

Restoring the Proper Family

A Boy's Triumph Over "The Anti-Mother" in Horace's *Epode 5*

Carol Wu

University of Pennsylvania

Canidia is one of ancient Rome's most infamous witches. Occupying a major role in three of Horace's poems (*Satire 1.8*, *Epode 5*, and *Epode 17*) and mentioned in another three (*Epode 3*, *Satire 2.1*, and *Satire 2.8*), Canidia is not only a combination of existing cultural manifestations and Horace's imagination but also an influence on numerous other works from the early Roman Empire.¹

However, Canidia is not merely a witch. To fully dissect her representation in Horace's *Epode 5*, this paper will be divided into two parts. This first will build on existing scholarship, including those of Maxwell Teitel Paule, Meredith Prince, and Kimberly Stratton, to argue that the Canidia in Horace's *Epode 5* is a combination of distinct but intertwined cultural figures, more specifically a witch, a demon, and a Fury, making her the ultimate Roman anti-mother figure. The second part will elucidate how, as the epode progresses, Canidia loses the powers that come with each of these three identities, reversing the power dynamic between her and the epode's unnamed young hero, who represents the socially approved "proper family." In other words, while *Epode 5* might initially appear to be about a witch's failure to achieve her desired spell, it in fact delineates the fall of the Roman anti-mother and the restoration of family integrity.

Cultural Background

Horace was born in Venusia in 65 BCE and schooled in Rome and Athens, where he studied Greek and Roman classics.² He was

¹ Paule, Maxwell Teitel. *Canidia, Rome's First Witch*, chap. I. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Accessed March 12, 2023. <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.5040/9781350003910>.

already renowned as a poet by the time he published *The Epodes* around 29 BCE.³ The Roman Republic had been teetering since the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE; two years after the release of *The Epodes*, the Republic dissolved and Augustus became the first ruler of the Roman Empire.⁴

Although the exact dates of the writing of *The Epodes* are unknown, scholars speculate that *Epode 5* had been composed before *Satire 1.8*, making it Horace's first poem in which Canidia plays a prominent part.⁵ In analyzing Canidia in *Epode 5*, this paper shall also consider her portrayals in *Satire 1.8* and *Epode 17*; however, because Canidia's specific depictions differ across the three works, *Satire 1.8* and *Epode 17* shall only act as rough references shedding light on Horace's general attitude towards Canidia as a concept rather than be treated as works involving the exact same character.

The plot in *Epode 5* is simple. An aging witch desperate to regain the lost affections of her lover, Varus, Canidia replicates the rites of Medea with the help of three other witches, Sagana, Veia, and Folia, and gathers a list of gruesome ingredients as well as a boy whose marrow and liver she plans to harvest after starving him to death. When the magic does not work, the boy, still alive, switches from pitiable pleading to curse-hurling, threatening to return as a Fury and avenge his own death. The poem then ends abruptly without revealing the boy's final fate.⁶

Canidia as a Combination of Witch, Demon, and Fury

Before analyzing the ways in which Canidia disrupts Roman expectations of "the proper family" and defies the associated concept of domestic femininity, it would be helpful to examine those expectations first. The ideal Roman woman is "a faithful

² Sedgwick, Henry Dwight. *Horace: A Biography*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1947. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.4159/harvard.9780674420328>, 1-15.

³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Roman Empire." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 25, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire>.

⁵ Paule, Maxwell Teitel. *Canidia, Rome's First Witch*, chap. III.

⁶ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett. Horace, *The Odes and Epodes* (Cambridge, MA, 1914), pp. 375-381.

wife and mother.”⁷ She would work to ensure that she and her husband lived “in harmony” and procreated and nurtured “legitimate children” (“children who were the progeny of their father”) to support society and “maintain family lineages.”⁸ The proper family, therefore, consisted of a father, a nurturing mother, and one or more children.

Canidia, however, is *not* a nurturing mother. To create her, Horace first drew on contemporaneous literary and social stereotypes of the witch, before adding characteristics of the child-eating demon and the parricide-revenging Fury to make her even more menacing.

