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Epode 5 as a Response to Eclogue 4: The Anti-Augustan in Horace

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***Abstract:** This paper offers a new reading of Horace's Fifth Epode as a response to Vergil's Fourth Eclogue. Vergil's poem heralds a savior-child that will restore the Roman state, while Horace's poem narrates the tale of a child captured and killed by witches. I argue that by pairing these two poems the reader uncovers a latent Horatian commentary on civil war and Roman leadership from the seemingly innocuous witch fable of Epode 5.*

To my knowledge, a sound linking of these two contemporary poems has never been published. I draw a concrete link between Eclogue 4 and Epode 5 first through textual and then thematic comparison. Vergil says that his messiah will destroy poisonous plants and snakes (24-25) and these are the very two things that Horace's child cannot overcome in the witch tale. Thematically, Eclogue 4 is centered in the ideas of birth and growth, the amicable integration of Eastern and Western cultures, and the natural peacefulness of the countryside. Epode 5 is concerned with the exact opposite themes: death and devolution, clashing of Roman and foreign cultures, and the murderous and unnatural filth of the city. I argue that these oppositions are intentional and highlight the tension between Vergil's hope for a savior-child that will rebuild Rome and Horace's pessimism that this abducted child will perish and take the city down with him. I then argue that contextual clues identify the savior-child as Octavian.

Although Horace is known for his patriotic poetry, the uncovering of this biting political commentary in superficially non-political Epode 5 begs reconsideration of other seemingly non-political Horatian poetry. Perhaps the poet safely conceals his honest opinions in these poems lest he compromise his political allegiances.

Horace's poetry, especially the more political of the Odes, voices a profound patriotism and a firm belief in the destiny of Rome and the endurance of her greatness.¹ This paper will argue that for a brief moment in Epode 5, Horace's patriotism is shaken. Canidia, as a child-killing witch, makes Epode 5 a natural response to Vergil's Eclogue 4 and its prophecy of a young messiah. While Vergil's child will restore Roman peace, the child of Horace is abducted, soon to be killed, and swears to become a *nocturnus Furor* that will wreak vengeance even in death (Epode 5.92-96). No published scholarship, as far as I am aware, pairs these two poems. Even Lindsay Watson's thorough commentary does not investigate this comparison.² This paper will draw a concrete link between Eclogue 4 and Epode 5 through textual and thematic comparison so that we might extrapolate a political interpretation of Horace's epode: Epode 5, read as a response to Eclogue 4, divulges a political commentary on civil war and Roman leadership cloaked under the guise of a witch fable.

In Eclogue 4, Vergil prophesies the birth of a new leader who will restore productivity, peace, and security to the Republic:

*At tibi prima, puer, nullo munuscula cultu
 errantis hederas passim cum baccare tellus
 mixtaque ridenti colocasia fundet acantho.* 20

*ipsae lacte domum referent distenta capellae
 ubera nec magnos metuent armenta leones;
 ipsa tibi blandos fundent cunabula flores.
 occidet et serpens et fallax herba veneni
 occidet;* 25

Vergil, Eclogue 4

¹ Consider, e.g., Odes 1.2, which looks ahead to Augustus' defeat of the Parthians, or 1.37, which reflects on the victory over Cleopatra.

² Watson, Lindsay. "Epode 5." *A Commentary on Horace's Epodes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. 174-251. Print.

But for you, child, shall the untilled earth pour forth as her first pretty gifts, straggling ivy with foxglove everywhere and the Egyptian bean blended with the smiling acanthus. Uncalled, the goats shall bring home their udders swollen with milk, and the herds shall not fear huge lions; unasked, your cradle will pour forth flowers for your delight. The serpent too shall perish, and the false poison plant shall perish.³

The earth blooms untilled (18-19) and the udders of goats swell with milk (21-22), suggesting the productivity this new leader will bring to the empire. The *acanthus* plant was invented as a Roman tradition in architectural order beginning with Augustus.⁴ By suggesting its mixing with the *colocasia* (20), an Egyptian bean, we see the blending of cultures in this new vision of the Roman Empire. The acanthus is smiling (*ridenti* [20]), prophesying a peaceful foreign policy in which foreigners are welcomed and integrated into Roman culture. Integration, plenty, and prosperity are further emphasized by the metaphor of straggling ivy intertwined with foxglove (19) and by the pastoral imagery throughout the poem. Vergil predicts the child will also bring security to the state through the metaphors of herds not fearing huge lions (22) and the serpent and poisonous plant perishing under his rule (24-25).

