

# Medieval Sex Education

## Or: What About Canidia?

### Abstract

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This essay considers two witnesses to the reception of Horace in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, focusing in particular on *Epode 5*, which features one of Horace's most disturbing and disruptive figures, the witch Canidia. One witness is the comic reworking of *Epode 5* in Anselmo da Besate's *Rhetorimachia*; the other is a drawing in the Leiden manuscript Gronovius 15, which shows Canidia and her young victim, the boy whom she is intending to kill in order to make a love charm. Horace was a standard school author, and these two witnesses also point to a scholastic context of some sort. I examine them closely to consider what sort of 'sex education,' or socialization and initiation to a sexual role, might be accomplished by exposing young students to the more bizarre and obscene elements of Horace's poetry (even when deflected into comedy), and the threat to one's poise and composure, and the embarrassment, that comes with them.

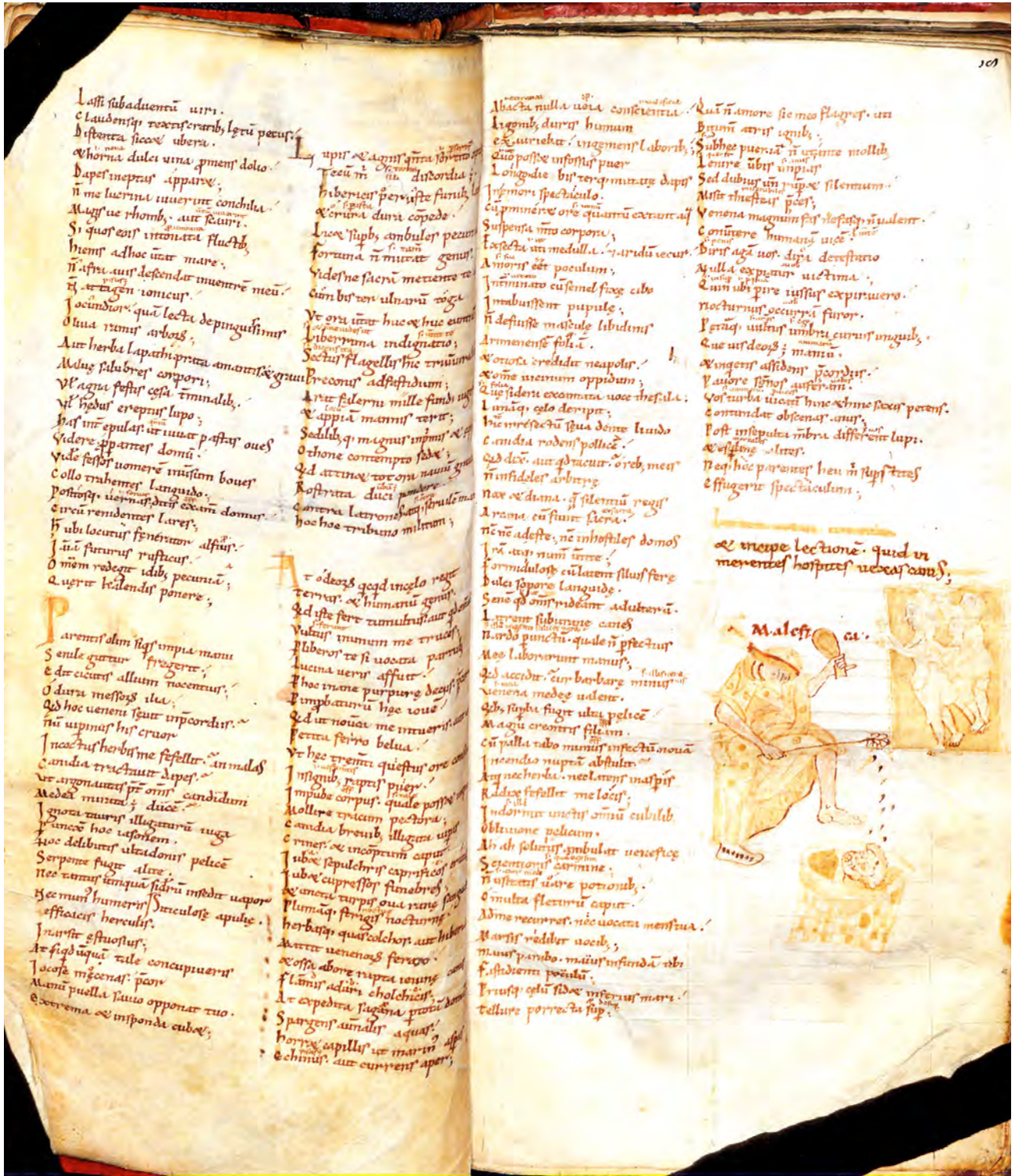
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In his essays on medieval Horace commentaries, now collected in *The Medieval Horace*, Karsten Friis-Jensen stressed the distinction between "our Horace" and "their Horace" (Friis-Jensen, "The Medieval Horace" 119 and *passim*). What interests us in his poetry is not necessarily what interested medieval readers; what resonates with us about his tone, his persona, his artistry is not necessarily what resonated with them. In fact, as one of Friis-Jensen's essay titles implies, Horace was read, in the schools especially, for two reasons: as a sampler of varied poetic meters; and, like all literature, as a source of ethical instruction, an exhortation to "do good and avoid evil," as the medieval *accessus* often describe the "intent" of literature.<sup>1</sup> Yet I would argue that medieval readers, at least occasionally and with some part of their being, picked up on the cynical Horace, the politically astute Horace, the sexually adventurous, jaded and frustrated Horace we appreciate, and not only endured but reveled in the moral danger he represented. In this essay, I will concentrate on Horace's witch Canidia, as an emblem of those alien and dangerous elements in classical literature that medieval readers, like ourselves, needed to deal with and account for. As Canidia pops up irrepressibly at various

