and, depending on the date of either the writing or the reading of the poem, it evokes the ongoing or recently concluded civil wars against Antony at Actium, Sextus Pompeius off Sicily, or Brutus, Cassius, and Horace himself at Philippi.36 This wolf and this sheep, then, in all the instability of their relative positions — just who is preying on whom? — are emblematic of the ongoing social conflict and Horace’s ironic reflections on it. In civil conflict, each side claims to have been victimized by the other. One side’s aggression is always a justified retaliation for the wrong done by the other. The memories can be very long. This is the history in which the iambist seeks to intervene: an endless retaliatory cycle of sheep and wolves, predators and prey, political actors who are constantly shifting positions and ultimately consuming their own. And this is why irony is such a potent rhetori-

35 Cf. 2.60.
cal tool in this situation, for it is not self-evident who are the wolves and who the sheep, nor is it the case that all the wolves are really sheep and vice versa and that hence there is no difference between them. The reality is complex: iambists and their objects are always both wolves and sheep, and yet the difference between them never quite collapses. The victims are in fact always and necessarily the original aggressors and therefore must be attacked mercilessly, even as they truly remain victims. In the memorable words of Clint Eastwood’s character, William Munny, in the film *Unforgiven* (1992), when the young would-be gunslinger asks him if the man he just gunned down had it coming, “We all have it coming, kid.” The opening statement of *Epode* 4 expresses both a literal meaning (its *dictum*) and the precise opposite of that meaning (its *intellectum*), but it also insists on maintaining the difference between those meanings as well as their potential commutability.

Similarly, in poem 7, immediately before the first of the impotence poems, Horace denounces the recent history of political warfare and the possibility of its continuation into the future, writing:

> Where are you criminals rushing off to? Or why are swords that had been put away now fitted to your right hand? […] *Not even wolves or lions* act this way, never savage except against the different. […] That’s the way it is: harsh fates goad the Romans and the crime of fratricide, since the sacred blood of innocent Remus flowed on the ground for his descendants.38

38 *Quo quo scelesti ruitis? Aut cur dexteris aptantur enses conditi?*  

[…]

> neque hic lupis mos nec fuit leonibus, numquam nisi in dispar feris.  

[…]

> sic est: acerba fata Romanos agunt scelusque fraternal necis, ut immerentis fluxit in terram Remi sacer nepotibus cruo. (7.1–2, 11–12, 17–20)
There are wolves, there are sheep, and then there are humans: the lone kind to prey upon their own. This poem posits a third position between generic victim and aggressor, producing a kind of meta-irony that does not deny the previous opposition between wolves and sheep, iambists and objects, but resituates them on that third level of commutability. Were Caesar’s assassins, who made Horace the son of a freedman a military tribune, wolves or sheep, victims or aggressors? Or were they just blind actors in a larger historical drama that they were powerless (im-potens) to change: the heirs to Rome’s original sin, the spilled blood of Remus?

In such a context, what is the heir to Archilochus, the foe of Lycambes (“the wolf dancer”), to do? Who is he and where does he stand? The speaking subject of the Epodes is himself surrounded by an ironic cordon sanitaire. As ever new levels of meaning unfold, it becomes impossible to say who he really is, what he really means, to be able to label and to categorize all his possible meanings, to empty him of all interiority, to render him a mere function of a describable social, political, personal, or sexual position. Each new dictum produces a variety of intellecta, meanings that are at once intentional (they are products of a performative structure that partakes of the Real) and resistant to reduction (they cannot be synthesized into a single coherent meaning that can be separated from the performative structure that makes them possible).

