

RESEARCH

Reconciling Physical Mortality With Literary Immortality: The Lyric Poets Sappho and Horace on Old Age

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In *Odes* III.30, the epilogue to Books I-III, Horace asserts that he “was the first to bring Aeolian measures to Latin” (15). Likewise, he concludes by alluding to the Greek emblem of victory, ordering the Muse Melpomene to “place on my head the garland of Delphic laurel” (18). Confidently, Horace aligns himself with the first-rate Greek lyric poets of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, namely Sappho, portraying an aristocratic society that fears tyranny and cherishes the gods, young love, and nature. Due to temporal and linguistic differences, Horace adapts the Greek lyric tradition to his contemporary context: first century BCE Augustan Rome. Thus, using an aesthetic rooted in the past, Horace envisions a future of literary immortality (like that of Sappho). After establishing the significance of aging in ancient Greece and Rome, I will examine the similar treatments of old age within the same genre of lyric poetry: Sappho’s Fragment 58 and Horace’s *Odes* II.11. Despite their temporal, geographic and contextual differences, Sappho and Horace advocate the motif of living for today in order to resign themselves to the negative effects—physical and mental—of old age.²

² Horace coined the phrase *carpe diem* in *Odes* I.11: “*Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*” (“seize the day, trusting tomorrow as little as

A fear of old age precipitated the commanding and enduring poetry of Sappho and Horace. In M.I. Finley's investigative paper, "The Elderly in Classical Antiquity," he explores the ancient preoccupation with old age, explaining that doctors in ancient Greece and Rome knew very little about aging:

They knew that pulse rates changed with age, for example, that the elderly tended to catarrh, failing sight, and deafness, or that age was a consideration in surgical cases, but beyond that they were absolutely blocked.³

Although the regularity of epidemics and warfare could lead to death at any age, the poets Sappho and Horace feared the *ambiguity* surrounding old age. Upholding Finley's characterization of youth in antiquity as "a healthy physique, beauty, and sexual attraction," Sappho and Horace considered old age problematic, marking the end of a former (and more worthwhile) stage of life.

Additionally, the author Stephen Bertman in his paper "The Ashes and the Flame: Passion and Aging in Classical Poetry" attributes the urgency characteristic of lyric poetry to the poets' own anxieties about aging:

Betrayed by time, angry at erotic injustice, the poets of Greece and Rome counterattacked with verse both as an act of vital defiance and as an affirmation not only of life but of the human need to love and be loved.

possible"); however, the philosophy undoubtedly predated him. The motif of living for today emerged from the poetry of both Sappho and Horace. Additionally, the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* popularized the phrase *carpe diem* when the teacher, Robin Williams, encouraged his students to make their lives extraordinary. Thus, the popular phrase does not wholly apply to this discussion.

³ M.I. Finley, "The Elderly in Classical Antiquity" *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, Ed. Thomas M. Falkner and Judith De Luce (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 3.

Tasting the bitterness of the ashes, they lived as the flame.⁴

Sensing the end of life and witnessing the deaths of others (“the bitterness of the ashes”), ancient poets attempted to live uninhibitedly and powerfully in the present (“as the flame”). The poetry of Sappho and Horace agrees with Bertman’s assessment of old age as a betrayal, which incites pity and leads to debility and erotic crises.

Although little is known of Sappho’s life, the *Suda*, a 10th century Byzantine encyclopedia, indicates that the poet was born around 612 BCE (the time of the 42nd Olympiad), daughter of Scamandronymus of Eresus and Clevis of Mytilene in Lesbos.⁵ According to the Parian Marble, a Greek chronological table found on Paros, Sappho was exiled to Sicily as a child (sometime between 604 and 594 BCE). Eventually, she returned to Mytilene, marrying an aristocratic man from Andros, Cercylas, with whom she had a child, Cleis. Consistently, scholars question contemporary knowledge of Sappho, calling aspects of her life inventions of later Comic poets. Ironically, given the emphasis she places on old age in her poetry, skepticism surrounds her tragic death.⁶ However, Sappho’s oeuvre of seven books written in Lesbian vernacular suggests that she most likely instructed a *thiasos* (a female community), believing in the importance of a religious education.⁷ Accordingly, Sappho addressed these close female friends in her poems, a fact that fragment 41—“toward you beautiful girls”—and fragment 160—“And

⁴ Stephen Bertman, “The Ashes and the Flame” *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, Ed. Thomas M. Falkner and Judith De Luce (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 169.

⁵ “Sappho” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Ed. M. Cary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 792.