1. "The Reception of Horace in the Middle Ages." Friis-Jensen somewhat complicates this simple assessment, but leaves its substance more or less intact: see "Horatius Liricus et Ethicus" 14–15.

Fig. 1

Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Gronov. 15, a manuscript of the works of Horace, from the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, 17v-18r. Reproduced by permission of Leiden University Libraries. I thank the library staff, particularly Mr. J.D. Cramer, for their help.



points in Horace’s poetry, she stands for that which is inassimilable, disturbing and exciting, and cannot easily be repressed.

One point of departure for this paper – which I found through Birger Munk Olsen’s invaluable catalog – is an image in Leiden library Gronovius 15 (Fig. 1; for detail, see Fig. 2), an Italian manuscript of the works of Horace, from the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The image illustrates, uniquely I think, *Epode 5*, which still has considerable shock value even today, with its grotesque narrative of the witches killing a little boy to make a love potion. The epode is not well known today; for obvious reasons, it is not commonly taught. Modern readers tend to react with a mix of amusement, dismay, and embarrassment. My suggestion is that medieval readers’ reactions may not have been all that different, and the question I am posing in this essay is why, rather than avoiding that embarrassment, they may have sought it out.

2. C. 80 in Munk Olsen, *L’étude 1*: 457–58; 4: 2, 181. When the image was added is not easy to say, but judging from the written captions, not very much later than the copying of the manuscript, perhaps in the twelfth rather than eleventh century.



Fig. 2  
Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Gronov. 15, 18r detail.

It is of course methodologically tricky to project modern feelings onto medieval readers, or even to introduce a term like “embarrassment” into a discussion of medieval texts. The English word, a loan from French, is attested in its current main sense only since the mid-eighteenth century (the more literal meaning of “encumbrance” pre-dating it by about a century). I am not aware of close lexical equivalents in medieval Latin or the major vernaculars, at least none that clearly distinguish embarrassment from shame / pudor/ honte. I will

nonetheless heuristically permit myself this anachronism because enough elements of what I consider the core meaning of “embarrassment” are present in our texts: a sense of exposure, nakedness, loss of composure and physical security; the reader’s quasi-somatic involvement in the scene, and uncertain and uncomfortable identification with the actors, particularly the victim; a puncturing of social and psychological defenses; a ludic component that distinguishes the sensation from true anxiety or shame, and even makes it partly pleasurable. It would be foolish to assume that the reactions of medieval readers mirror ours exactly, or that the social significance of these reactions would be identical. That is the dilemma of all studies involving historical affect and emotion: it seems impossible to recover or reconstruct what exactly past emotions felt like, not only for lack of better information but because the precise quality of others’ feelings is in principle unavailable to us – except by way of close reading and a tentative, interrogative approach from our own experience. One might say that for the duration of this discussion, “embarrassment” should remain in imaginary quotation marks throughout. But with those caveats in mind, I think we can proceed cautiously and open-endedly to drop the modern term “embarrassment” into this alien context and observe what happens.<sup>3</sup>

3. I am inspired by Peter von Moos’s concept of a “controlled anachronism.”

A brief summary of the epode is perhaps in order, with apologies for any offense or discomfort it may cause (*Epode 5*, Borzsák 133–36). Canidia, a recurring figure in Horace’s poetic universe, and her fellow witches have kidnapped a young boy. The plan is to dig him into the ground up to his neck and starve him to death, with food in view but out of reach, so that the intense desire that will be his last emotion before death will imprint itself onto his liver, which can then be dried and ground into a love potion, transmitting that desire to the intended target. The poem opens as the boy, naked, trembling, and stripped of the amulets that upper-class Roman children wore both as status markers and protective charms, realizes what they will do to him and begs for his life. He makes a last-ditch attempt to appeal to whatever residual stirrings of motherliness Canidia may have – to no avail. The witches, unmoved, keep digging, and the last words of the poem are the boy’s brave but futile curses on his tormentors. We may note immediately that the tableau is not only cruel, but it also has something obscene about it; hence the common response of embarrassment. The thought of women, older women at that, torturing a male child is uncomfortable and breaches all sorts of taboos. And the poem plays up the child’s nakedness, his exposure to the cold gaz-

es of predatory women, his helplessness, his shame – but also his eloquence, creating an implicit link between proficient language use (poetry or rhetoric) and shame.