Returning however to Epode 4, the abstract notion of discordia in the poem’s opening couplet is given more concrete form in the next two lines’ images of bondage and enslavement. The forcible deprivation of freedom as both cause and consequence of civil conflict is a recurring theme throughout the epodes. The social wars, Spartacus’s uprising, Sextus Pompeius’s recruitment of slaves to man his navy, and Octavian’s propaganda against Antony, Cleopatra, and their supposedly unfree oriental hordes are all specifically cited in poems 9 and 16.39 These two poems

round out the series of political epodes that began with poem 1 on Maecenas as the willing companion of Octavian, as he prepares to sail for Actium, and continued with poem 7’s vision of Roman civil conflict (discordia) being the result of acerba fata and Romulus’s murder of Remus. These political poems (1, 7, 9, and 16) are then intercalated with the series of Canidia and impotence poems (5, 8, 12, and 17). They find their point of intersection in poem 3, where the vile, parching vapor of Apulia serves to join Horace, Canidia, and Maecenas into a singular comic knot, which is then given a distinctly iambic point with poem 4’s opening image of sheep and wolves, before poem 5 repeats almost word for word Epode 3’s evocation of Medea’s burning gifts for Creusa in the final tirade of a boy about to be sacrificed to satisfy Canidia’s lust.

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Poem 5, in many ways, serves as a masculinist fantasy genealogy of the origin of iambic. In it, the combination of Canidia’s sexual insatiability and disgusting physical appearance lead first to literal violence, when she and Sagana capture and bury an innocent boy to the chin. Their physical assault and grotesque torture leads to a violent verbal riposte on the part of the boy, who offers his own iambic tirade in response to Canidia’s mala carmina. Here again, the narrative of iambic violence traces its origin to a prior moment of the aggression, and it is generically appropriate that the boy is transformed into an iambic poet by the enormity of Canidia’s crimes. The surest sign of that poetic transformation is the boy’s own use of intertextuality, when he cites almost word for word passages from poem 3, the very passages in which Horace, Canidia, and Maecenas begin to share certain traits and imagistic associations, becoming the dicta of certain common intellecta. Poems 3, 4, and 5 thus serve both as the nodal point between the political and the Canidia/impotence poems, and

40 The boy also knows his Archilochus. See Johnson, Horace’s Iambic Criticism, 103.
as the place in which the poet’s iambic irony bends back most clearly to include himself. As such, these poems should take on a particular importance for any attempt to understand the Epodes as a whole. Returning once more to the beginning of poem 4, we should lastly note that the image of “burning” caused by the ropes and shackle (peruste) on the body of Horace’s iambic victim provides a further imagistic link between this poem and its predecessor. That linkage, unsurprisingly, is ironic in that it produces multiple and even opposed intellecta from the same dicta. In poem 3, we saw the fire that roiled the poet’s tender guts transformed into the product of Canidia’s witchcraft. It then became the dog’s breath of the Canicula, which parched Horace’s native sriticulosa Apulia, before finally being metamorphosed into the breath of Maecenas himself, a foul vapor that will cause his puella to beat a hasty retreat. In this fashion, the poet’s molitia, of which he complains in his invocation of the dura ilia of the reapers, and which in poem 1 renders him imbellis, is transformed over the course of poem 3 into the source of Maecenas’s own sexual frustration or impotentia. Thus, the fire of Horatian halitosis, which is also the iambic breath of the dog, becomes the inflammation that rubs raw the slave turned military tribune of Epode 4, branding him with the sign of social transgression, the cause and the consequence of discordia. The fire of Horatian liberrima indignatio in poem 4 becomes at once a force of rage turned against the other, whose very existence threatens the emerging Augustan settlement, and an impenetrable wall between the poet and the social world, a wall that obscures his position in the moment he appears to reveal it.

For Horace himself is born of a freedman (natus libertino patre), as he memorably repeats throughout Satire 1.6. Likewise, he too was raised to the position of military tribune and hence to equestrian status by the very Brutus whose assassination of Divus Caesar produced the most recent round of discordia, a

round which will only finally play itself out at Actium, whose Liburnian galleys are evoked in the opening lines of *Epode* 1, lines which also call to mind Callimachus’s *Ibis*.\(^2\) Horace is the fiery voice, the barking dog, the wolf whose anger gives voice to the outrage of the community, and the soft poet, the unwar-like sophisticate, the object of Canidia’s wrath and disappointed lust (more on this lust in a moment). He is the son of doubtful origins, raised to the rank of military tribune in a time of social discord, as well as the poet who decries that discord and with it the spilled blood of the innocent grandchildren of Remus. The fire that burns the skin and sides of the social climber in *Epode* 4 is both a fire that has burned Horace himself and the flame his iambic persona embodies.

