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VENUS AND HER COMPANIONS
(HOR. *CARM.* 1. 30)

Horace's *Carm.* 1. 30 contains only eight lines, but in this brevity and compositional fineness lies the mystery:¹ while in the first strophe the poet invokes Venus,² the second lists the members of her entourage:

O Venus regina Cnidi Paphique,
sperne dilectam Cypron et vocantis
ture te multo Glyceræ decoram
transfer in aedem.
Fervidus tecum **puer** et solutis 5
Gratiæ zonis properentque **Nymphae**
et parum comis sine te **Iuventas**
Mercuriusque.

As we see, along with Venus, the poet invokes also Cupid, the Graces, with their loosened girdles – this may be of some importance –, the nymphs, the personification of Youth, and Mercury, who completes the list. The whole procession is not exactly repeated in poetry, although Lucretius (5. 736–739) has a similar group of characters with Zephyrus and Flora instead of Youth.³ But since the most puzzling in this company is Mercury, this parallel gives us little to nothing.

Below I will try to systematize the explanations for the appearance of Mercury in our list that have been expressed since ancient times and until

¹ West 1995, 142 says, the opinion that it is a short and slight poem is “a common one, and false”.

² This strophe may have been inspired by Posidippus (*PA* 12. 131; this is common knowledge now, but it is not easy to identify who first made the observation. According to Pasquali 1964, 503, it was Reitzenstein). The fragment 2 by Sappho has a slight resemblance, too, but only by mentioning places the goddess is to abandon. West 1995, 143 rejects the analogy: “If it influenced Horace, it influenced him to produce something entirely different”.

³ The question of a similar set of characters in Botticelli's *Allegory of Spring* will not be considered in the paper.

recently, but before I do so, we need to understand whether his appearance is emphasized by the position, namely in the last verse of the Sapphic strophe with the particle *-que*. This is what commentators point to,⁴ citing two other similar cases that contain enumeration: *Carm.* 1. 12. 40 (... *Fabriciumque*) and *Carm.* 2. 6. 8: (... *militiaeque*). Meanwhile, none of these contain the required focus on this component in the enumeration: the reference to C. Fabricius bridges the gap to the next stanza,⁵ while Horace's military service (which is in fact difficult to explain⁶) in *Carm.* 2. 6 enters only in a paired construction: *sit modus... viarum militiaeque*. Although when reading the list of deities, one gets the feeling that Mercury, named last but not least, is more important than the others, there is nevertheless no evidence to support this idea – he simply closes the list of “the whole company”.

So, how is his appearance here explained? The first explanation is simple as pie: Ps.-Acro: “Per Mercurium vero quaestum vult accipi”, i.e., Horace wishes Glycera's enterprise prosperity – as she is “a demimondaine whose business is blooming”.⁷ This – it must be said – logical interpretation has two flaws: the mention of money as the primary motive for Glycera's favouring introduced what might be called “light irony”⁸ or even “superficial satire – out of harmony with the pictures in the poem”.⁹

A variant of the same understanding would be to relate Mercury (who is also a god of eloquence) as a substitute for Peitho, depicted in Aphrodite's entourage in some archaic groups in Greek art.¹⁰

Another argument against understanding Mercury as a personification of money is the question what the other characters in this situation actually symbolize. What do the nymphs mean in this case? Or how could Horace wish a girl “youth”? Rather, the words *parum comis sine te Iuventas* contain his advice to take advantage of its benefits.¹¹ If the characters named before Mercury are simply mythological personages, then one has to assume a kind of disconnect between them and the god of commerce, which gives a jocular flavour to the whole poem.

⁴ West 1995, 145; Oppermann 1972, 362; Quinn 1980, 181. Rüpke 1998, 442 notes a similar technique.

⁵ Nisbet–Hubbard 1978, 159, referring to Cic. *Cael.* 39: “traditionally he belongs to the group in the next stanza”.

⁶ See Egorova 2017, 71–73.

⁷ Nisbet–Hubbard 1970, 143; in a similar vein, Quinn 1980, 181.

⁸ Mayer 2012, 193.

⁹ West 1995, 144.

¹⁰ Among others, Kiessling–Heinze followed by Burck 1960, 170: “Mercurius hier wohl an die Stelle der Peitho getreten ist”. As an example of an Archaic relief see *LIMC* II s.v. Aphrodite, no. 1257.

¹¹ The main theme of *Carm.* 1. 25 and 1. 11 (according to Tarrant 2020, 48–52).