For me, the image in Leiden Gronovius 15 immediately calls up the prominent use of *Epode 5* in Anselmo da Besate's mid-eleventh-century *Rhetorimachia*, a text I have frequently returned to in recent years.<sup>4</sup> The *Rhetorimachia* is a satirical, burlesque, slightly unhinged rhetoric textbook, with prosimetric and menippean gestures, from about 1046. Anselmo was an artes student in eleventh-century Northern Italy: Besate is near Pavia and Milan. He calls himself a son of the Milanese church (which, as we shall see, is not irrelevant to our topic); and while he says he has been to many schools, the ones specifically mentioned are in the Northern Italian cities of Parma and Reggio.<sup>5</sup> He wrote the *Rhetorimachia*, he says, as a companion volume to the Ciceronian rhetorics, to furnish illustrations, examples, discussion questions, even, at one point, a quiz of sorts (*Rhetorimachia* 131–36). (If some readers are reminded of the classic British spoof of university history courses, *1066 and All That*, the association is not altogether unfitting.) The framing letters make it clear that Anselmo intended the work to be, among other things, a sampler of his skills that would gain him entrance into intellectual circles and a job at the Imperial Chancellery in Germany: a “Masters’ thesis,” as Heinz-Jürgen Beyer has half-jokingly called efforts of this sort (Beyer 43; see also Manitius, “Einleitung” 69). (Anselmo reports a mixed reception in Mainz, but he did land the job eventually.)<sup>6</sup> The whole treatise is framed as an invective, a controversia, a judicial accusation against Anselmo’s cousin and fellow student Rotiland, who, for the purposes of this exercise, is presumed to have committed anything from rhetorical errors to extensive fornication and homicidal necromancy. To this end, the treatise includes extended narrative segments that have rightly been called “novellistic,” involving Rotiland’s outrageous and burlesque (but usually unsuccessful) sexual and magical adventures (Cizek 113). It has been noted that the *Rhetorimachia* is not really an example of a Ciceronian speech; in fact it is not a speech at all, but rather a polemical letter. It does rehearse rhetorical teaching such as the doctrine of the *status*, but its tone and content, and its sense of humor, is more Horatian than Ciceronian. It has more of the iambus, the obscene invective which Horace took over from Greek tradition, than of whatever part of the Genus Iudiciale Anselmo claims for it.

The *Rhetorimachia* specifically cites, or recreates, *Epode 5*, although it blunts it and softens its cruelty (see Manitius, “Magie und

4. Manitius, editor. *Gunzo. Epistola ad Augienses. und Anselm von Besate, Rhetorimachia*, henceforth cited as *Rhetorimachia*. See Otter, “Scurrilitas;” Krämer and Koch. For further information and judicious critical discussions of Anselmo’s work, see Bennett, “The Significance of the *Rhetorimachia*,” Bennett, “The Rhetoric of Martianus Capella,” and Cizek.

5. *Rhetorimachia* 107. On Anselmo’s studies, see Manitius, “Einleitung” 62–67.

6. *Rhetorimachia* 181–83. See Resnick.

Rhetorik” 55–58; Cizek 111). The episode is told to Anselmo during a dream vision, by Rotiland’s late father:

Maleficus quidem ille quadam nocte civitatem exiit, ad pratum quod sancti Iohannis dicimus pervenit. Quendam secum puerulum duxit, quem ibi facta fovea ad medium corporis sepelivit. Postea vero multarum petrarum exaggeratione quasi quodam muro circumdedit, tenui fossa tandem percincxit. Nares et oculos acri fumo tota nocte cruciavit. Ubi his sacris verbis tota nocte ad auroras vigilavit: “Ut est fixus adolescentulus in loco isto, sic puella in amore meo. Ut est precinctus muro et fossa, sic et ille dilectione mea. Et ut oculi consumuntur fumo, ita puellule abscessu meo.” Cum quibus verbis hec dicebat Hebraica vel potius diabolica: [Hebrew characters, or an approximation thereof] Que si non credis, ad scrinium illius vadas, in cuius angulo pixidem ligneam quam ab aliis rebus invenies remotam aperias, ubi hec scripta et alia invenies nimia. Mane vero nimis vigiliis afflictus, nimio cruciatu affectus, omnia tibi pandit puerulus. Erat enim tuus discipulus. Res ut erat exposuit, solacium scilicet nocturni laboris. Quem, cum forte ad illum ut sepius iveras, pre caeteris tuis scolaribus tecum semper duxeras. (*Rhetorimachia* 143–44)

