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THE CENTRAL SIMILES OF HORACE'S CLEOPATRA ODE

Critics have long noticed that the similes in Horace's *Cleopatra Ode* are pivotal to the poem, that through them the vengeful triumph of the opening stanzas is modulated into admiration for Cleopatra's courage in facing death. At the same time, Cleopatra, who enters the poem drunk and out of control, emerges as an example of Stoic fortitude, able to contemplate the collapse of her kingdom with serenity and to cheat Octavian of his triumph by suicide.¹ Separating these radically different visions of Cleopatra is this passage (1.37.17-21):

. . . accipiter velut
molles columbas aut leporem citus
venator in campis nivalis
Haemoniae, daret ut catenis
fatale monstrum. . .

As a hawk pursues soft doves, or as a swift hunter in the fields of snowy Thessaly pursues a rabbit, so Octavian pursued Cleopatra from Actium in order to put her in chains as a fatal monster. But in the verses that illustrate Cleopatra's flight so vividly, Horace charts another voyage as well, a voyage of the soul. A drunken queen became a Stoic philosopher. On the way, clearly, Cleopatra has suffered a sea change. As the verbal link between the two Cleopatras, the similes have been examined by scholars who seek to find in them the reason for Cleopatra's moral redemption.²

Why, after all, should similes likening Cleopatra to frightened animals prepare us for the ennoblement of her character? The first part of my paper is devoted to this problem. As I shall argue, the doves and rabbit not only convey the pathos of Cleopatra's situation, but also carry us back through her ancestors to northern Greece, from whose icy fields the Macedonians had poured out to conquer the world. If this is correct, the similes put Cleopatra into psychological and historical perspective. Through them Horace explains her spiritual renewal and at the same time gives us a glimpse of the inevitable historical process by which empires arise in adversity, flourish, and

¹ For the antithesis between the opening and closing stanzas, see especially Steele Commager, "Horace, *Carmina* 1.37," *Phoenix* 12 (1958) 48-52, and Brooks Otis, "A Reading of the Cleopatra Ode," *Arethusa* 1 (1968) 52-57. I would like to thank Jerry Clack, Ernst Fredricksmeier, Edwin Barrett, and Margaret Hurley for their suggestions and criticisms.

² Commager (note 1, above) 48-50; A. T. Davis, "Cleopatra Rediviva," *G&R* 16 (1969) 92; Fred Mench, Jr., "The Ambiguities of the Similes and of *Fatale Monstrum* in Horace, Ode I, 37," *AJP* 93 (1972) 316-318. J. V. Luce, "Cleopatra as *Fatale Monstrum* (Horace, *Carm.* 1.37.21)," *CQ* 13 (1963) 251 ff., puts the pivot in *fatale monstrum*.

come to nothing. In Cleopatra's fate, Horace implies, we see Rome's future and eventually that of every nation that rises to eminence.

To be sure, Octavian, not Cleopatra, is the subject of the similes. Horace brightens his achievement by allusions to Achilles and Hercules. Like Octavian, Achilles is compared to a hawk in pursuit of a dove when he chases Hector around the walls of Troy (*Il.* 22.139-140):

ête kirkos oresphin, elaphrotatos peteênôn,
rhêidiôs oimêse meta trêrônâ peleian.

Commentators point out the echo, which Horace's readers would surely have noticed.³ Moreover, the diction of Horace's simile evokes the larger canvas of Homeric epic, with its liking for ornamental details. Thus, the doves are soft, the hunter is swift, the hunt takes place in Haemonia, which is snowy. As we look at the poem more closely, however, we will find that these adjectives are not merely ornamental. In the second simile, Bickel points out, Horace keeps Achilles' duel with Hector before the reader.⁴ First, the adjective *citus* evokes Homer's epithet for Achilles, "swift footed". Achilles is evoked by *Haemoniae*, since for Horace's contemporary readers the adjective *Haemonius* was sufficient to bring him to mind. Thus, the confrontation between Octavian and Cleopatra is elevated by the parallel with the duel between Achilles and Hector. Associated with the greatest of the heroes at Troy, Octavian is made even more heroic by the lines that follow: *daret ut catenis/ fatale monstrum* (20-21). Octavian's achievement is put on a level with those of Hercules, who was renowned for his prowess in vanquishing monsters.⁵

But when we hold up our glass of Caecuban wine, we find that we are no longer celebrating Octavian's victory, but rather Cleopatra's glorious death. Her miraculous transformation is left obscure and surely this transformation is the mainspring of the poem.