A very different group of interpretations takes us to the poems that also mention Mercury as a kind of a *sphragis* of Horace – first and foremost, referring to his well-known self-designation as a *Mercurialis vir* (*Carm.* 2. 17. 29–30). This explains well the final reference to the god who invented the lyre and is a patron of verbal expression – it is this aspect of deity that is meant by those who proposed this opinion, E. A. Schmidt¹² and J. Rüpke, whose article “Mercur am Ende: Horaz, Carmen 1, 30” builds a rather complex compositional construction on this detail: he highlights the sequence of three poems in the Book 1, namely 1. 10 – to Mercury, 1. 19 – to Venus (the poet also is in love with Glycera), and 1. 30 – where two lines are combined. Although I do not share this structural approach for a better understanding of the individual poems, I find his observation on the division of the strophe interesting:¹³ “5 Glieder sind verbunden durch 4 Kopulae – et ... que ... et ... que”. He sees “Gedankenvorschritt” in both cases of the particle *-que*; in my opinion, this alternation can also be interpreted as combining Graces with Nymphs in one group and Youth/Hebe and Mercury in another.

Another theory of this kind must not be missed: H. Dettmer states that Horace here represented Mercury in union “with the goddess of life and poetry” and so “bridged the gap between his antithetical roles in Odes 1. 24, as a guide to the dead, and in Odes 2. 7, as savior”.¹⁴

A third explanation – or rather rejection of it – is presented by G. Maurach, who admits that there are some things that “man sollte offen lassen”.¹⁵ However, before agreeing with him, let’s pay attention to one detail that Horace has left us with as almost the only clue – the untied belts of the Graces.

There is a close parallel to our situation – the Graces untie a knot (*nodum solvere*), *Carm.* 3. 21. 21–22:

te Liber et, si laeta aderit, Venus
segnesque nodum solvere Gratiae
...producent...

What is meant, however, is a matter for discussion.¹⁶ As the Graces are often depicted holding hands, N. Rudd¹⁷ follows the scholiasts

¹² Schmidt 1992, 47.

¹³ Rüpke 1998, 439.

¹⁴ Dettmer 1983, 28.

¹⁵ Maurach 2001, 186, and further: “Nur, wenn der Leser das Offene offen lässt, wird er die Feinheit der Zeilen genießen”.

¹⁶ Horace used the word *nodus* only twice (the other time referring to a coiffure, *Carm.* 2. 11. 24).

¹⁷ Nisbet–Rudd 2004, 254 as “NR”.

and understands *nodus* as their ring:¹⁸ they are reluctant (*segnes*) to separate their hands. D. West¹⁹ warns of a logical inconsistency in this understanding, as it rests on the obligatory presentation of the Graces naked – with *no* possible other nodes in their garments – which would contradict the influence of Pindar, esp. *Pyth.* 9. 2–3 (βαθυζώνοισιν... Χαρίτεσσι). But he is in no hurry to join the belt knot party, represented by Nisbet²⁰ and Schmidt,²¹ who adduced passages from Catullus²² and Martial²³ to their side.

Back to the Graces' belts, which are already untied in *Carm.* 1. 30. Although there is nothing more natural than imagining their fluttering garments (the swiftness of their motion arises from the verb *properent*), it is not the prevailing canon for depicting them: as in *Carm.* 4. 7. 5–6 (*Gratia cum Nymphis geminisque sororibus audet ducere nuda choros*; the same is suggested in another spring poem, *Carm.* 1. 4. 6–7), from the Hellenistic period on, the Graces were depicted completely naked. Already in antiquity, art historians (Paus. 9. 35. 6–7) noted a change in the way the Graces were pictured, although it is not known who first depicted them without clothes (whereas in the archaic period they generally wear warm dresses and cardigans²⁴). The most famous painting was by Apelles, made in the Odeion at Smyrna, and Pausanias lists his Graces in a list of the clothed ones. They may have been depicted with transparent and/or loose garments – we can read about this canon in the works of authors who lived later than Horace, including an allegorical interpretation of such attire (Sen. *De benef.* 1. 3. 2. 5):

et virgines solutaque ac perlucida veste ... in quibus nihil esse alligati decet nec adstricti: solutis itaque tunicis utuntur; perlucidis autem, quia beneficia conspici volunt.

It can be assumed that both of these canons have been transferred to Rome – the well-attested²⁵ one with the goddesses completely naked (Horace uses it in his spring scenes), and the one less known today

¹⁸ Cf. Cic. *Am.* 51 as bond of friendship.