⁶ Poem fifteen (‘Sappho to Phaon’) of Ovid’s *Epistles* suggests that the poetess threw herself off a cliff, heartbroken.

⁷ “Sappho” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Ed. M. Cary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 792.

now I shall sing/these songs, beautifully,/to delight my friends” —communicate clearly.⁸

Sappho dedicates the entirety of fragment 58 to the subject of her own aging.⁹ Beginning with a concrete and negative description of her old age in the first stanza, Sappho shifts to an abstract and positive reflection on human nature in the second stanza. In the fragment’s opening line, Sappho underscores the changes in her physique: “Age withers now my flesh” (Sappho 58.1). Assuming she is addressing the same “beautiful girls” mentioned in fragment 41, Sappho asks younger generations in fragment 58 to live in the present, before they, too, exhibit the withered flesh of the poet. Throughout the remainder of the first stanza, Sappho describes her physical transformation: “my black locks are white” and “no longer do my knees/carry me” (2;3-4). In emphasizing her current condition, Sappho alludes to the passage of time; she used to be attractive, with dark hair and strong limbs. Overall, the first stanza, constituting one half of the fragment, suggests that unfavorable external forces cause old age, victimizing the poet (and eventually, her audience as well), rather than strengthening her position.

In the second stanza, Sappho moves away from the concrete and negative and arrives at the abstract and positive, emphasizing that what “I love” is nature and attractiveness (6). According to scholar Ellen Greene in her paper “Sappho 58: Philosophical Reflections on Death and Aging,” the “passion for sunlight” Sappho mentions in the second stanza could serve as allegory for the mythical figure Tithonus, whose beauty and youth mesmerizes the beautiful goddess

⁸ Sappho, “Fragments” *Archaic Greek Poetry: An Anthology*, Ed. and Trans. Barbara Hughes Fowler (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 134;149.

⁹ Again, it is important to note that her biography is debated; therefore, it is with caution that we take any portion of her writing as autobiographical. However, we can use her poems to help us understand how she wanted others to *perceive* her.

Dawn (9).¹⁰ Zeus grants Tithonus immortality at Dawn's request; however, the goddess fails to request eternal youth. As a result, Tithonus ends up in a state of continuous physical decay, repelling the once-enamored Dawn.¹¹

Regardless of whether Sappho intended to embody the goddess Dawn in this stanza, the sunlight imagery underlines the idea that death may serve as a welcome relief from the suffering produced by old age, as mentioned by the poet in the first stanza. Conversely, the optimism of the second stanza may allude to Sappho's confidence in her own literary immortality (like the sun, her poems will not die) or her attempt to glorify the notion of old age for her psychological well-being. Additionally, since her *thiasos* (her addressees) are younger than the poet, she trusts that they, symbolic of a lineage of followers, will preserve her poetry (and thus her memory). Overall, fragment 58 with its two stanzas points to the dual nature of lyric poetry itself: contingent and eternal. Ultimately, Sappho's body may decay (first stanza), but she can live in the moment, because, unlike her physical condition, her poetry has the potential to last forever (second stanza).

Six centuries after Sappho, the poet Horace was born on December 8, 65 BCE at Venusia in Apulia. Nothing is known of his mother; however, his father was a freedman, who owned a small farm and sent Horace to school in Rome. Around 45 BCE, Horace moved to Athens to continue his studies, learning Greek and reading Greek authors. However, in 44 BCE, following the assassination of Julius Caesar, he

¹⁰ Ellen Greene, "Sappho 58: Philosophical Reflections on Death and Aging," *Classics@ 4* (2011), *The Center for Hellenic Studies of Harvard University*.

¹¹ In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, which Sappho was likely to have known, the story of Tithonus illustrates the horrors of old age. Though his body utterly fails him in the *Hymn*, Tithonus' voice "flows endlessly." ("Hymn to Aphrodite" *Archaic Greek Poetry: An Anthology*, Ed. and Trans. Barbara Hughes Fowler (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 39.)

joined Brutus' army as a *tribunus militum* (a senior officer). On the losing side at the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, Horace experienced embarrassment, fleeing the scene without his shield (*Odes* II.7), evoking the Greek lyric poets Alcaeus and Archilochos, who also wrote about abandoning their shields. Accepting Octavian's amnesty, a disheartened Horace returned to Rome to find his father no longer living and his farm confiscated – a heartrending manifestation of old age. Impoverished, he began writing poetry and embraced an Epicurean philosophy.¹²