Some critics have argued that the similes make us feel sorry for Cleopatra and in this way prepare us for the shift in her characterization.⁶ But pity does not lead naturally to admiration, doves and rabbits do not die magnificent deaths, and for a frightened rabbit to change into a *fatale monstrum* is jarring.⁷ For while it may

³ See Nisbet and Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book I* (Oxford 1970) 415-16.

⁴ Ernst Bickel, "Politische Sibylleneklogen," *RhM* 97 (1954) 211-13, citing Propertius 2.1.63, 3.1.26; Ovid, *Amores* 2.8a.7, *Epist.* 13.2, *Ars Am.* 1.682, *Fast.* 5.400; Statius *Silvae* 2.6.33.

⁵ Luce (note 2, above) 254; Raoul Verdière, "'Fatale Monstrum' (Hor., *Carm.*, 1, 37, 21)," *Maia* 20 (1968) 9.

⁶ Davis (note 2, above) 92; Mench (note 2, above) 316-18. The rabbit and dove were proverbially timid. The Greek word for rabbit had a secondary meaning of coward.

⁷ W. H. Alexander suggested that Horace was carried away by his own propaganda, "*Nunc tempus erat*," *CJ* 39 (1944) 233; W. R. Johnson, "A Queen, A Great Queen? Cleopatra and the Politics of Misrepresentation," *Arion* 6 (1967) 389, finds the similes so transparently meaningless that he argues that nobody was supposed to be deceived by them.

be necessary to elevate Cleopatra to an opponent worthy of Octavian, where is the victory in bagging a rabbit? I would, therefore, like to suggest that the Homeric resonance of the similes does not exhaust their meaning for the poem.

The crux of the poem, as critics have noticed, is the dichotomy between the two Cleopatras. That same dichotomy is revealed in the central transitional passage by the juxtaposition of the two Cleopatras likened to pathetic animals and to the *fatale monstrum*. It is even given a physical dimension, I suggest, by the two separate journeys the reader is asked to imagine. While Octavian pursues Cleopatra to Egypt, the similes carry us to Thessaly. Now the ethical gulf between the drunken queen and the philosopher queen is made visible in the ocean that separates snowy Thessaly from luxurious Egypt.

As the queen seeks Egypt and her death, the similes carry us to northern Greece and the area that bordered on the Ptolemies' original home. In Latin poetry, the distinction between Thessaly and Macedonia was consistently blurred.

If this is correct, the similes carry us back through time as well as through space: to northern Greece and to the origins of Cleopatra's dynasty. The creatures in the similes also have associations with the Ptolemies which scholars have not noticed. The queens of Ptolemaic Egypt were identified with Aphrodite, whose bird is the dove. The founder of the Ptolemaic line bore the name Lagos, which is very similar to the Greek word for rabbit. As I hope to prove, Cleopatra's sea change can be explained by the allusions within the similes to her ancestors.

The soft doves evoke Aphrodite because the doves are her birds and are often used to symbolize love. For example, Apollonius uses the portent of a hawk and a dove to symbolize the inferiority of military tactics to erotic ones.⁸ Closer to Horace's time, the dove is used to symbolize Venus in the poetry of Vergil and Ovid.⁹ The doves of Horace's poem, then, have a particular appropriateness, because, as queen of Ptolemaic Egypt, Cleopatra was associated with Aphrodite.