Lines 24-25 in particular overlap with aspects of Epode 5: *occidet et serpens et fallax herba veneni/occidet*, "The serpent too shall perish and the false poisonous plant shall perish." With the birth of Vergil's savior child, both snakes and poisonous plants are destroyed in order to restore prosperity. These are precisely the two dangers, however, that Horace's abducted child in Epode 5 cannot overcome. Canidia, the boy's captor, has small snakes intertwined into her hair: *brevibus implicata viperis crinis* (Epode 5.15-16). She thus becomes a representation of the snakes that the boy is unable to conquer. Similarly, Canidia uses poisonous herbs, *herbas... venenorum ferax* (Epode 5.21-22), to perform her magic. The intertextuality between Eclogue 4 and Epode 5 is clear as *herbas...venenorum* (Epode 5.21-22) strikingly resembles *herba veneni* (Eclogue 4.24). The sound play between *fallax* (Eclogue 4.21) and *ferax* (Epode 5.22) in these parallel statements also establish clear textual relationship. Thus, in equipping Canidia with poisonous serpents and herbs, Horace highlights the vulnerability of the child to the very dangers that have perished in Eclogue 5, and which no longer threaten the newly born savior.

Furthermore, Eclogue 4's vision of productivity, peace and security are in exact opposition with the themes of Epode 5: for Horace, the focus is not on the birth but rather the death of a child, cultures of the East and West do not integrate amicably but are instead clashing, and the natural peacefulness of the countryside is juxtaposed with the murderous and unnatural filth of the city. These oppositions, I argue, are deliberate and highlight the tension between Vergil's hope for a savior-child that will restore Rome and Horace's pessimism that this abducted child will perish at the hand of snakes and poisonous herbs.

The two poems differ markedly in their respective focus on birth and death. Vergil's text is almost excessive in its language of birth and new age: a new generation descends from high heaven (*iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto* [7]), as a boy is born (*nascenti puero* [8]). Verbs like *surget* (9), *nascetur* (8, 25), *incipient* (12, 60), and *referent* (21) all connote birth, rising, and new beginnings. By contrast, Epode 5 abounds with death imagery. The witches prepare a slow death for the boy, hoping his eyeballs will rot away (*promineret ore* [35]), and his

³ All translations are the author's own

⁴ Strong, D. E. "Some Early Examples of the Composite Capital." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960), 119.

marrow will dry up (*medulla...aridum* [37]). Each ingredient that Canidia requires to concoct her love potion is similarly associated with death: a tree having been uprooted from graves (*sepulcris erutas* [17]), a funeral Cypress (*cypressos funebris* [18]), an egg smeared with the blood of an ugly toad (*uncta turpis ova ranae sanguine* [19]), a feather of a nocturnal screech-owl (*plumam nocturnae strigis* [20]), and a deadly poisonous plant (*herbas...venenorum ferax* [21-22]). Death and magic are strongly correlated, underscored by the boy's death for the purpose of creating a magic potion. Similarly, places like Thrace (known for blood-thirsty fighters), Colchis (the home of the murderous witch, Medea), and Lake Avernus (the entrance to the underworld) all connote death. The preponderance of death imagery in this epode contrasts sharply with the birth imagery in Eclogue 4 - a contrast that, in conjunction with the earlier intertextuality, invites the reader to interpret the epode as an ironic response to Vergil's optimism.

A second opposition is that of pastoral life versus city life, a favorite Horatian theme.⁵ Eclogue 4 equates the savior-child's birth to an "optimistic pastoral fantasy" with orchids (*abrusta* [2]), woodlands (*silvas* [3]), yellow plains sprouting with waving corn (*molli paulatim flavescet campis arista* [28]), purple grapes hanging (*incultisque rubens pendit* [29]) and trees filled with honey (*durae quercus sudabunt roscida mella* [30]).⁶ Vergil asks that this pastoral setting be "worthy of a consul", *sic animus silvas, silvae sint consule digne* (3), suggesting the reign of this child will transfer the peace associated with the countryside to his political role in the city, Rome. Thus, peace will be the marker of a new, blooming state.