¹⁹ West 1967, 147 n. 55.

²⁰ Nisbet–Rudd 2004, 245 as “RN”.

²¹ Schmidt 1992, 46.

²² Cat. 2b. 2–3: ... *aureolum fuisse malum, / quod zonam soluit diu ligatam.*

²³ Mart. 9. 101. 5: *peltatam Scythico discinxit Amazona nodo.*

²⁴ For examples, see *LIMC* III s.v. Charis nos. 6, 24; s.v. Horai no. 42.

²⁵ Most of the images in the *LIMC* III s.v. Charis, with the commentary by Harrison 1986, 200–203. Surviving Roman paintings present only the nude Graces, e.g., Napoli, Mus. Arch. Naz. 9236 (1st cent. AD).

(perhaps because it was more common in painting than in sculpture) with transparent and/or fluttering garments.

Now, knowing that I can no longer postpone my own solution, I will try to bring together the few and disparate arguments in favour of the assumption that in this poem Horace is describing some kind of (wall) painting in which all these characters were depicted.

To the general sense of visual representation noted by scholars earlier,²⁶ I would like to add another, namely compositional one: in listing the deities “given” by the existing image, Horace shows his skill and names “the whole company” in just four lines – and he manages to put Mercury in the last carriage at the last moment. If we compare this poem with others that list characters, each of them has “more space” for him or her, e.g. *Carm.* 1. 4. 5–8; 12. 19–46; 16. 5–21; 4. 8. 25–34, etc.

What else would suggest to the reader that it is about the visual arts? Perhaps the name of the heroine. While the lovers in the poems are conventional, Horace could name them anything he wished. The name “Glycera” may set off an association with Greek art: as C. Doyen pointed out, this was the name of the artist Pausias’²⁷ lover,²⁸ and Romans knew the portrait of her in a wreath²⁹ (Plin. 35. 125):

Pausias amavit in iuventa Glyceram municipem suam, inventricem coronarum, ... postremo pinxit et ipsam sedentem cum corona, huius tabulae exemplar, quod apographon vocant, L. Lucullus duobus talentis emit.

C. Doyen concludes that Glycera may have been a common example of “la maîtresse du peintre”, which can be confirmed by another reference to Glycera: *Carm.* 1. 19. 5–6, although this one refers to sculpture and not painting:³⁰

²⁶ Fraenkel 1968, 198 n. 70: “... the particular *kōmos* of immortals that *unfolds before our eyes* takes us away from the Rome of Caesar Augustus and *back to many representations in Greek paintings and relief* and to early Greek songs”. Schmidt 1992, 46: “... für den *bildhaften Aspekt* (wie die Grazien beim Tanze erscheinen)”. Syndikus 1972, 272: “er stellt uns ein einheitlich *schönes Bild* von Göttin... vor Augen”; he also names some multi-figured compositions in Casa dei Vettii and Casa di Marte e Venere.

²⁷ See Lippold 1949.

²⁸ See Rossbach 1910.

²⁹ She herself was no stranger to design, being the ancestor of floristry.

³⁰ In two other cases, however, Glycera is mentioned without any connection to the fine arts: in *Carm.* 1. 33. 2 (with *inmitis*) and in *Carm.* 3. 19. 28 at the very end of the poem without any details.

urit me Glycerae nitor,
splendentis Pario marmore purius.

A more general argument that it is possible to see a description of a work of art in Horace's lyrics is the numerous references to the hobby in many of his works:³¹ he speaks with irony about his habit of spending time "in art galleries", comparing himself to a slave gazing at a gladiator's poster (*Serm.* 2. 7. 95–96):

vel cum Pausiaca torpes, insane, tabella,
qui peccas minus atque ego...

In another case, he demonstrates the skill of looking at works from different distances and under different lighting conditions (*A. P.* 361–365):

Ut pictura poesis; erit quae, si propius stes,
te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes;
haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri,
iudicis argutum quae non formidat acumen;
haec placuit semel, haec deciens repetita placebit.

His dream is to give his friends original Greek art (*Carm.* 4. 8. 1–8):

Donarem pateras grataque commodus,
Censorine, meis aera sodalibus,
donarem tripodas, praemia fortium
Graiorum neque tu pessuma munerum
ferres, divite me scilicet atrium
quas aut Parrhasius protulit aut Scopas,
hic saxo, liquidis ille coloribus
sollers nunc hominem ponere, nunc deum.