Canidia’s physical characteristics are reminiscent of the Roman witch. Whereas witches might have once appeared shapely and beautiful under the pens of Greek authors, Roman witches were “old, ugly, and frightening,” with “frightful clothing to match their evil dispositions.”⁹ Such depictions are consistent with Horace’s depictions of Canidia in *Epode 5* as a “filthy hag” with “locks and disheveled head entwined with short vipers” and who “gnaw[ed] her uncut nail with malignant tooth.”¹⁰ In fact, Canidia’s very name invokes “old age.”¹¹

In addition to physical appearance, Canidia’s association with predatory magic and masculine lust (because she was seeking to proactively seduce Varus) also fits with literary depictions of witches at the time. Whereas ancient Athenian witches often used magic for defensive purposes, Roman magic was “grotesque, predatory, and cruel,” not in the least because they were often used for seeking “erotic love,” a masculine privilege at the time.¹² Thus

⁷ Phang, Sara Elise. *Daily Life of Women in Ancient Rome*. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2022, 136.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹ Spaeth, Barbette Stanley. *From Goddess to Hag: The Greek and the Roman Witch in Classical Literature. Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁰ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett.

¹¹ Oliensis, E. “Canidia, Canicula, and The Decorum of Horace ‘Epodes.’” *Arethusa*. 24, no. 1 (1991): 107–138.

¹² Stratton, Kimberly. *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 94. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2007. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.7312/stra13836>

Roman witches suffered from “masculine lust” and predatory behavior, of both of which Canidia is also guilty.¹³

Ancient Rome’s disapproval of female masculinity also had social roots. By the late Roman Republic, women had gained the right to inherit, allowing many to gain wealth, independence, and even social influence.¹⁴ However, some men saw women’s freedom as a threat.¹⁵ According to Livy, Cato the Younger had argued for the continuation of a law that limited women’s ability to accumulate financial assets.¹⁶ Others policed women’s behavior through linking female independence with promiscuousness and undesirable masculinity.¹⁷ As one scholar, Kimberly Stratton, notes, “[t]he portrait of predatory, lustful, and violent *sagae* presented in Roman literature draws on and dramatically reinforces a parallel discourse of women’s dangerous independence that circulated as early as the third century BCE.”¹⁸ Similar characterizations can also be found in the works of other Roman writers. In Virgil’s eighth *Eclogue*, a love-struck girl performs incantations to “win back the affections of her strayed lover.”¹⁹ Magic, old age, proactiveness in love, and sexual promiscuity were all “invective tropes” in ancient Rome.²⁰ Satisfying all of them, Canidia embodies the ultimate wicked witch in contemporaneous literature.

However, Horace did not stop at merely giving Canidia the characteristics of a witch: she is also a child-killing demon.²¹ In ancient mythologies, examples of such demons include the Sumerian demon Lilith, the Roman Strix, and the Greek Lamia, all of whom are similar to Canidia in their failure to have a family and status as a threat against children and the completeness of the

¹³ Prince, Meredith. "Canidia Channels Medea: Rereading Horace's Epode 5." *The Classical World* 106, no. 4 (Summer, 2013): 617. <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/canidia-channels-medea-rereading-horaces-epode-5/docview/1450012456/se-2>; Stratton, Kimberly. *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 107.

¹⁴ Stratton, Kimberly. *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 93-94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96-98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

²¹ Paule, Maxwell Teitel. *Canidia, Rome's First Witch*, chap. III.

family, or “general domestic integrity.”²² Childless and child-threatening, these demons destroy families through kidnapping and murdering children, just as Canidia attempts to do in *Epode 5*, in which she is determined to starve a boy to death just so that “his marrow and his liver, cut out and dried, might form a love-charm.”²³ Canidia’s childlessness will become important when considering her role as the anti-mother in the next section.