(The scoundrel left town one night and came to the meadow we call St. John’s. He took a little boy with him; he dug a hole and buried him up to the waist. Then he piled up a lot of stones and surrounded him with a sort of wall, and finally with a thin ditch. All night he tormented his nostrils and eyes with sharp smoke. And with these magic words he kept watch all night until dawn: “As this boy is fixed in this place, so may the girls be fixed in my love. As he is surrounded by wall and ditch, so may they be surrounded by my affection. And as his eyes are tormented by the smoke, so may the girls be tormented by my absence.” And then he said these words in Hebrew, or rather the devil’s language: [Hebrew characters]. If you don’t believe it, go to his trunk, and in a corner of it you will find a wooden capsule; take it out from among the other things and open it, and you will find these things written and more than enough other things. And in the morning, weakened by lack of sleep and affected by too much

suffering, the boy disclosed everything to you. For he was one of your pupils. He has exposed matters just as they happened, as a solace for his nightly suffering. When you went to him [=Rotilandus] as you often did, you always took along this boy in preference to all your other pupils.)

In Rotiland's magical ritual, the boy is not meant to die or to be sacrificed, and he does indeed survive the ordeal and snitches about it to Anselmo, for the boy is connected with both the cousins. But the Canidian plot and Horatian satire surface elsewhere. In a different episode, we see a probable allusion to another of Horace's Canidia stories: the depraved Rotiland digging up dead bodies in a cemetery may recall *Satire* 1.8, spoken by a wooden Priapus statue. (In the *Satire*, the witches, clearly up to no good, come to dig in the garden Priapus presides over as a scarecrow, and he scares them off with an epic fart.) Moreover, the *Rhetorimachia* is constantly concerned, if not obsessed, with infanticide, thus reinforcing the *Epode's* murderous plot that is suppressed in the burlesque account of Rotiland's magic. There is a learned scholastic discussion of contraception (is it even possible to deprive humans of life when they are not even born yet?). There is a climactic moment in which Rotiland finally succeeds in killing a baby by black magic; at which point the text (or its reciter, or even the whole audience) breaks in to an accusatory song pillorying him as an infanticide ("heu de infanticidio").<sup>7</sup> And there is the overarching idea of witchcraft and necromancy, and the equally insistent preoccupation with male sexual prowess and impotence, another constant of Horace's poetic world.

Anselmo explicitly draws on things that he and his school companions have studied; so we must assume that they did study the *Epode*, or at the very least had access to it. Horace was of course routinely studied in schools. There are numerous manuscripts, typically containing the opera omnia. They are often heavily annotated, and they typically come with the scholia, or a selection of them: most commonly pseudo-Acron, or a mixed set.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, it is not necessarily the case, or even likely, that all of Horace's work was covered in class. On the contrary, by far the most annotated, embellished, worked-over, and best remembered text is the *Ars Poetica*; the poems seem to have received much less attention. In examining the manuscript annotations, Susan Reynolds, Friis-Jensen, and others have shown that the poems seem to have been studied mostly for moral instruction, and/or as examples of meter and poetic art – where they were not simply used, as most Latin texts were and still are, for fur-

7. The neumes are extant on an insert slip in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 7761; a tentative reconstruction of the tune is found in an appendix to Manitius's edition: Fickermann, "Die neuemierten Stellen im Cod. P." 213–15.

8. On commentaries, see Friis-Jensen, "Medieval Commentaries on Horace."

ther practice in Latin grammar (Friis-Jensen, “Horatius Ethicus et Liricus;” Reynolds). One wonders how teachers kept the attention of adolescent boys on such pedestrian matters if the book offered so much more exciting and spectacular information, especially if the students also had access to the *scholia*. There is sex, there is impotence, there is witchcraft, there is farting. It is true that the *scholia* favor technical details over explanations of the content, but most still explain a great number of juicy words and details (for instance in *Epode* 8). The commentary on *Epode* 5 usually contains the sensational information that some “hermaphroditic” women, such as the witch Folia, have sex with other women – eye-catching to us because female homosexuality was so rarely explicitly addressed before the early modern period.<sup>9</sup>

9. “Dicuntur quaedam mulieres habere naturam mostrosae libidinis coeundi cum feminis, quo crimine etiam Sappho male audit. Huius modo autem feminae hermafroditae dicuntur.” Keller 1, 398. See Watson 217–18. As Stratton argues, “mascula libido” may have referred not so much to same-sex desire as to a sexual aggressiveness not becoming a woman (71–105). But the Ps.–Acron gloss clearly does read it as a reference to homosexuality.