As we learn (through inscriptions and through poetry), the Ptolemaic queens were identified with Aphrodite.¹⁰ Since Horace was himself steeped in Alexandrian poetry¹¹ and expected his readers to be as well educated, we may presume a knowledge of the Ptolemaic queens' deification, especially at a time when interest in the dynasty was

⁸ Apollonius, *Arg.* 3.540-554.

⁹ Vergil, *Aen.* 6.190; Ovid, *Met.* 15.386.

¹⁰ For the identification of Ptolemaic queens with Aphrodite, see P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972) I. 197, 229, 238-40, 243, 667 (Arsinoe II); 240 (Berenice I); 221, 240, 244 (Cleopatra III).

For the deification of Berenice I, see Theocritus 15.106-111, 17.45-50. For epigrams on Arsinoe's temple, see Callimachus 14, Poseidippus 12 and 13, Hedylus 4 (Gow-Page). Callimachus' *Lock of Berenice* is fragment 110 Pfeiffer.

¹¹ See, for example, the commentary of Nisbet and Hubbard (note 3, above) xiv.

stimulated not only by literary borrowing but also by Cleopatra's affairs with Antony and Caesar, and by the recent war.

A reader of Horace not educated in Greek would have access to other sources of information about the identification of the Ptolemaic queens, and especially of Cleopatra, with Aphrodite. Catullus had translated into Latin Callimachus' *Lock of Berenice*, which alludes to the deification of Arsinoe. Cleopatra's first meeting with Antony, when she dressed as Aphrodite, was notorious;¹² and Cleopatra's statue made of gold still stood in the temple of Venus Genetrix.¹³

Horace had a particular reason for using the plural *columbas*. Granted the ancients' love of pluralizing singular nouns, it is significant in this context that Horace chose to qualify the sense of a duel in the simile by making one of its members plural. If Horace is charting a voyage back through time to the origin of the Ptolemaic line, the use of the plural is appropriate since the doves evoke both Cleopatra and her predecessors. In their flight we are carried to the founder of the race: Lagus.

Lagus, or, momentarily to adopt Greek orthography, Lagos, had a name resembling the Greek word for rabbit: *lagos*.

The Romans' familiarity with Greek is well established. Certainly Horace demands of his readers a knowledge of the Greek language and literature.¹⁴ The Greek word for rabbit is one that Romans would be especially likely to know.¹⁵ A contemporary of Horace, the grammarian Tryphon, wrote a chapter on the word concluding that *lagoos* is used in epic, *lagôs* in Attic, and *lagos* in other dialects.¹⁶ A Roman concerned with speaking Greek properly would have known the Greek word for *lepus* in all its manifold declensions.

Could such a Roman also translate *lagos* to Lagos? Puns on proper names, as Aristotle and Cicero both recognized, are rhetorically effective.¹⁷ In the Roman period, bilingual puns are common. Trained by their poets to find hidden meanings in words, the Romans could no doubt have connected *lagos* with Lagos in a Ptolemaic context.

Moreover, there is evidence that the ancients knew of such a connection. In the Roman tradition, the connection is made explicitly. For them, Lagus was to enjoy a literary after-life that eclipsed his

¹² Plutarch, *Antony* 26.2-3.

¹³ Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 2.102.

¹⁴ In *Ode* 1.33.2, he draws on our linguistic and literary abilities by *inmitis Glycera* so that the girl becomes the personification of Sappho's famous description of love, *glukupikron*. Similarly, when warning Grosphus against ambition, he puns on the Greek meaning of Grosphus, "throwing spear," when he says we shoot for too many things (*Ode* 2.16.17). The *Cleopatra Ode* itself has a precedent in ancient literature, the poem (332 L.-P.) in which Alcaeus calls on his friends to celebrate the death of the tyrant Myrsilus. Recognizing the allusion, the reader is taken by surprise when Horace's poem ends with loathing transformed into admiration.

¹⁵ Lucian, *Psuedo Sophist* 3.