Canidia is also a Fury. In mythology, Furies are goddesses of vengeance who punish for unfilial conduct and homicide, especially parricides.²⁴ Their hair is often woven with serpents, just as Canidia’s hair in *Epode 5* is “entwined with short vipers.”²⁵ While the boy will later vow to return as a Fury with “crooked claws,” Canidia already has her nails “uncut” in the same fashion.²⁶ In *Satire 1.8*, Canidia’s physical similarity to a Fury is even stronger: not only does she don a “black robe” in traditional Fury-style,²⁷ she and her witch friend are explicitly called “the twin Furies.”²⁸

The characterization of Fury is important in the analysis of Canidia because it adds a third facet to her identity. If being a witch highlights Canidia’s masculine power and lust (defying expectations for a woman) and being a demon underlines her childlessness and child-murdering tendencies (threatening domestic integrity), being a Fury links her to familial discordance. Two of the stories in which the Furies feature most prominently are that of Oedipus (in which Oedipus slays his father and marries his mother) and the curse on the House of Atreus (in which five generations of interfamilial feud result in countless lives lost), in which characters are haunted by the Furies’ unrelenting pursuit.²⁹ Canidia’s association with the Furies, therefore, not only brings her

²² Ibid.

²³ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett.

²⁴ “Erinyes,” Theoi. March 12, 2023, <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Erinyes.html/>.

²⁵ Oliensis, E. “Canidia, Canicula, and The Decorum of Horace ‘Epodes.’”

²⁶ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett.

²⁷ “Erinyes,” Theoi.

²⁸ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett.; Horace, Book I: Satire VIII, trans. A. S. Kline. March 12, 2023. <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceSatiresBkISatVIII.php/>.

²⁹ “Erinyes,” Theoi.

further from the ideal Roman woman but also alludes to the anti-mother figure she becomes as a result of all three identities.

Canidia as Anti-Mother

Predatory, child-threatening, and relentless, Canidia is everything an ideal ancient Roman woman should *not* be. However, because the other major character in *Epode 5* is not a potential spouse but rather a young boy, it is her qualities as an anti-mother that are emphasized.

Canidia's status as an anti-mother is both shown through her actions and recognized by the boy and the narrative voice. The epode opens with the boy lamenting his imminent death and Canidia commanding the other witches to gather ingredients for her potion and bury him into the ground for death through starvation. Whereas the boy's pleas would have softened even "the impious breasts of Thracians," Canidia's unmotherly heart remained hard; rather than using her breasts to nurture the child, she demands his demise.³⁰

Another piece of evidence alluding to the familial relationship between Canidia and the boy lies in the categorization of the boy's final curse as "Thyestean."³¹ Although "the Thyestean curse" is not a set phrase with a specific meaning, the Thyestean family (also known as the House of Atreus) is most infamous for murders amongst five generations of members of the same family, starting with the dinner at which Atreus serves his brother, Thyestes, the flesh of Thyestes' own children.³² Therefore, one can deduce that a "Thyestean curse" refers to a curse on another member of the same family, further strengthening the stepmother-stepchild tie between Canidia and the boy. The boy himself recognizes as much, bemoaning that Canidia looks at him the way "a stepmother" hatefully gazes at her stepchild.³³

Yet Canidia is not *any* stepmother—she explicitly notes that she is following the rites of Medea, famous not only for her witchcraft skills but also for her murder of her children on her husband's betrayal.

³⁰ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

³¹ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

³² "House of Atreus in Greek Mythology," Greek Legends and Myths, March 12, 2023, <https://www.greeklegendsandmyths.com/house-of-atreus.html/>.

³³ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

Scholars such as Maxwell Teitel Paule and Meredith Prince have long recognized similarities between Medea and Canidia from *Epode 5* as witches and child-murderers.³⁴ Even in ancient Rome, the mention of Medea would invoke connotations such as “women’s unrestrained passion, subversive desire to control their husbands, and penchant for using dangerous poisons and magic rites.”³⁵ Canidia, willing to murder to regain Varus’ love and control his whereabouts through Medea’s very rites, is logically cast as her successor, inheriting not only the former’s identities as witch and lover, but also as a failed mother who decides to kill her child when her lover abandons her.