I am of course being largely facetious if I speak of “medieval sex education” in my title. It is highly unlikely that there was explicit and systematic discussion of such matters in a medieval monastic or cathedral school classroom. Whatever the boys picked up surely happened in a more casual, unorganized, perhaps even unlicensed fashion. One could even imagine that Anselmo’s and Rotiland’s late-adolescent fascination with Horace’s obscene witch is entirely extracurricular, that they are, as it were, surreptitiously flipping back in their books to the juicy notes on Canidia instead of paying attention to the lessons on grammar and meter. But Anselmo, for all his joking, is not a rebel against the educational program of which he is a product. On the contrary, he is, if anything, the model student. The book is framed with grateful and boasting letters to his teachers. Moreover, he defends himself against the detractors of his book by noting that what he is doing is far from unusual: it is what goes on in classrooms all the time – only he is the first one to write it down. There is no reason to doubt his assertion that his goal is to support and uphold the official curriculum.

So we should consider the possibility that the sexual material, including the spectacular, the embarrassing, the disturbing and the obscene, is at the very least tolerated as a co-curricular element, a not-entirely-unwelcome byproduct of studying Horace: otherwise, why even expose the pupils to it in the first place? Scholars such as Gordon Epp, Marjorie Wood and others have recently argued similarly about sexual content in the medieval rhetorics, chiefly Matthew of Vendome and Geoffrey of Vinsauf (Epp; Woods). Not only do these class texts not shy away from material that would now be considered



inappropriately sexual for young students; they seem to actively seek it out.

But what is to be gained by doing so, besides just providing a little relief in a dull school day? I should note that my two examples address the question a little obliquely, in that neither strictly concerns school boys, or at least cannot be shown to do so. Anselmo and Rotiland are young men, in their late teens or early twenties. We do not know who drew the image in the Leiden manuscript, and apart from its copious interlinear glosses, there is no particular indication that it was a book used by pre-adolescents or young adolescents. At best, the two examples can approach the question from the adult end, as it were, show how Canidia is integrated into the intellectual and personal makeup of those who studied Horace in school. All we have is two almost accidental witnesses to reception that not only do not avoid Canidia's scandalousness but deliberately "go there."

What Canidia means in Horace's work has been discussed persuasively in an article by William Fitzgerald and, above all, Ellen Oliensis's magisterial work (Fitzgerald; Oliensis, *Horace* 68–90; "Canidia, Canicula, and the Decorum;" "Erotics and Gender"). Both proceed by following up the connections, open or covert, between Canidia and other figures in Horace's poetic world. For instance, the *vetula*, the hideous old woman of *Epodes* 8 and 12 who renders Horace impotent and is viciously attacked by him for it, is really a separate figure; yet Oliensis notes that she is thematically connected to Canidia, and it is no accident that readers and critics have often conflated the two. More surprisingly, in Oliensis' analysis, Canidia is paired with Maecenas, acting as a kind of counter-figure to him (Oliensis, *Horace* 88–90). Maecenas stands at the beginning of many Horatian works and Canidia at the end: a male, paternal figure who commissions and encourages Horace's work, and a hyper-feminine but perversely non-feminine, malignant, failed mother figure who threatens to destroy him and all his poetic efforts. In the pervasive play on Horace's name, "Flaccus," and his sexual impotence, *both* Maecenas and the old woman accuse him of flaccidness, and have the power to make him flaccid. While he is thus the "victim" of both Maecenas and Canidia – that is, he corresponds to the boy in the tableau of *Epode* 5 – they are also equated with him, two avatars of Horace and his poetic career, between which he must navigate to arrive at the correct, normative, "manly" poetics.

As Fitzgerald shows, one can draw such chains of associations almost infinitely. One chain he establishes links *Epodes* 5 and 6 (with

sideways connections elsewhere): the *dens ater*, the black tooth, associated with one of the hag figures as a sign of sheer hideousness and unwholesomeness, becomes the *dens ater*, the dark fang of the dog who threatens Horace in *Epode 6* and instantly morphs into one of a chorus of hostile critics of his work. *Epode 6* thus retroactively rewrites *Epode 5*, for the connection between Canidia and *canis* is easy to make; the boy who is about to be killed for the love potion in 5 is the poet of 6, victim of rabid critics, who asks rhetorically, “shall I weep like a defenseless, unavenged boy,” “*inultus puer*,” taking up verbal cues from 5 where the boy promises precisely that he will not be unavenged.<sup>10</sup>

10. “An, si quis atro dente me petiverit,  
/ inultus ut flebo puer?” *Epode 6*,  
lines 15–16; Borzsák 137.

It is easier to say what “sex education” of this sort would do in a Classical rather than medieval context. That rhetorical education in Greece and Rome was always also an initiation into the performance of citizenship and acceptable manhood has been appreciated for a long time, and discussed recently, for instance, by Eric Gunderson. In a Roman school, the lurid, the grotesque, the sexual, for instance in the *suasoriae*, would serve in a way to cajole, humor and frighten youths into acceptable gender performances by offering them not only role models, but also counter-images that are situated somewhere between the scary and the laughable (Bloomer).