¹⁶ Athenaeus 9.400a - VanVelsen 13.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Rh.* 2.23.28; Cicero, *De Or.* 2.62. See Eugene S. McCartney, "Puns and Plays on Proper Names," *CJ* 14 (1919) 343-58.

actual one. The poets of the Silver Age coined the adjective *Lageus* to denote Alexandrian.¹⁸ We may imagine that when the Ptolemies were more important, during the war with Antony especially, the Romans knew the name of Lagus. We find evidence as well that the Romans connected Lagus with a rabbit. A scholiast on Lucan, seeking to explain the meaning of the adjective *Lageus*, explains that it was derived from a rock in the shape of a rabbit.

If this is true, the two halves of the poem might be brought together in the images of frightened animals. On the surface they vividly describe Cleopatra's panic as she flees to Egypt. On a deeper level, as the last Ptolemy moves towards death, the similes carry us north to the origins of her race. A reader capable of following both journeys simultaneously is rewarded by seeing the two Cleopatras meet and merge, as the madwoman is transformed into a sage. In fact, we come to see the world from her perspective, as she changes from a *lagos* to a descendant of Lagos.

Traditionally, pride in one's lineage has been an important inspiration for courage. Homer's heroes stride out to face death adorned in patronymics. Closer to Cleopatra is Catiline, as portrayed by Sallust, whose life, as Luce has shown, follows the same pattern as Cleopatra's.¹⁹ His dissolute life was redeemed by his bravery in death, since he fought *memor generis*.²⁰ The contemporary judgment on Cleopatra's death, according to Plutarch, was that she had died worthy of her ancestors.²¹ Horace more allusively invites the reader to the same conclusion. We are encouraged to enter Cleopatra's mind as she prepares to meet her ancestors with the pride of a Homeric hero.

The change can be sensed in the following stanza. At first, Cleopatra is viewed from the point of view of Octavian, *fatale monstrum*. Immediately afterward *quae* rings out triumphantly over the neuter gender of its antecedent, *monstrum*. In the upright or nominative case, *quae* is subject of the verb (unlike the creatures of the previous stanza), and emphasizes Cleopatra's control of her destiny. Freed from the chains Octavian planned for her, Cleopatra dies *generosius*, "more nobly", a word that has connotations of noble origin.

Cleopatra's story should also be viewed in the context of ancient political thought. Classical historians propounded the dangers of prosperity. The Macedonians, according to Livy, were especially prone to decadence because they degenerated to the level of the peoples they conquered in Persia, in Seleucia, and in Egypt.²² Strabo, too, found

¹⁸ *Lageus*: Lucan 1.684, 8.692, 10.394, 414, 522; Silius Italicus 1.196, 10.322; Martial 10.26.

¹⁹ Luce (note 2, above) 253.

²⁰ Sallust *Catiline* 60.6. Another parallel is Sardanapalos, who, according to Ctesias (frg. 20 Müller), lived extravagantly, but died nobly.

²¹ Plutarch *Antony* 85-86. Cf. Adolf Kiessling, *Q. Horatius Flaccus. Oden und Epoden* (Zürich 1964) at 1.37.21.

²² Livy 38.17.

luxury to be the reason for the Ptolemies' downfall.²³ The corrupting effect of wealth and climate is suggested in the *Cleopatra Ode* by the similes. *Molles* and *nivalis* frame lines 18-19. In a compressed and allusive way, they suggest how the Macedonians were hardened by the snows of Northern Greece and softened in the luxurious climate of Egypt.

Through the similes, the contradictions in Cleopatra's character are resolved. Her lack of control, intemperance, and delusions of grandeur exemplify her decadence, which Horace attributes to the softening effect of prosperity (*molles*). Her recklessness brought her to the point where she was hunted down like a pathetic animal. Then, by a brilliant paradox, Cleopatra's nobility and courage are revealed in the very moment of her degradation and panic, when she regains her dignity by determining to end her life.