By contrast, Horace's epode takes place in the city and his characters embody the contamination of Rome. The scene of the witches' activities is a public garden on the Esquiline⁷ that was funded by Maecenas as part of the urban improvement projects carried out under Augustus.⁸ During the Republic, this location had been a graveyard for the poorest, often foreign, inhabitants of the city.⁹ The witches uproot funeral trees (17) and dig a grave for the captured boy (30-31) in this garden. They deface the public garden sponsored by patrons of the Empire and turn it back into a gravesite, its function during the Republic. In this vision of Rome, the city devolves from a site of growth and plenty - symbolized by the garden - to one of death and impoverishment - symbolized by the graveyard - rather than flowering into a peaceful state as Eclogue 4 envisions.

Horace's presentation of Lucina, goddess of childbirth, as compared to Vergil's offers another pessimistic view of the Roman situation. In Eclogue 4, Lucina smiles on the birth of the child that will usher in the golden age (*tu modo nascenti puero... caste fave Lucina* [8-10]). But in Epode 5, Lucina is not present at the birth of children, in particular the children of witches: *per liberos te, si vocata partubus/ Lucina veris adfuit* (5-6). Since the action of Epode 5 takes place on the Esquiline, and Lucina is often associated with the same hill, Horace further emphasizes the dire hopelessness of Rome, having been overrun by monstrous evils to the point where the gods have abandoned the city.¹⁰

⁵ Consider, e.g. Epode 2, Sat. 2.6 and 2.7

⁶ Hardie, Philip R., and Helen Moore. *Classical Literary Careers and Their Reception*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 45.

⁷ The references to the birds of the Esquiline (*Esquilinae alites* [99]) fix the scene firmly on the hill. C. E. Manning argues that this impression is confirmed by the setting of their activities in Satire 1.8 (Manning 1970 393).

⁸ D'Alton, J. F. *Horace and His Age*. (London: Longmans, 1917), 206.

⁹ D'Alton, J. F. *Horace and His Age*, 206.

¹⁰ Dolansky, Fanny. "Reconsidering the Matronalia and Women's Rites." *Classical World* 104.2 (2011), 191.

The city is also described as a place of fear and chaos. The boy is kidnapped in an uproar (*tumultus* [3]), and his lips tremble out of fear as he pleads with the witches to spare his life (*trementi...ore...constitit* [11-12]). Torture, murder, magic and adultery are rampant and unholy acts are performed. Responsible for all of these evils, the witches themselves embody the filth of the city: they are described as impious (*impias* [84]), having no sense of guilt (*abacta nulla Veia conscientia* [29]), physically grotesque (*irresectum saeva dente livido/ Canidia rodens pollicem* [47-48]), and grunting with exertion (*ingemens laboribus* [31]). The striking opposition between the peace of the budding countryside in Eclogue 4 and the distress of the devolving city in Epode 5 connect the two poems.

The final opposition between Eclogue 4 and Epode 5 is between Romanness and foreignness. Although the poem takes place in the countryside, Eclogue 4 is clearly focused on Roman concerns. Vergil foretells the glorious age will begin with the consulship of Pollio (11-12), the typical time-marker of the Roman annalistic tradition. Mention of the acanthus plant (20), as suggested earlier, also locates the poem in Roman culture.

By contrast, while the poem is set in Rome, Epode 5 emphasizes the “de-Romanization” of the city. In line 7, the boy describes the purple decoration of his toga as *inane*, “useless” in defending against evils. The value of Roman citizenship has been diminished, further emphasized by the boy having been stripped of any marker identifying class and age: *insignibus raptis puer* (12). Moreover, Eastern influences have infiltrated the city. Magic itself was identified as an Eastern practice that followed in the train of Eastern religion.¹¹ John D’Alton also says that it is hardly credible that such a belief existed among educated Romans, but it may have lingered among the unenlightened.¹² This would further suggest that the elite orders and social hierarchies of Rome have crumbled as the foreigners, with their Eastern magic, take command of the city.¹³ The witches’ capture of the young boy in his toga, which represents his freeborn status and the dress of curule magistrates, symbolizes the overpowering of the Roman by the foreign.