In Rome, Horace befriended Virgil and Varius, who welcomed him into the circle of Maecenas, an aristocratic friend of Octavian.¹³ As Horace's benefactor, Maecenas empowered Horace both monetarily and intellectually, enabling him to reclaim his father's farm and expand his knowledge of other poets, including Sappho. For instance, in *Odes* I.1, Horace addresses Maecenas, confessing that he aims to be considered *lyricis vatibus* (among the lyric poets), demonstrating their shared knowledge of Archaic Greek poets like Sappho, thus fulfilling her presumption of literary immortality (previously discussed and skillfully framed in fragment 58).¹⁴ Horace published his third major work, *The Odes*, in two collections: Books I-III in 23 BCE and Book IV in 13 BCE. Horace's 103 lyric poems of varying lengths employ Alcaic, Sapphic and Asclepiad metrical patterns.¹⁵ Never marrying, Horace died on November 27, 8 BCE.

Horace probably wrote *Odes* II.11, "To Quintius Hirpinus," (Alcaic meter, after Alcaeus, Sappho's

¹² R.G.M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, "Book II Introduction," *A Commentary on Horace: Odes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 2.

¹³ "Maecenas" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Ed. M. Cary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 527.

¹⁴ Horace, "I.I: To Maecenas," *The Odes of Horace*, Trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 4.

¹⁵ "Horace" *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Ed. M. Cary (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 439.

contemporary) around 27/6 BCE, when the Cantabrians were challenging the Romans and the Scythians were yet to send their peace mission to Rome (25 BCE).¹⁶ Although Quinctius' exact identity is unknown, Horace speaks warmly of a well-known and prosperous man, who fears old age, by the same name in *Epistles* I.16, "And you live rightly, if you truly live/as you are said to live by all of us/who have for so long talked of you as happy."¹⁷ Thus, like Sappho and her female addressees, Horace addresses someone with whom he socializes (probably in the circle of Maecenas, since a collective group discusses his happiness).

Unlike Sappho's poetic construction in fragment 58, which shifts from a concrete to an abstract description of old age, Horace's *Odes* II.11 inverts Sappho's order, shifting instead from an abstract to a concrete description of old age. Consistently, the ode begins with politics and ends with love, moving backwards from the future to the present, arriving emphatically at the here-and-now: old age. In the first stanza (Horace II.11, 1-4), Horace attempts to quell his friend's anxieties about Rome's foreign enemies, the Cantabrians and the Scythians.¹⁸ Horace's brief reference marginalizes the enemy, transforming the ode into both a lament on old age and an emblem of the empire, internally at peace with enemies elsewhere. Confidently, Horace dismisses Quinctius' implied concern with a rational remark: "Life's too short for that" (4). In the second stanza (5-8), he cries out about the passage of time: "Youth and good looks go by pretty fast," suggesting to Quinctius (and the implied larger audience) that the passage of time is beyond mortal control (5). Elaborating, he associates the passage of time with a compounding of

¹⁶ There were Cantabrian wars in 29 BCE, 26/5 BCE and 24 BCE (p 170).

¹⁷ Horace, "Epistle I.16 to Quinctius Hirpinus," Trans. David Ferry, *Literary Imagination* 3 (2001). Web.

¹⁸ R.G.M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, "*Odes* II.11," *A Commentary on Horace: Odes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 177.

problems. For example, in old age, sex becomes obscene and insomnia becomes commonplace (6-8). Horace's matter-of-fact treatment of the aging process suggests that he has made peace with the physical realities of his own aging and in turn wants to eternalize his wisdom.

Instead of looking forward at what "the Cantabrians...*might* be planning" (emphasis mine), the remaining three stanzas describe the concrete realities of living for today (2). The third stanza uses nature imagery to describe the ephemerality of beauty: "Flowers don't bloom forever" and the moon's "brightness dims" (9-10). Using a rhetorical question, Horace emphasizes that looking forward – "trying to see what eyes are unable to see" – is pointless; rather, living in the present makes sense (12). Finally, in the fourth stanza, Horace locates his *locus amoenus* (perfect place) "under the olive trees," depicting himself and his addressee as old men with *canos...capillos* (untranslated: white hair) happily in need of repose (13;15). While resting, Horace suggests to Quinctius, "let's have a drink," introducing wine: a symbol of forgetting one's woes (i.e. old age), bliss, and association with the immortal Bacchus (13). Following, he contrasts his own (and Quinctius') inactivity and physical appearance with the quickness and youthfulness of the servant *puer* (boy) sent to gather water (14).