Prince’s analysis of Medea and Canidia connects the two eloquently. Examining the epode’s original version in Latin, Prince notes that “venena...non valent/ convertere humanam vicem (‘magic potions are not effective in reversing human retribution’)” and “diris agam vos; dira detestatio/ nulla expiatur victima (‘I shall pursue you with curses; an awful curse is averted by no sacrifice’)” recall Canidia’s description of Medea (“dira venena valent”).³⁶

One might ask why Canidia should be seen as a “stepmother” when her predecessor, Medea, is her children’s biological mother. The answer lies in the relationship between the two witches as well as ancient Rome’s attitude towards stepmothers. In Euripides’ version of *Medea* (as the other playwright of the same tale, Seneca had yet to be born), both Medea and Jason assume that the latter’s new wife, Creusa, will feel hostile towards her stepchildren. This assumption is the reason Jason promises, before the parties even meet, that he will “persuade” Creusa to not exile Medea’s children, and also serves as the justification under which Medea delivers her lethal raiment.³⁷ Whereas Medea “loathes” her children only because of Jason’s betrayal, Canidia has never loved the boy she is to kill in the first place, making Canidia one step removed from

³⁴ Paule, Maxwell Teitel. *Canidia, Rome’s First Witch*, chap. I; Prince, Meredith. “Canidia Channels Medea: Rereading Horace’s Epode 5.” *The Classical World* 106, no. 4 (Summer, 2013).

³⁵ Stratton, Kimberly. *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 111.

³⁶ Prince, Meredith. “Canidia Channels Medea: Rereading Horace’s Epode 5,” 617.

³⁷ Euripides, *Medea*, trans. David Kovacs. March 12, 2023. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0114%3Acard%3D94/>.

the intimate relationship between a child and its biological mother and closer to the position of Creusa when facing the child she is about to murder.

The stepmother relationship is also backed by social context. Arguably the birthplace of “the evil stepmother” as a trope, ancient Romans turned the goddess Juno into the jealous and fatal stepmother she is today via the writings of Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca.³⁸ Legally, the stepmother–stepchildren conflict can be seen from records of declamations.³⁹ Ancient Romans believed in stepmothers’ inherent malevolence so deeply that, in a particular case involving a biological mother who had explicitly threatened revenge on the husband, a seemingly innocuous stepmother, and a child who had died under suspicious circumstances, public opinion still suspected wrongdoing by the stepmother despite the birth mother’s expressed threat and clear motive.⁴⁰ By this line of reasoning, the stereotypical Roman stepmother is by nature a threat to the child, which fits more closely with Canidia’s lack of love for and intention to murder the boy. This is the reason Medea is often analyzed as a stepmother as well as the reason the boy himself compares Canidia with a stepmother.

Given the negative connotation around the concept of the stepmother, the notions of the stepmother and the anti-mother are possibly more similar at this point in ancient Rome than in some other societies. However, a crucial difference lies between the two: whereas Rome did have kind stepmothers,⁴¹ the Roman anti-mother is always evil. Prince has previously concluded that Canidia is the latter, because Medea is at least somewhat justified in murdering her children for revenge whereas Canidia does it purely to harvest his organs.⁴² The current author agrees with the conclusion but believes that in addition to the difference in incentives, the key to Canidia’s more pronounced anti-

³⁸ Ovid and Seneca wrote decades after Horace penned *The Epodes* while Virgil and Horace were contemporaries. Watson, Patricia A., *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 92, 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴² Prince, Meredith. "Canidia Channels Medea: Rereading Horace's Epode 5." *The Classical World* 106, no. 4 (Summer, 2013), 617-19.

motherliness lies in her other identities: a child-killing demon and a Fury.

While stepmothers in ancient Rome poisoned and murdered their stepchildren, declamatory collections show that many of these women shared a common motive: to prevent the stepchild from competing for inheritance with her biological children.⁴³ Therefore, although these stepmothers might have seemed evil to their stepchildren, the animosity makes logical sense given the stepmothers' desire to protect their biological children's financial interests. Canidia has no similar excuse. She has all the intrafamilial catastrophe symbolized by the Furies, but she is childless just like Lilith, Strix, and Lamia, the child-murdering demons. Canidia is not just a stepmother: she is an anti-mother. For whereas stepmothers are occasionally portrayed positively even in Roman disclamations, anti-mothers are, by nature, evil and menacing even if there is no conflict of interest. At this point, this paper finally establishes Canidia as the Roman anti-mother.