But what relevance would any of this have to schools of high medieval Western Europe? Since virtually all school boys were clerics-in-training, how can their gender performance, let alone their initiation into the macho sexuality propagated by Anselmo, be of any interest? For one thing, as Anselmo notes, these pupils, although clerics, do not necessarily plan to be priests, let alone monks. Anselmo himself, as we have seen, wants to be a member of the imperial chancellery. Even the teachers at the kinds of schools the cousins frequented apparently did not have to be priests. A little later in the eleventh century, there is a “magister Rollandus” at the Parma school, who may or may not be our Rotiland, and who had taken only lower orders and not become a priest (Manitius, “Einleitung” 76 n. 4; Greci 33).

But even those who followed a more obviously religious career path had reason to be very concerned with sex and gender performance. This period has been described as a great shake-up and reorganization of the Western European sex-gender system; and many modern historians have seen the sexuality and masculinity of clerics as the wildcard and the problem in that reorganization (McNamara; Bullough; Burgwinkle). And this is not only the judgment of mod-

ern scholars such as Jo Ann McNamara, Vern Bullough, and William Burgwinkle: Anselmo, half-jokingly, seems to be quite aware of the shift. We are just before the age of the Gregorian reforms, in which the sexual ‘purity’ of the clergy became a central concern, and clerical marriage was definitively forbidden and shut down. There had been stirrings of this new zeal earlier in the eleventh century, including a synod at Mainz and one at Pavia (both venues with which Anselmo had connections) (Laudage 84–88). Clerical marriage had been tolerated, even normative, in the Milanese (‘Ambrosian’) church that jealously guarded its independence and distinctive customs (as indeed it does, in small ways, to this day). Anselmo cheerfully insists that, as a secular cleric and a Milanese one at that, he would be entirely within his rights to have sex, only he *chooses* not to. But that right came under violent attack in Milan only a few years later, with the unrest surrounding the Patarine movement, and Milanese clergy were forced into celibacy just like Catholic priests all over the Latin church (Violante; Golinelli; Alzati). This is also the age of Peter Damian, who, by the way, also went to school in Parma, although probably a few years before Anselmo and Rotiland. His violent diatribe against homosexuality and his fanatical insistence on clerical purity are well known, although, as Burgwinkle has argued, in so doing he also invented a queer clerical subjectivity (Burgwinkle). Anselmo is resolutely heterosexual and does not necessarily lend himself to queer readings, apart from the general homosociality of young men who joke about sex together; but it is easy to see why young students like Anselmo and Rotiland, irrespective of their precise inclinations and career ambitions, would have been preoccupied with the sexual roles open to them.

With this general framework in mind, let us read our two disparate witnesses of *Epode 5* reception and see what they can tell us about high medieval ‘sex education.’

The image in the Leiden manuscript is, in one way, unpromising. It is a one-off, so it hardly constitutes ‘data;’ it is one reader’s reaction to what he was reading. It is more in the nature of an elaborate (and quite skillful) doodle than an “official,” planned illustration. The writings around the image are perhaps also a let-down. There is the terse caption “malefica” to designate Canidia. The other caption, pronounced partly illegible even by Munk Olsen (the highlighting and its oxidation obliterated the top part) appears to be, as far as one can make out, a simple instruction to the reader: *Epode 6* should start here but does not. There is a blank space (in which the drawing was

added), and the next couple of pages contain treatises on Horatian metrics. So the caption helpfully directs the reader to the right place to continue: "... et incipe lectionem quid vi merentes hospites vexas canis," the start of *Epode 6*.

Yet the picture does yield a few ideas. In the first place, it makes the probably unsurprising point that even if discouraged, readers did notice and respond to the text's juicy contents. It creates the continuity between *Epodes 5* and *6* that we have noted – in fact it demands it ("where is *Epode 6*?"). And although I am sure it is not an intended effect, it is nice for my argument that it also specifically invites readers to leap right over the earnest philological tracts that follow on the next page. Moreover, the caption directly addresses the reader (the first word of the almost-obliterated part appears to be "Lector") and comments on his reading process.

