

GREEN LIZARDS IN HORACE:
LACERTAE VIRIDES IN ODES 1.23

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*Vitas inuleo me similis, Chloe,
quaerenti pavidam montibus aviis
matrem non sine vano
aurarum et siluae metu.*

*nam seu mobilibus veris inhorruit
adventus foliis seu virides rubum
dimovere lacertae,
et corde et genibus tremit.*

*atqui non ego te tigris ut aspera
Gaetulusve leo frangere persequor:
tandem desine matrem
tempestiva sequi viro.*

SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE has heretofore paid little attention to the presence of the green lizards, *virides lacertae*, in line 6 of this poem. In 1970 Nisbet and Hubbard noted that "some of the poem's images suggest a fresh eye," such as that of the "lizards parting the undergrowth."¹ In 1971 Nielsen suggested several explanations: 1) "even the darting movement of green lizards shatters her [Chloe's] small reserve of strength"; 2) "the sudden appearance of lizards . . . makes the fawn conscious that she does not enter the adventure of a new life alone"; 3) "the suitor like the harmless lizards prefers to accompany Chloe through her introduction to love"; 4) "the noun *rubum*, whose kindred adjective '*ruber*' means red, suggests that the picture of the brambles as they are parted may have erotic implications of its own"; and finally 5) "it is this erotic element which brings about the shift in animal imagery from second to third stanza."² In 1989 Ancona, following Nielsen, concluded in her exposition on this poem's "complicated . . . disturbing version of love and desire" that "the erotic potential awakened in this description of spring is realized in the vivid picture of sexual

¹R. G. M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book 1* (Oxford 1970) 274.

²Rosemary Nielsen, "Horace *Odes* 1.23: Innocence," *Arion* 9 (1970) 373-378, at 376-378.

intercourse imaged by the lizards parting the brambles, *virides rubum / dimovere lacertae*.”³ But no critic has yet looked closely enough. For these lizards, which appear nowhere else in Horace’s four books of odes, form an important part of both the structure and the imagery of the poem.

First of all they help vitiate Bentley’s argument for amending *veris adventus* (5–6) to *vepris ad ventum*.⁴ Lizards are cold-blooded reptiles which are active only in warm temperatures. What better way for Horace to indicate what Commager says is the “ode’s controlling metaphor . . . a seasonal one,”⁵ than to introduce spring through its springtime fauna.

Second the lizards’ presence establishes a tone of explicit eroticism—one found in both Greek and Latin literature. The noun “lizard” (σαύρα) is thrice used by the epigrammatist Strato to mean penis.⁶ He also employs the noun “bramble” (βάτος) to convey an image of female genitalia.⁷ In Martial *lacerta*, lizard, appears in the suggestive epigram “Sauroctonos Corinthius” (14.172.1).

The lizards also divide the poem into two discrete parts: the first half is dressed in green from Chloe (1), whose name *χλόη* means a green sprout, to the woods, *silvae* (4), to the shivering leaves, *mobilibus foliis* (5–6), and finally to the green lizards, *virides lacertae* (6–7). Significantly, the noun *rubum* with its connotation of red follows after *virides* and ushers in the second half of the poem, suggesting the redness of a heart, *corde* (8), and the mammalian blood of the tiger and lion in lines 9–10. In addition, at this point in the poem they form a convenient bridge from Chloe the hunted, to the tiger, the lion, and the man, who are all hunters. For the green lizard which hunted insects was in turn hunted by humans for its value as an ingredient in a variety of medicaments and remedies.⁸

Taking a hint from Baker’s “crescendo of the volume of noise” rising from the rustle of leaves to the tiger and lion,⁹ I suggest that there is here as well an evolutionary crescendo beginning with the plant kingdom and ending with the animal world—leaves to lions as it were. Furthermore the

³Ronnie Ancona, “The Subterfuge of Reason: Horace *Odes* 1.23 and the Construction of Male Desire,” *Helios* 16 (1989) 49–57, at 55, 53.

⁴For information about this argument see M. Owen Lee, “Horace, *Carm.* 1.23: Simile and Metaphor,” *CP* 60 (1965) 185–186, at 186, and J. T. Christie, “On Enjoying Bentley’s Horace,” *G&R* 15 (1968) 23–32.

⁵Steele Commager, *The Odes of Horace* (New Haven 1962) 238.

⁶11.21.1; 12.3.5, 207.1.

⁷P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, “Strato and the *Musa Puerilis*,” *Hermes* 100 (1972) 215–240, at 228.

⁸See the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder for the uses of green lizards in various medicines: 17.266.6; 29.108.1, 116.3, 129.1, 130.1, 131.3; 30.36.4, 52.4, 53.6, 71.3, 80.8, 86.3, 90.5, 104.6, 120.2, 135.6; 37.81.6.

⁹Robert J. Baker, “The Rustle of Spring in Horace (*Carm.*, I, 23),” *AJP* 92 (1971) 71–75, at 73–74.

organisms involved create an unnatural ecological system. While lizards and brambles may be found in the verdure of a forest, lions are not. They were found in the open plains of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Africa and, having been exhibited in Rome as early as 186 B.C., were seen frequently thereafter.¹⁰ That Horace was aware of this is shown by his use of the adjective *Gaetulus* (10) and by his description, *Iubae tellus generat leonum / arida nutrix*, in the ode before this one (1.22.14–15). Tigers, on the other hand, natives of Hyrcania, India, and Armenia, were not common in Rome. Indeed, the first were seen there in 11 B.C., just three years before Horace's death, in the celebrations that accompanied the opening of Augustus's Theater of Marcellus.¹¹ This strange zoo therefore demonstrates the shifting viewpoint of the poem. From Chloe's perspective these creatures created a frightening phantasmagoria, because she fears not only them, but Horace's narrator and perhaps her own emotions as well.¹² On the other hand Horace's narrator uses this impossible assemblage of animals to make light of what he feels is Chloe's baseless and silly fear, *metu vano* (3–4).

All of this flora and fauna, however, are subject to human control. The ring composition makes this clear, as the reader circles around from one human to another, Chloe and the would-be suitor in both the first and last lines. Thus not only does Horace's striking lizard image figure the erotic dynamics of the poem, but it also denotes its three structural movements—the bipartite, the evolutionary, and the circular.

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¹⁰J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1973) 61–62, 69.

¹¹Toynbee (above, n. 10) 70.

¹²On this point see M. Owen Lee, *Word, Sound, and Image in the Odes of Horace* (Ann Arbor 1969) 80, and Victor A. Estevez, "Chloe and the Fawn: The Structure of Odes 1.23," *Helios* 7 (1979–80) 35–44, at 38.