Restoration of the Proper Family

Epode 5 opens with tilted power disparity between the boy and Canidia. The former is "stripped" and implores with "quivering lips"⁴⁴ the witches to have mercy. Canidia, on the other hand, is in her full power as a witch, child-murdering demon, and Fury. With her hair "disheveled," she invokes divine "Night and Diana" to booster her magical abilities, and the boy can do nothing but try to sweet-talk his way out of imminent death.⁴⁵

As the epode progresses, however, Canidia loses each of the powers from her three identities. She is a witch, but her magic fails and Varus continues to roam free. She is a child-murdering demon, yet the child does not die. She is a Fury, but the identity of the Fury is eventually usurped by the boy.

Because *Epode 5* alone might not make clear Canidia's inaptitude as a witch, it might be helpful to examine Horace's depictions of her in *Satire 1.8* and *Epode 17*. *Satire 1.8*, true to its categorization, openly mocks Canidia who, despite all her howling and wandering at night, scurries away at the sound of a scarecrow's fart, making her an unsympathetic laughingstock.⁴⁶ Similarly,

⁴³ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁴ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Paule, Maxwell Teitel. *Canidia, Rome's First Witch*, chap. II.

although *Epode 17* appears to be Horace's apology to Canidia, scholars have found it so "deliberately insulting" that it is puzzling as to why someone would write such an apology.⁴⁷ Therefore, despite the subtle differences in Canidia's characterizations across the works, it would not be preposterous to assume that Canidia in *Epode 5* is meant to be similarly laughable.

And she is. Horace mocks Canidia's overblown self-confidence as a witch through the stark contrast between her initial pretentious invocation to the gods and the subsequent failure of her magic. Calling Night and Diana her "faithful witnesses," she self-complacently observes that the ointment she made for the ritual cannot have been "more perfect."⁴⁸ Yet the very next line exposes her inadequacy as she realizes that her magic has failed, forcing her to admit that she has only been following the rites invented by Medea. But Canidia does not give up yet—rather than acknowledge that the magic simply does not work, she salvages her pride by declaring that it only failed because of the countering effect of a "cleverer enchantress."⁴⁹ Horace here showcases Canidia's pathetic nature for all to see: a supposed witch, so confident only seconds prior, is now trying to save face by conjuring up an imaginary rival.

Given Canidia's previously analyzed connections with Medea, it is especially significant that the latter also fails in her attempt to murder her stepchild, Theseus (depicted in both Euripides' and Sophocles' versions of *Aegeus*⁵⁰ as well as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*).⁵¹ Before Theseus' appearance, Medea had been unimpeded in her murders, whether of Pelias, her children, or Creusa.⁵² However, when Theseus, the unrecognized son of her second husband, Aegeus, arrives in Athens, Medea tries to poison him but fails.⁵³ The failure of both witches to kill their stepchildren further highlights Canidia's eventual loss of power as a witch,

⁴⁷ Ibid., chap. IV.

⁴⁸ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Watson, Patricia A. *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*, 225.

⁵¹ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, Book VII. trans. A. S. Kline. March 13, 2023. <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph7.htm#64106443/>.

⁵² Watson, Patricia A. *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*, 225.

⁵³ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, Book VII; Watson, Patricia A., *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*, 225.

because it is Medea's magical rites she uses, revealing that Canidia's attempt has been doomed from the beginning.

Similarly, Canidia loses her powers as a child-murdering demon as the story progresses. The most explicit evidence is that, despite the initially apparent certainty of his demise, the boy remains alive at the end of the poem. Although scholars including Prince and Susannah L. Wright still believe in a negative outcome for the boy, Horace's mockery of Canidia in *Satire 1.8* and *Epode 17* as well as Medea's failure to kill Theseus leave room for suspense.⁵⁴ Given that Canidia shares so many characteristics with the child-killing demons, the conspicuous open-endedness of the outcome only draws further attention to her inability to kill the boy, eliminating her power as a child-killing demon.