This address to the reader links the image to the only other iconography that is regularly associated with Horace: the monsters that often illustrate the beginning of the *Ars Poetica*, which begins memorably by enjoining writers not to produce monstrous hybrids in their writing, through the analogy of an incompetent or silly painter who would combine a human head, bird feathers, and a fish tail.<sup>11</sup> In her article on these *Ars Poetica* monsters, Claudia Villa notes that they turn up in the period we are talking about, that is, the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Villa). They are disordered, mismatched female bodies, often sirens, both alluring and off-putting, sometimes but not always sexualized. But they always signify wrongness, unnaturalness; and they embody the readers' distraction, just as they embark on a canonical school text. As Villa notes, in one way the drawings obediently illustrate Horace's text; in another way they go directly against it, by depicting the very thing he says no sane person would even imagine.<sup>12</sup> In one eleventh-century illustration (München, Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14685, f. 81r) we even see, perversely, Horace (or perhaps the hypothetical painter) drawing from nature the non-natural creature that could not possibly exist (Villa 195–96, and fig. 10). The monster's femaleness, Villa argues, ties into the pervasive concern in Classical rhetoric about the right, manly style and the avoidance of anything that might be seen as effeminate. There is thus an interesting ambiguity about who or what to identify with. The monster in one way represents that which you would not under any circumstances want to produce: a forbidden object, if you will. Seen in another way, it represents that which you would not under any cir-

11. Oliensis links the monster to Canidia, but without reference to the medieval drawings. ("Canidia, Canicula" 107–09.)

12. "contro l'invito di Orazio" (189).

cumstances want to be: female, sexually weird, hybrid, disordered – a forbidden body image, a forbidden subjectivity.

The Canidia drawing is similarly paradoxical and perverse. It, too, is a ‘fantasy’ picture that does not precisely illustrate the text: it depicts a moment that is not actually in the text (in the epode, the boy has not yet been dug in), but its projected outcome. The image is meant to be horrifying, and it is also clearly sexualized. This is an overwhelming Canidia, dancing aggressively over the little boy’s head. Although she is fully clothed, nudity is hinted at. We make out her body under the clothes, particularly her thighs; we see her bare feet (and those of the other witches);<sup>13</sup> and the boy’s gaze goes directly up her skirts to her crotch. She is sprinkling something over him, apparently into his mouth: apart from the obscene, androgynous implications of her holding a dripping wand, she also appears to be perversely feeding him, even as she starves him – a decidedly *not* motherly gesture, reminding us of the boy’s pathetic appeal to her non-existent maternal instincts (Oliensis, “Canidia, Canicula” 128). The presence of an audience of crudely drawn witches at the top right makes his predicament not only murderous but also shaming. The viewer’s involvement in the picture wavers between the roles of voyeuristic observer (thus aligning him with the witches) and victim, especially if the viewer is a young male himself. A viewer’s impulse is probably to refuse any such identification, to distance the image altogether; but, like all obscenity, it has the power of puncturing one’s defenses. The image is threatening but in a grotesque, macabre, comic way that invites nervous, embarrassed titters more than real nightmares, from modern viewers and most likely medieval viewers also.

In the *Rhetorimachia*, embarrassment and exposure is the name of the game, at least for poor Rotiland, whose sexual and rhetorical performance is being publicly dissected and denounced – to be sure, in a comic mode, again inviting derision and nervous laughter rather than actual contempt or actual shame. Here, too, the paths of identification are complex: both protagonists, Anselmo and Rotiland, can be seen as the witch or the boy, or as Horace – and as each other. They are nominally at opposite ends of this invective, as aggressor and victim; but they are also cousins and fellow students, and since it is only a make-believe aggression, they easily become doubles of each other. In the Epode 5 episode, they share the boy as a pupil. Rotiland *is* Canidia, in this and in other magic rituals; Anselmo, too, hints that he has been suspected, wrongly of course, of magic

13. *Satire* 1.8 mentions the witches’ bare feet.

and love charms. Rotiland, in other adventures, is also Horace: the frustrated, impotent Horace of *Epodes* 8 and 12. As in Horace, and elsewhere, the comic self-debasement and joking about impotence becomes a covert boast about sexual potency. Anselmo contrasts himself with Rotiland, boasting that he himself is very potent indeed, in fact may need to carry a contraceptive charm with him at all times, although he denies doing so. But the impotence charge strangely works for Rotiland too: one senses that he does not emerge diminished from this flyting, quite the contrary. I am not sure I can fully describe the mechanism: perhaps it is apotropaic, or it works *ex contrario*, suggesting that if you can afford to joke about impotence in public, you really must be quite sure of your masculinity.

But why engage in such games? There are many fruitful ways of approaching the question. Most critics have explained sexual content and sexual discomfort in medieval school materials either as a harmless diversion and invitation to macho camaraderie, or else as a kind of crude aversion therapy: the goal, in that reading, is to initiate young clerics into a life of chastity by making sex appear repugnant (Epp). Or one could go for a more complex psychoanalytical reading, perhaps in a Kristevan key; one could focus on Canidia's 'bad mother' aspect and explain the disgusted fascination with her as an abjection of the Mother, the price of entry into adult manhood. Perhaps this abjection is even more important, and emotionally charged, to young clerics who are being initiated into an all-male community, at a time when societal expectations for them are rapidly changing and becoming much more restrictive, to the point of banning them from any sexual expression of their masculinity. Both of these dynamics are surely in play; but what we are seeing in these reactions to Horace is not just a negation. There is more than just a small residue of enjoyment, of thrill. And it appears to be more than simply the attraction of the Forbidden: that might be better served by, say, Anselmo's more straightforward stories of amorous adventures with pretty young women, or better yet, stories of triumphant sexual conquests. Why seek out the intense embarrassment of impotence, and of seeing oneself, however glancingly and fleetingly, as Canidia's victim?