(A more debatable matter relates to the transmission of pictorial subjects in Horace's poetry;³² for *Carm.* 2. 19. 21–24³³ and *Carm.* 3. 4. 42–68 there is the question of the impact of the Gigantomachy, as it was presented in the Siphnian Treasury and the Pergamon Altar.)

³¹ Calcano 1996, 124–126.

³² On this point, see Hardie 1993.

³³ For this poem, addressed to Bacchus, the images of lions may be of some help to resolve the textual problem: "Tu ... Rhoetum retorsisti leonis unguibus horribilique (mss; horribilisque Bochart | horribilemque Trendelenburg) mala" (v. 23–24).

In conclusion, let's try to guess what kind of piece of work was described. We can easily imagine a central figure of Venus, next to her Cupid, and a little further away (*et...*) Graces and Nymphs. As for the most debated figures, Youth and Mercury,³⁴ in my opinion we can present them to the sides of the central group (*et ...que*).

This arrangement of figures can be seen in the surviving work (I should point out that we see a different set of characters there, with the only companion Peitho) and, importantly, just the right period.³⁵ I mean the Cubiculum B from Villa Farnesina (on display in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme): it is also of interest that, according to specialists, the paintings are replicas of Greek paintings from the Classical period,³⁶ i.e., the image of the Graces depicted by Horace may also have been painted according to an older canon.

One wall is decorated with a triptych consisting of a larger central panel and two smaller side panels. The other wall has a similar arrangement of images, but the side figures are depicted in the background of the wall.³⁷ Perhaps the figures of Youth/Hebe and Mercury were painted in the same way – with some difficulty,³⁸ they can be presented as paired characters: in the 1st century BC, the name *Iuventas* stood for Hebe (Cic. *De nat. deor.* 1. 112: *Ac poetae quidem nectar, ambrosiam epulas comparant et aut Iuventatem aut Ganymedem pocula ministrantem, tu autem, Epicure, quid facies? Tusc.* 1. 65: *non enim ambrosia deos aut nectare aut Iuventate pocula ministrante laetari arbitror*). As a gift-giver,³⁹ she could, in my opinion, balance out the messenger of the gods, Mercury, in the triptych described.

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³⁴ Hermes is rarely portrayed in the group, usually in the scene of the Judgement of Paris (e. g. Napoli Arch. 120033).

³⁵ The history of painting in the late 1st century BC is not so well known to us, and many surveys, e.g. Dorigo 1971, do not begin to cover the subject until the 1st cent. AD.

³⁶ Kousser 2010, 300–305 with the bibliography. Kousser notes the good preservation of the entire ensemble, which is often lacking in Pompeii.

³⁷ See photo: Kousser 2010, 304.

³⁸ So, for example, Hebe could be matched by her husband Hercules, and the pair of Youth/Flora and Hercules would then become widespread in New Age palaces and parks.

³⁹ “Schankmeisterin der Götter” (Rüpke 1998, 439).

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In *Carm.* 1. 30, Horace lists the companions of Venus, naming among them the usual characters for this context – Cupid, Graces, nymphs, as well as the personification of Youth and – which is very unusual – Mercury. Since antiquity, commentators have offered various explanations of his appearance here, and several

recent works have suggested correlating the scene of the appearance of the goddess and her suite with works of ancient art. In this vein, the author proposes that Horace was inspired not by an elongated composition with a procession of deities, but by the way the figures were arranged in wall paintings (for example, Villa Farnesina, Cubiculum B), in which two smaller side panels (in our case with one figure of Youth/Hebe and Mercury) were placed to the sides of the central multigure group (Venus, Cupid, Graces, nymphs).

В оде 1, 30 Гораций перечисляет спутников Венеры, называя среди них как обычных для этого контекста персонажей – Купидона, Граций, нимф, так и персонификацию Юности и – что уже совсем необычно – Меркурия. Со времен античности комментаторы предлагали разные объяснения его появления, а в ряде недавних работ предлагалось соотнести сцену явления богини и ее свиты с произведениями античного изобразительного искусства. Следуя этому направлению в интерпретации, автор выдвигает предположение, что Горация вдохновила не вытянутая композиция с процессией божеств, а засвидетельствованный для времени написания стихотворения способ расположения изображений фигур в настенной живописи (например, Villa Farnesina, Cubiculum B), при котором по бокам от центральной многофигурной группы (Венера, Купидон, Грации, нимфы) располагались два боковых панно меньшего размера, в нашем случае – с фигурой Юности/Гебы и Меркурия.