In the final stanza (lines 17-20), Horace introduces a third character, Lyde, who embodies the erotic crises of both Horace and his addressee, Quinctius, and crowns Horace's undeniable reference to Sappho with clarity. Instead of encouraging sexual relations (the men's inability is aforementioned in stanza two), Lyde, similar to the alcohol the men are consuming, furthers their forgetfulness. Additionally, with an exotic name with Greek and poetical associations and hair arranged "in the Laconian fashion," Lyde is meant to evoke Greek lyric poetry (19).¹⁹

¹⁹ R.G.M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, "Odes II.11," *A Commentary on Horace: Odes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 177.

Additionally, Horace describes Lyde as possessing an “ivory lyre to sing and play us some music,” possibly an indirect reference to the poet Sappho (17). Concluding the poem with such imagery, Horace reinforces that in old age, man must rely on poetry, music (such as Sappho’s), and intoxication to occupy the here-and-now.

Despite the overwhelming number of parallels drawn between Sappho’s Fragment 58 and Horace’s *Odes* II.11, each lyric poet achieved individual distinction. Although Horace aimed to bring Latin lyric poetry to the level of Greek lyric poetry, as a male poet, Horace described women, including Sappho, as inextricably linked to aesthetics and music. Unlike Horace’s *Odes*, many of Sappho’s personal lyric fragments demanded monody, a literary form in which a singer performs a poem accompanied by music (usually from a lyre).²⁰ In *Odes* II.13, after his close encounter with death, Horace exclaims, “How close I came to hearing the music of Sappho/complaining of those young women of her island.” According to Horace, Sappho’s music belongs in the past, while his poetry belongs in the present. In *Odes* IV.9, Horace further emphasizes his distance from Sappho, remarking, “And Sappho’s passion lives and breathes confided/to the strings of Sappho’s lyre.” In fact, when Horace mentions Sappho, he deliberately mentions her connection to the lyre as something he lacks, isolating himself from the past, females, and Greece in order to pay homage to himself. Consequently, although dubbed ‘lyric poetry’, Horace’s *Odes* functioned as speeches or readings for his literate Roman society, while Sappho’s fragments functioned as songs for her Greek followers.²¹ Although Sappho’s lyre captures her literary immortality, Horace expresses that he, too, possesses literary immortality, but confined to his words, rather than emotion

²⁰ In fragment 118, Sappho addresses the instrument, “But come,/my heavenly lute,/take voice.”

²¹ With that said, Quintillian (X.I.96) claims that Horace is the only successful Latin lyric poet.

felt during a dramatic performance. Nevertheless, having acknowledged that significant differences exist between Sappho and Horace, the poets' emphasis on old age indubitably informs their poetry, juxtaposing their mortality as human beings with their immortality as sources of literary genius.

Although both Sappho and Horace necessitate the motif of living for today by presenting a negative view of old age and summarizing the present, they exhibit only one societal attitude towards old age. In fact, many ancient authors present a positive view of old age, since societal attitudes vary greatly across cultures and times. Horace's Augustan Rome looked to Sappho's Archaic Greece for inspiration, making the comparison between Sappho and Horace viable. However, for example, in his 8th century BCE epic poetry, Homer presents old age as a sign of maturity and wisdom. Author Thomas Falkner sheds light on Homer's positive view:

The passage into old age is less a process of disengagement than of transition to a different but valued social role. Although old age precludes the elderly from certain activities, their status is determined by other factors: the political power they have accumulated, their knowledge and experience, their spiritual and moral resources.²²

In Book IV of Homer's *Odyssey*, Nestor assumes this "valued social role," describing the authority associated with his old age to Agamemnon: "I shall be among the riders, and command them with word and counsel; such is the privilege of the old men" (320-1).²³ Consequently, Agamemnon strives

²² Thomas M. Falkner, "Homeric Heroism, Old Age and The End of the Odyssey," *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 24.

²³ Qtd. in Thomas M. Falkner, "Homeric Heroism, Old Age and The End of the Odyssey," *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 27.

to emulate Nestor with his presumed “privilege of the old men.” Sappho and Horace counter the concept of old age as representing a “valued social role,” describing the negative end of the spectrum with powerful and enduring clarity.

Understanding their own mortality and the misfortunes of old age motivated the lyric poets Sappho and Horace to embrace the motif of living for today, despite nature’s destructive will. Resigning themselves to the physical realities of old age, Sappho and Horace turned towards poetry as a means of conveying their distress and immortalizing their legacy, literally.

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