Stripped of her powers as both witch and demon, Canidia's sole source of superiority is now her status as a Fury. Yet she loses this identity in an even more dramatic way. This time, it is the boy who usurps the identity by vowing to hound her with curses and revenge "as a fury."⁵⁵

It is important to note, however, that although this paper has been analyzing Canidia's three identities separately, they are not actually as distinct as they may seem. For instance, although the boy explicitly threatens to become a Fury to tear at Canidia's face with "crooked claws," crooked claws and talons are characteristics more closely associated with the child-murdering demon Strix than with Furies.⁵⁶ Similarly, Strixes usually appear at night to snatch children away from their family,⁵⁷ just as the "night-witch" was also a stereotype in ancient Rome.⁵⁸ By mixing the three identities, Horace made the components of the anti-mother figure not only menacing but also indistinguishable—overthrowing one would signify the annihilation of all three identities.

⁵⁴ Prince, Meredith. "Canidia Channels Medea: Rereading Horace's Epode 5." *The Classical World* 106, no. 4 (Summer, 2013), 619; Wright, Susannah L. "Nocturnus Occurram Furor: The 'Night-Mare' in Horace, Epodes 5 and 17." *Preternature: critical and historical studies on the preternatural*. 10, no. 1 (2021), 52.

⁵⁵ Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

⁵⁶ Wright, Susannah L. "Nocturnus Occurram Furor: The 'Night-Mare' in Horace, Epodes 5 and 17," 52.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Stratton, Kimberly. *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 95.

The coexistence of all three stereotypes in Canidia has another layer of significance in the irrelevance of the anti-mother's exact identity: the anti-mother's characterization, similar to an antagonist, lies in her threat to the child and her function as a hurdle on his path to heroism. Hera, turned into Hercules' persecutor by the Romans, propels Hercules into achieving the 12 labors, the ultimate testament to his success. Medea, Canidia's predecessor in witchcraft, tries to poison Theseus, the son of her second husband, only to be stunted and forced to witness the recovery of his royal status.⁵⁹ Centuries later, Hansel and Gretel would return home after killing the witch, only to learn that the evil stepmother who had cajoled their father into abandoning them had also died.⁶⁰ The witch and the stepmother might not always been the same person in a story, but they serve the same function, and it is their function as the antagonist that matters.⁶¹ Similarly, while Horace evidently mixes together multiple cultural and literary stereotypes to create Canidia, what matters the most is that she is the anti-mother figure and the enemy of the socially accepted family ideals whom the boy will overthrow on his way to restoring family integrity.

In addition to disputing over the boy's physical destiny, scholars also disagree about the boy's spiritual fate. Does he die or survive, and if he survives, does he turn into the new Fury, or worse, the new Canidia?

At first glance, the boy's transformation for the worse does look amply alluded to in the epode. Not only does he vow to return as a Fury, he also threatens to return as an anti-mother figure himself. As Wright points out, when the boy vows to become a Fury, he mentions sitting on Canidia's chest.⁶² The Latin word Horace had used was "adsideo," often used to describe birds settling upon surfaces, including on their eggs, in a nurturing and motherly way.⁶³ However, in this case, the boy is not sitting atop Canidia to care for her as his child, but rather to take revenge, reversing a nurturing role into that of the anti-mother. Similarly,

⁵⁹ Watson, Patricia A. *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*, 225.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Horace. "Epode V, Canidia's Incantation." Trans. C. E. Bennett.

⁶³ Wright, Susannah L. "Nocturnus Occurram Furor: The 'Night-Mare' in Horace, Epodes 5 and 17," 53.

Paule is concerned that because “child-killing demons perpetuate their existence through the act of killing their victims and converting them into demons like themselves,” the boy’s curse “may then be read as reflective of Canidia herself.”⁶⁴

The current author would like to argue to the contrary.

First, the boy’s curses on threatening to return as a Fury are described as “Thyestean.”⁶⁵ Whereas this paper has previously noted Thyestes to be the man who unwittingly eats the flesh of his own children as served by his brother, Atreus, the Furies are most famous for the part they play in the last of the five murderous generations in Thyestes’ household in the story of Orestes. Both Euripides’ *Orestes* and Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides* survive, where they tell the aftermath of Orestes’ murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge her murder of Agamemnon, her husband and his father.⁶⁶ While the two plays differ in plot and characterization, they agree that the Furies pursue Orestes after he commits the matricide even if it is technically just, and the gods eventually intervene to acquit him, ending the cycle of conflict. Given that the Furies play a prominent role in Orestes’ story, as they are especially relentless in their punishment for parricides, Horace’s linking of “the Furies” and “Thyestean” not only serves to emphasize the familial relationship between Canidia and the boy but is also a glimmer of hope that the boy, even if he returns to murder Canidia, will be exonerated because he is only justly avenging himself and restoring familial relationships to the way they are supposed to be.