Since this is a virtual, vicarious, playful form of embarrassment, stemming from a reading encounter and depending on a fleeting, partial identification with a character, in explaining it I have found most helpful not so much the classic sociological approaches, such as Erving Goffman's influential framing of embarrassment, face loss

and ‘facework’ as a powerful regulator of social interactions; but, rather, a more ludic approach, coming, not coincidentally, from students of theater. That embarrassment has a ‘humorous’ element is noted by sociologists also. Some have shown how close its expression is to amusement (so that test subjects who are shown photographs of amused or embarrassed people can usually but not always distinguish between the two). My favorite experiment, which involved “directed facial action” – *i.e.*, an exercise designed to elicit embarrassment by directing subjects to make strange faces on camera and hold the expression until permitted to relax – bifurcated, making some subjects feel embarrassed and others merely amused (Keltner; Billig).

The psychologists conducting the experiment note that it draws on one of the chief features of embarrassment, namely a loss of physical control; and that is one of the elements that links embarrassment to play. Gail Kern Paster investigates ‘uncontrol’ in her helpful reading of the Tudor interlude *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* (Paster). This farce has striking similarities to the Canidia scene: there, too, a male is physically immobilized and sexually shamed by dominant older women, who try to mend his split trousers (with him still in them), giving rise to all sorts of jokes about needles, phalluses, anal control and anal sex. Paster links this farce to children’s struggle for physical autonomy against their caregivers, chiefly their mothers, and the resulting anxieties about physical boundaries. Roger Grainger also links embarrassment to boundaries, defining embarrassment as “anxiety aroused when psychological defenses are put under pressure” (Grainger 59). Both scholars, since they are writing about theater, talk of specifically theatrical boundary crossings, namely identification. Paster considers the physical presence and emotional involvement of the Elizabethan boy actors, who are in one way protected against “real” embarrassment by the ludic situation and by their professional distance from their stage role – but nonetheless bring forth Hodge’s embarrassment in their acting, as well as the actions of the gamers who inflict the embarrassment. Grainger considers the audience, who should be protected from embarrassment (or any other emotion inhering in the play’s action) precisely by being spectators, safely separated from the action; but that protection is easy to puncture, and many plays, or stagings of plays, deliberately transgress these boundaries. As our everyday experience of vicarious embarrassment (and several sociological studies of that phenomenon) make clear, “in these matters ego boundaries seem especially weak”

(Goffman 99). We have already seen similar boundary-crossings in the various identifications in Horace's epode and in our two medieval takes on it.

The 'going there,' the deliberate breaching of viewers' defenses and provocation of embarrassment, is of course ludic as well. Roger Caillois lists uncontrol, or what he calls "ilinx" (vertigo) as one of the four basic types of play: it comprises all games that consist in deliberately letting go of physical and/or psychological control, from small children submitting to a tickling, or falling down in 'ring-a-ring-a-roses,' to adult games like sky-diving (Caillois 12, 81–98). To be sure, control is relinquished only to be regained. The 'goal' of any such game – if games have goals – may in fact be to reassert control and become better aware of its mechanisms. Children putting their physical control at risk by balancing on a fence acquire better muscle tone, a better sense of equilibrium, and greater self-confidence by doing so. Edward Gross and Gregory P. Stone note that playing children in all cultures continually upset each other's balance and composure, by shoving, tripping, and pulling at each other's clothing – with a similarly educative effect (if perhaps not intention) (13–14).

But it would be wrong to focus only on the didactic aspect of "ilinx." The enjoyment of the vertigo, of the momentary loss of equilibrium, is not to be underestimated. It is, after all, not for some sort of moral gain but for thrills that we subject ourselves to scares like roller coaster rides. Likewise, we would be wrong to discount the pleasure of discovering the evil witch Canidia and her abominable sexual misdeeds, and of briefly trying on the role of both perpetrator and victim. It is a ludic letting-go, which is far more than a moralistic warning, and more even than a carnivalesque safety valve. Entertaining such 'uncontrol' is not merely a rare exception from one's usual composure, but a part of one's intellectual, psychological, and (even for celibate clerics) sexual being. The celibate life, as Anselmo pretty much articulates, is not merely a negation or repression, but a constant negotiation, both stressful and exciting. Anselmo's announcement, "I could have sex but I choose not to," may be more profound than even he realizes. By a complex mix of mechanisms, from identification to misidentification, from embarrassment to boasting, joking to earnest, these Horatian themes encourage the students to work out an appropriate sexual identity for themselves – and keep working at it, not without some thrilling admixture of the inappropriate.



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