But the glory of the last Ptolemy makes the historic darkness the more oppressive. Ptolemaic Egypt was part of the Macedonian empire that Alexander had established. The Macedonian empire replaced the Persian empire, which had succeeded its own predecessors. History tells us that no nation's power is imperishable. In this poem, Horace commemorates the passing away of a corrupt dynasty. In the following poem, which is the final poem of the first book, Horace decries luxury, which proved so fatal to Cleopatra, *Persicos odi, puer, apparatus*. Eventually, Rome must follow Macedonia and Persia. The ancestral wine which Horace urges us to drink turns too easily into the Maerotic wine that drove Cleopatra mad.

The passage throws into question Octavian's glorification through being compared with Achilles and Hercules. The simile of hawk and doves recalls Achilles' pursuit of Hector before the walls of Troy. Achilles was doomed to die shortly after he had killed Hector. Victors and vanquished are buried under the same earth. In the same way, the allusion to Hercules the monster-killer is ominous. Dressed in a lion's skin and given to murderous rages, Hercules came to resemble the monsters that he hunted. Eventually he dies from the poison of the Hydra he had killed.

Ironically, Achilles and Hercules, to whom Octavian is compared, were occasionally said to be the ancestors of Alexander the Great. In fact, he claimed them both as ancestors and also as his models. Therefore, Alexander's prestige is added to Octavian's victory—an ominous adornment.

The Ptolemies were the most successful of Alexander's successors, living in a capital both founded by Alexander and named for him. Indeed, through the Ptolemies' machinations, Alexander's body now was housed in Alexandria. To stress the connection between the Ptolemies and Alexander, a cult was established for them jointly. Moreover, a report, perhaps encouraged by the Ptolemies, circulated claiming that the father of Ptolemy was not Lagus but Philip. The

²³ Strabo 17.1.11.

Ptolemies, in that case, were descended from Alexander's half-brother. Propertius alludes to this tradition in his account of the battle of Actium, where he says that Cleopatra is of Philip's blood, *Philippeo sanguine*.²⁴ Given the well-publicized intimacy of Cleopatra's family with Alexander the Great, it is surprising that Horace should have connected Alexander's ancestors, Achilles and Hercules, not with Alexander's heir but with her destroyer. Now Alexander's invincible energy has passed from the Macedonians to the Romans, since Octavian, who is known to have admired Alexander, is credited with his qualities.²⁵ Eventually, Horace suggests, the energy will move elsewhere, as the Romans succumb to the corruptions of success, whose dangers are the subject of much of Horace's poetry.²⁶

In this context, I suggest, we can understand why Cleopatra is called a *fatale monstrum*. Since she managed to ensnare two of Rome's greatest generals, monster is perhaps not too strong a term to express the disgust of a patriotic Roman. But the primary meaning of *monstrum* according to Roman philologists is, however, "warning".²⁷ *Fatale monstrum* in that case means a warning of what is fated to happen. Cleopatra led in chains through Rome would have given a thoughtful observer a glimpse of Rome's future.

Scipio wept, we are told, when Carthage burned.²⁸ He saw how fleeting was power, how lightly it passed from one nation to the next. In illustration of this, he quoted to Polybius Hector's famous line to Andromache, "I know in my heart that Troy will fall." His breadth of vision, which Polybius admired, could see Rome's ruin in the sack of Carthage.

Like Scipio, Horace saw Rome's downfall in her present triumph.

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²⁴ Propertius 3.11.40; cf. Curtius 9.8.22; Pausanias 1.6.2.

²⁵ Jasper Griffin, "The Creation of Characters in the *Aeneid*," in *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, edited by Barbara K. Gold (Austin 1982) p. 124.

²⁶ Horace, *Od.* 1.12.43, 3.24.47-63, 4.9.45-52.

²⁷ Cicero, *De Div.* 1.42.93; Varro in Servius' commentary on Vergil, *Aen.* 2.681.

²⁸ Polybius 38.21; Appian 8.132; Diodorus 32.24. For a definitive commentary on the passage, see F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, vol. 3 (Oxford 1979) 722-25.