In addition to the hopeful ending, the boy also gets the last word structurally, which can be seen as a manifestation of power. In stark contrast to the beginning of the story, where he also speaks but to only implore for Canidia’s mercy, his last monologue ends in a much more assertive tone, literally giving him the last word and alluding to his eventual triumph and the anti-mother’s defeat.

More importantly, the boy mentions his parents at the end of the epode for no apparent reason. The translation that the paper has been relying on goes: “Then by and by the wolves and birds

⁶⁴ Paule, Maxwell Teitel. *Canidia, Rome’s First Witch*, chap. III.

⁶⁵ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett.

⁶⁶ Euripides. *Orestes*. trans. E. P. Coleridge. March 13, 2023. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0006.tlg016.perseus-eng1:1-33/>; Aeschylus. *Eumenides*. trans. Herbert Weir Smyth. March 13, 2023. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0085.tlg007.perseus-eng1:1-33/>.

that haunt the Esquiline shall scatter far and wide your unburied limbs, nor shall this sight escape my parents—surviving me, alas!”⁶⁷ According to another translation, the epode ends with: “And then the wolves and birds of the Esquiline,/ Will scatter your unburied limbs,/ And my parents, who will alas survive me, shall/ Not miss a moment of that sight.”⁶⁸ Here are two important similarities: in both cases as well as the original Latin version, “parents” (or “parentes”) are mentioned in the last lines of the epode (“neque hoc parentes, heu mihi superstites, effugerit spectaculum”).⁶⁹ Also, in all three versions, “parents” are characterized as the boy’s survivors, who will watch as the boy takes revenge on the anti-mother.⁷⁰

Despite the abundance of anti-mother references throughout the poem, the boy only mentions his biological parents at the ending. What is the significance of mentioning them here, and why link them to the idea of “survive”? The present author believes that the boy’s parents serve as the epitome of familial integrity and an extreme contrast to the anti-mother, so that even if the boy dies, as Wright and Prince believe, his parents still “survive” and can reproduce again to recreate the ideal family and restore familial integrity. Thus, in his effort to ensure that the reader understands the anti-mother’s eventual failure, Horace creates double insurance: not only does he hint at the boy’s triumph over Canidia by extinguishing her powers and having him replace her as a Fury, he also structurally ensures that “the proper family” is restored by ending the epode with a hopeful recreation of the “ideal family.”

Conclusion

If Canidia’s similarity to Medea establishes her as a murderous stepmother, her additional resemblance to a child-killing demon and a Fury catapults her into the realm of anti-motherhood. She is child-threatening, childless, and hateful. The power dichotomy between her and the boy at the beginning of the epode is stark. However,

⁶⁷ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett.

⁶⁸ Horace. “Epode V - The Witch’s Incantation.” Trans. A. S. Kline. March 13, 2023. <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceEpodesAndCarmenSaeculare.php/>.

⁶⁹ Horace, “Epodon Q. Horatii Flacci Liber.” The Latin Library. April 15, 2023. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/horace/ep.shtml#V/>.

⁷⁰ Horace. “Epode V, Canidia’s Incantation.” Trans. C. E. Bennett; Horace. “Epode V - The Witch’s Incantation.” Trans. A. S. Kline; Horace, “Epodon Q. Horatii Flacci Liber.” The Latin Library.

with Canidia's failures, each of her three powers is extinguished, and the boy even usurps her power as a Fury. Not only does the boy vanquish the anti-mother and become his own heroic figure, he also ends the epode by highlighting the constituents of a contemporaneous proper family: a biological father, a biological mother, and their child. Although the boy's physical fate is technically undetermined, it is clear that he has triumphed over the anti-mother figure despite their earlier power imbalance and restored "the proper family" to its socially designated pedestal. Therefore, Horace's *Epode 5* is not just a mockery of Canidia as a witch but also the tale of the downfall of the anti-mother and a celebration of the eventual triumph of the ideal family.