Within this complex ironic constellation, Canidia becomes more than just a quasi-archetypical witch figure and poisoner who serves as a stock object of the invective poet’s wrath. She is also the vehicle through which the poet’s power as a bestower of blame, as an iambist, is reflected back on itself. Asking in *Epode* 3 whether Canidia has “trafficked in foul feasts” is not only ironic in the sense that it equates the dish proffered by Maecenas with a meal prepared by someone whom we learn in *Epode* 5 is a sexually frustrated and murderous practitioner of black magic. It also implicates the poet himself in a larger pattern of sexual frustration and inability to perform. Thus, in poem 5, Canidia is burying a young man up to the neck and starving him to death, so she can extract his liver and make a philter that will cause her wandering lover to return:

> O Varus, not by means of the usual potions, O face about to shed many tears, will you run back to me. Your mind will come back called not by Marsian voices. I will prepare a more powerful cup. I will pour on your disgust a greater cup, and the sun will not set beneath the sea, above the outstretched

earth, before you burn for my love with black flames, like bituminous pitch.\textsuperscript{43}

The dark flames of lust roused by Canidia’s magic, of course, recall the flames of Medea’s magic exercised in vengeance against Creusa, flames which were evoked earlier in this poem (5.61–64) and in poem 3 as well. At the same time, Canidia’s need to overcome her erstwhile lover’s disgust looks forward to poems 8 and 12, where the poet cites the woman’s repulsiveness as the reason he is unable to rise to the occasion. And while the clear points of resemblance between Canidia, whose lover has fled, and the hag, who provokes impotent disgust in our poet, have been noted before,\textsuperscript{44} it will repay our effort to look more closely at these poems in conclusion.

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We need not prove the absolute identity of the frustrated hag with Canidia—an impossibility in any case, since Canidia is not named in poems 8 and 12. We need only demonstrate the possibility, indeed the invitation, to make that identification. That invitation comes in the opening lines of poem 8. There, Horace describes a grotesque old woman who provokes disgust in him, much as Canidia, the \textit{obscena anus} whom the innocent lad, turned voice of iambic rage, curses in 5.98.\textsuperscript{45} Having dared to ask why Flaccus is flaccid, the woman in \textit{Epode} 8 is anato-

\textsuperscript{43} Non usitatis, Vare, potionibus, 
o multa fleturum caput, 
ad me recurrens, nec vocata mens tua 
Marsis redibit vocibus: 
maius parabo, maius infundam tibi 
fastidienti poculum, 
priusque caelum sidet inferius mari, 
tellure porrecta super, 
quam non amore sic meo flagres uti 
bitemum atris ignibus. (5.73–82)

\textsuperscript{44} Armstrong, \textit{Horace}, 60–63.

\textsuperscript{45} Who had of course also excited disgust in her former lover, Varus.
mized in grotesque detail: generic old age, wrinkles, a gaping asshole, drooping breasts, a noticeable paunch, and swollen ankles. There is an almost erotic luxuriance in this blazon of revulsion, leading up to the final command that if she wishes the poet to come to attention, she will have to work on him with her mouth (ore allaborandum est tibi, 8.20). With no other woman of similar description in the corpus, and with poem 8 coming shortly after poem 5 (the longest poem in the collection), it would be difficult for the suggestion of their identity not to come to mind. Yet, the resemblance with Canidia goes beyond generic disgust with an aging female body. In line 3 of poem 8, there is a direct verbal recollection. There, Canidia’s “black and blue tooth” (dens lividus) of 5.47 is recalled in the image of the dens ater or single “black tooth” of our archetypical hag. That tooth in turn recalls both the black flames of Varus’s rekindled lust (“black flames” [atris ignibus]) and the dens ater of traditional iambic vengeance cited at the end of poem 6, where the poet asks, if someone should attack him “with a black tooth” (atro dente), should he weep like an unavenged boy (puer)?

