

HORACE *CARMEN* 1.30: GLYCERA'S PROBLEM

O Venus regina Cnidi Paphique,  
 sperne dilectam Cypron et vocantis  
 ture te multo Glycerae decoram  
     transfer in aedem;  
 fervidus tecum puer et solutis  
 Gratiae zonis properentque Nymphae  
 et parum comis sine te Iuventas  
 Mercuriusque.

Scholarly opinion has shifted in the significance it attaches to the somewhat surprising reference to Mercury in the last line. Heinze-Keissling concluded that it derived from some lost original in Sappho or Alcaeus.<sup>1</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard, however, have revived interest in Pseudo-Acro's suggestion that Hermes is here invoked as the god of commercial transactions.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation fits well with Glycera's name, which, as Nisbet and Hubbard point out, was frequently used by courtesans. Besides citing Sappho 2 and Alcman 55 as possible models for the invocation of Aphrodite in the first stanza, Nisbet and Hubbard, following Reitzenstein, adduce an epigram by Posidippus (*Anth. Pal.* 12.131). Here Aphrodite is called upon to be propitious to Callistion, a courtesan "who has never driven a lover from her door."<sup>3</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard refrain from offering an opinion on the exact point of the reference to Mercury, contenting themselves with the vague observation that perhaps "Horace has gone one better than Posidippus." Quinn is more explicit: "Mercury appears in his role as the god of commercial transactions . . . a divine pimp to manage the business side of an establishment run under the patronage of Venus herself; the last word of the poem firmly places Glycera—she is no victim of unrequited love, but a *demi-mondaine* whose business is booming."<sup>4</sup>

While agreeing that the mention of Mercury unmistakably characterizes Glycera as a courtesan, I would suggest a rather different interpretation of the ode as a whole. Quinn astutely notes that *ture . . . multo* implies that Glycera's appeal to Venus is made "with some urgency, or, perhaps, with some frequency."<sup>5</sup> When we set this urgency beside the plea that *Iuventas* and Mercury join Venus in coming to Glycera's aid, the situation suggested is surely of a business that is faltering rather than booming. Is not Horace here hinting that Glycera's invocation of Venus and attendant deities is prompted by a declining clientèle and a concern that she is not so young as she used to be? The motif of the aging courtesan recurs frequently in Horace's *Odes* (1.25 and 4.13, and cf. 4.10) and *Epodes* (8 and 12). The subject was clearly a humorous one for Horace and his audience, though it is a humor that most modern readers find offensive. Here the topic is merely hinted at and the tone is of gentle banter.

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1. A. Kiessling and R. Heinze, eds., *Q. Horatius Flaccus, "Oden" and "Epoden"*<sup>3</sup> (Berlin, 1898), p. 124: "dass aber Merkur, der ithyphallische Gott, den Beschluss macht ist gewiss altesbischem Vorbild entlehnt."

2. R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace's "Odes,"* vol. 1 (Oxford, 1970), p. 344.

3. *Ibid.*

4. K. Quinn, ed., *Horace, The "Odes"* (London, 1980), p. 131.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 130.