The clear thematic and textual links between Eclogue 4 and Epode 5 invite the reader to interpret the two poems against each other. Horace exploits Vergilian resonance to suggest a darker fate and a darker context for the boy at the center of Epode 5. If we are to see that boy, in light of Eclogue 4, as once having been Rome’s potential savior, then the future is very bleak indeed. This pessimistic view toward the future of Rome can be seen in the boy’s Thyestean curses (*Thyesteas preces* [85]) as well: *nocturnus occuram Furor...pavore somnos pavore*, “I will haunt you by night as a Fury...I will banish sleep with fear” (92-96). In cursing the witches, the boy abases himself by practicing magic like the witches. He thus not only transforms into something evil, a *Furor* (92), but also becomes un-Roman as he dies, practicing magic in a foreigner-infested city.

The contemporary political context partly accounts for Horace’s pessimistic view towards the current state and future of Rome. Vergil wrote the Eclogues just after Caesar’s death, sometime between 44 and 40 BC when Rome needed a means to stabilize the fast disintegrating state.¹⁴ According to Vergil, the “great line of the centuries begins anew” with the “consulship of Pollio” in 40 BC (5-12)¹⁵. 40 BC is the year that a temporary peace between Antony and

¹¹ D’Alton, J. F. *Horace and His Age*, 199.

¹² D’Alton, J. F. *Horace and His Age*, 205.

¹³ Kiernan, V. G. *Horace: Poetics and Politics*. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999), 35.

¹⁴ Arnold, Bruce. “The Literary Experience of Vergil’s Fourth Eclogue.” *The Classical Journal* 90.2 (1994), 145.

¹⁵ Arnold, Bruce. “The Literary Experience of Vergil’s Fourth Eclogue,” 143.

Octavian was engineered at Brundisium.¹⁶ Because of his close connection with Maecenas, a speculative reading might suggest that Vergil had Octavian in mind as the savior-child of Rome, particularly because he was a young man in his early twenties at the inception of his political career.¹⁷ This reading of Eclogue 4 then concludes that Octavian might stabilize the turbulent Roman state. The Epodes were written shortly after this, between 41 and 30 BC, when civil war escalated and hope for Rome's return to her formal glory seemed dismal.¹⁸ With this context in mind, Epode 5 can also be read in a radically anti-Octavian manner: the boy Octavian has not restored the peace that Vergil prophesized, and instead the evils of civil war and social turmoil consume the Roman world. Perhaps Horace even suggests that Octavian, a *Furor* consumed by the evils of the city, drives Rome to her demise.

An allegorical reading of the young boy is more reasonable. In Vergil's Eclogue, the youth of the *puer* suggests possibility, opportunity, and optimism that lead to production; in Horace, his youth suggests vulnerability that results in devolution and death. In both cases, the qualities in question pertain to Octavian and the Roman state alike. The atmosphere in Rome is clearly one of vengeance and corruption, as even those who are innocent become by contamination something dreadful.

Although the Odes and Epodes project strong patriotic messages and ties to champions of the new empire, the "slaughterhouse" of Roman civil war left its impress on Horace's genius and "deepened his poetic colors".¹⁹ The result is Epode 5: a Roman citizen's shrouded confession of his fear for the future of his country. Although many of Horace's later political poems suggest his wholehearted endorsement of the autocratic state, a political interpretation of Epode 5 as a response to Eclogue 4 questions his unwavering patriotism. This reading of Epode 5, outwardly a witch fable, invites us to reconsider Horace's seemingly non-political poems. Perhaps in such a space the poet finds a safe camouflage to divulge his honest opinions without betraying his political allegiance.

¹⁶ Arnold, Bruce. "The Literary Experience of Vergil's Fourth Eclogue," 144.

¹⁷ Arnold, Bruce. "The Literary Experience of Vergil's Fourth Eclogue," 143.

¹⁸ Mankin, David. *Horace: Epodes*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 3-5.

¹⁹ D'Alton, J. F. *Horace and His Age*, 1.

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