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Horace, *Odes* 2.8 (+2.9): Imitation of Life

Barine, the heartless, faithless beauty of Horace's Ode 2.8 (*Ulla si iuris*), both confirms and challenges our sense of the rhetorical functions of feminine figures in this body of poetry. Two traits seem to characterize Barine's crimes against language: her lying both increases her beauty (*enitescis / pulchrior multo*, ll.6-7) and grants her unusual force in the religious (9-16) and civic (17-24) realms (see Ancona [1994: 76-85] on the public imagery here). In other words, her language, unanchored to any fact or event in the world, has the aesthetic powers that we might expect from such ludic practice, but also has powers that are usually associated with the most strenuously effective kinds of communication (e.g. vows, commands).

It seems not too far a leap to say that one of the things this poem puts before us for consideration is the peculiar situation of poetic language, especially that of a poet like Horace, simultaneously claiming his role as *vates* and his allegiance to the *musa procax* (2.1.37). Through Barine, Horace is able to enjoy a kind of combinatory fantasy, in which poetic language is able to achieve real control over others while remaining immune from the necessity to be descriptive or referential. This poem finds in fictionality (= "lying") the source of both poetry's beauty and its persuasiveness. However, the association with femininity reveals that these qualities are precisely those through which illegitimate power is claimed -- the power of the coquette, of the demagogue, of the con man. Thus, allying oneself with this technique not only might undermine any moral standing one seeks to claim, but, perhaps even more injurious, aligns one with those outsiders who can only gain power through under-handed means.

What are Horace's other options? Among the strongest would be a recourse to the more traditional powers of lyric poetry, energies derived from its role in (Greek) ritual and civic life and from the long tradition of a transcendent literary tradition. Not coincidentally, the next poem (2.9, *Non semper imbres*, addressed to the poet Valgius) offers us a glimpse of just such a strategy. Although this poem also reproves its addressee for an improper use of language (his excessive mourning and the attendant lapse in literary taste), it depicts a world in which all language, including poetry, finds its meaning in its authentic expression of social life. The counter-balance to the virtues of this poetic strategy, however, is the fact that the civic-minded poetry of praise that Valgius is enjoined to contribute ends up replicating the subordination of elite men to Augustus, exactly the least desired potential effect of becoming a *vates*.

Taken as a complementary pair, these poems frame two strategies for how lyric will relate to the world: is it to be language that is beguiling but faithless, like Barine's promises, or is it to gain purchase by being embedded in social actions like grieving and praising, as Valgius' language is? The feminine addressee in poem 2.8 embodies language's power to produce fictions and to use fictions to achieve real control in the world. Meanwhile, the male addressee of 2.9 gets associated with language which retains the full function of social communication and with a power that comes not from the cleverness or beauty of the individual, but from more impersonal forms of authority. The

juxtaposition of the two poems produces a vision of poetic authority which is able to capitalize on both poetry's disjunction from and its continuity with social life.