The boy in need of vengeance, of course, can call to mind none other than the puer of 5.82, who fell prey to Canidia’s own dens lividus. This same “iambic” tooth in turn is associated in Satires 2.1 with both the fierce bite of the wolf (dente lupus, 2.1.52) and the carping of Horace’s detractors (“envy […] will hurt its tooth trying to strike against the solid with the weak”). Many years later, Horace would present his genealogy of satire and invective in Epistles 2.1, and he would refer to the “bloody tooth” of uncontrolled invective verse as what would eventually necessitate a law against mala carmina and a return to the care for speaking well (2.1.148–55). Thus, we have a complex multivalent web of associations surrounding the black-toothed hag of Epode 8. She both provokes Horace’s momentary impotence or mollitia and actualizes a potential softness within him, the presence of which

47 invidia […] fragili quaerens illidere dentem offendet solido (2.1.77–78)
was acknowledged from the very first poem. At the same time, her black tooth is directly associated with Archilochus and Hipponax, who are specifically cited at 6.13–14, immediately before the black tooth of abuse cited above. She is, then, simultaneously the cause of the poet’s impotence, the object of his abuse, and his iambic doppelgänger. The same black tooth of abuse, which also recalls the *dens lividus* of Canidia, is in turn commanded in poem 8 to call Horace’s flaccid phallus back to life. But, as we have seen, that very tooth is identified throughout the Horatian corpus with the iambic poet in his most archetypical incarnations as the biting mouth of the wolf, the barking mouth of the dog, and the voice of both protection and disgust. One way or the other, it seems, we all get badmouthed in the end.\(^48\) The burning, garlic, dog breath of *Epode* 3 is just the beginning. That same unclean, iambic mouth, described and commandeered in poem 8, talks back in poem 12. There, the lady in question responds to Horace’s blazon by retailing the poet’s sexual shortcomings, launching her own iambic attack on the soft poet: “you were less limp for Inachia than for me/ you were up for Inachia three times in one night, for me it’s always one/ soft job.”\(^49\) As Watson cautiously observes,

> It is possible that, in her gracelessness, old age, grotesque ugliness, and obscenity of word and deed, we are meant to see in the *vetula* an analogue of Iambe (Baubo), the eponymous deity of iambic, who encompassed all these attributes.\(^50\)

This view that the hag who is Horace’s nemesis in poems 8 and 12 is also his generic double, which is consonant with both the structure of poem 3 and the image of the savage tooth of iambic

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\(^{48}\) On poems 8 and 12 as directly derived from Archilochus and Hipponax, see Watson, *A Commentary on Horace’s Epodes*, 8, 40. On dogs, bites, and iambic, see also Nelson Hawkins, “The Barking Cure,” 63–70.

\(^{49}\) *Inachia langues minus ac me;
Inachiam ter notce potes, mihi semper ad unum
mollis opus* (12.14–16)

\(^{50}\) Watson, *A Commentary on Horace’s Epodes*, 83.
abuse, is further reinforced by Mankin’s suggestions concerning the import of Canidia’s name and the significance of her activities. Her name seems to point to two associations, with “the dog” (canis) (but also the Canicula) and the furiously “dogged” genre of iambus (cf. Ep. 6), and with “old-age” (canities) and the decrepit impotence not only of the poet but of Rome as it collapses into ruin (Ep. 16.1–12) under the weight of its ancient curse (Ep. 7.17–20).\textsuperscript{51} This same image is recalled in appropriately inverted form at the end of poem 12, when Canidia/Baubo/the hag exclaims, “Oh how unhappy I am whom you flee as the lamb flees fierce wolves and she goats flee lions!”\textsuperscript{52} The image of the wolf and his somewhat domesticated confrère, the dog, has been part of the iambic genre from its earliest manifestations, but this passage specifically recalls the opening lines of poem 4, where the relation between wolf and lamb is peculiarly overdetermined: who is the aggressor and who the victim? Who the attacker and who the attacked? Iambic poison is always a response to aggression, and hence the roles depend in their very nature on a potential reversibility. At the end of poem 12, the iambic poet not only becomes the object of attack (i.e., the wolf becomes the lamb), but so too does the masculinist poet in his passive impotence become the she goat, the penetrated prey, a role he assumes as iambist, as poetic ironist. Ellie Oliensis has succinctly summed up the case:

Invective originates as a compensation for impotence. But impotence remains a part of the story. What distinguishes the \textit{Epodes} is precisely the failure to erase the origin of invective in impotence. The failure is luridly obvious in \textit{Epodes} 8 and 12.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} o ego non felix, quam tu fugis ut pavet acris
agnas lupos capreaeque leones! (12.25–26)
\textsuperscript{53} Oliensis, “Canidia, Canicula, and the Decorum of Horace’s \textit{Epodes},” 175.
Iambic violence becomes the sign of weakness in an age of instability. Canidia becomes the double and the antagonist of Horace: simultaneously the iambic subject and object. She is the evil twin of the iambic dog, like the social climber of *Epode 4*. And so, it is only appropriate that she be given the last word in the collection. Rather than ending with the triumph of the iambic poet over his adversaries, with the death of Bupalus and Lycambes, the *Epodes* ends with a cry of triumph by Canidia, the poet’s ostensible object of iambic aggression and persistent doppelganger:

> I will be a rider carried on the shoulders of my enemies and the land will yield to my insolence. Or shall I, who can make waxen images come alive, as you yourself know from your spying, and tear down the moon from the pole with my chants, who can bring back to life the cremated dead and mix the cups of desire, weep that my art is of no avail against you?

The Horace of the *Epodes* is thus not the triumphant enforcer of a masculinist or aristocratic social discipline. Nor is he the herald of a new Augustan settlement after Actium’s end, though clearly all of these elements are in play. He is not given—or, more accurately, does not give himself—the last word. Rather, Horace as we see him in *Epode 3*, in the Canidia poems, in the political and in the impotence poems, is both the subject

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55 *Vectabor umeris tunc ego inimicis eques,*
> meaeque terra cedet insolentiae.
> *an quae movere cereas imagines,*
> *ut ipse nosti curiousus, et polo*
> *deripere lunam vocibus possim meis,*
> *possim crematos excitare mortuous desiderique temperare pocula,*
> *plorem artis in te nil agentis exitus.* (17.74–80).
and object of iambic invective, the perpetrator and the victim of sexual aggression, the voice of social norms and of their enforcement as well as the embodiment of their breach. The ironic voice of Horace’s *Epodes* leads us less to the adoption of any one definite point of view, a doctrine or explicit ideology, than to the creation of the subjective space from which the personal, the political, the sexual, and the aesthetic contradictions of the emerging Augustan settlement can be both sharply interrogated and immediately experienced.

And this unending interrogation is the ’pataphilological gesture *par excellence*, a simultaneous gesturing toward the possibility of communication and its ultimate refusal. Horace does not give us his views in the *Epodes*. He does not advocate for a position or a program, even as we may well recognize the elements of communication within the *Epodes*. We may even identify within this text the semantic undergirding of an ideological program, but the moment we try to establish what that program would be in its finite actuality, then we must engage in a drastic reduction of this rich and ironic text. We must drag the *intellectum* back into conformity with the *dictum*. We must reduce the materiality of language to an idealized and universal “meaning,” which can only ultimately be a reflection of ourselves, and which thus must necessarily be “untrue” to the text and untrue to the most basic philological impulse, an impulse that can only be satisfied, I would contend, by its beyond (*meta*) and its besides (*para*).