

1 | Introduction

On May 23, 2000, millions of Americans pondered an ancient Greek poem—in the *original* Greek. Certainty is impossible, but this was likely the greatest *en masse* reading of ancient Greek *ever*. The reason? That evening witnessed the season four finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon’s cult television series about an unlikely posse of monster-killers. At the beginning of this particular episode (“Restless”), Willow (a young American sorceress) has just finished tattooing Greek on a fellow witch’s back (that of Tara, her lover); the Greek—excepting perhaps an errant iota—is epigraphic and absolutely legible (to those, of course, who know Greek). For about six seconds, the camera travels the length of Tara’s back, in effect, “reading” the Greek for the audience, and allowing the viewer a moment’s rumination on the text (see Figure 1.1). After the camera—and Willow—finishes the poem, the camera cuts away to an extended conversation between Tara and Willow, and soon the episode leaps into the wider “Buffyverse” of Watchers, and Slayers, and slithering Lovecraftian horrors from alternate dimensions. In a moment or two, the Greek is gone.

But not forgotten. For most audience members, a “naïve” reading of the poem—that is to say, of the legible but unfathomable Greek—would focus precisely on the “deadness” of the language: an ancient tongue used to summon, it seems, ancient and unfathomable powers. The *content* of the poem would be immaterial: its *form* is the thing, such as *abracadabra* or other incantatory utterances. For most readers, then, the Greek poem is a signifier of magic, setting the scene for that particular episode’s heavily oneiric and fantastic story arc. Yet the Greek is assuredly not content-less, but is rather an *authentically* ancient poem, calculatedly included by series creator Whedon in this most postmodern of narratives. Indeed, *Buffy*—as the booming scholarship on Buffy has proven—constitutes a quintessentially postmodern text, a series that mimics in form the lowly genre of “teen dramady,” while juggling startling explorations of sexuality, metaphysics, desire, and even eschatology.¹

¹ Jowett 2005: 2 describes *Buffy* “an ideologically and formally ambiguous postfeminist artifact, one that is characteristic of postmodern cultural production.” For Jowett, postmodernism is the crucial critical mode for the interrogation of cultural change.

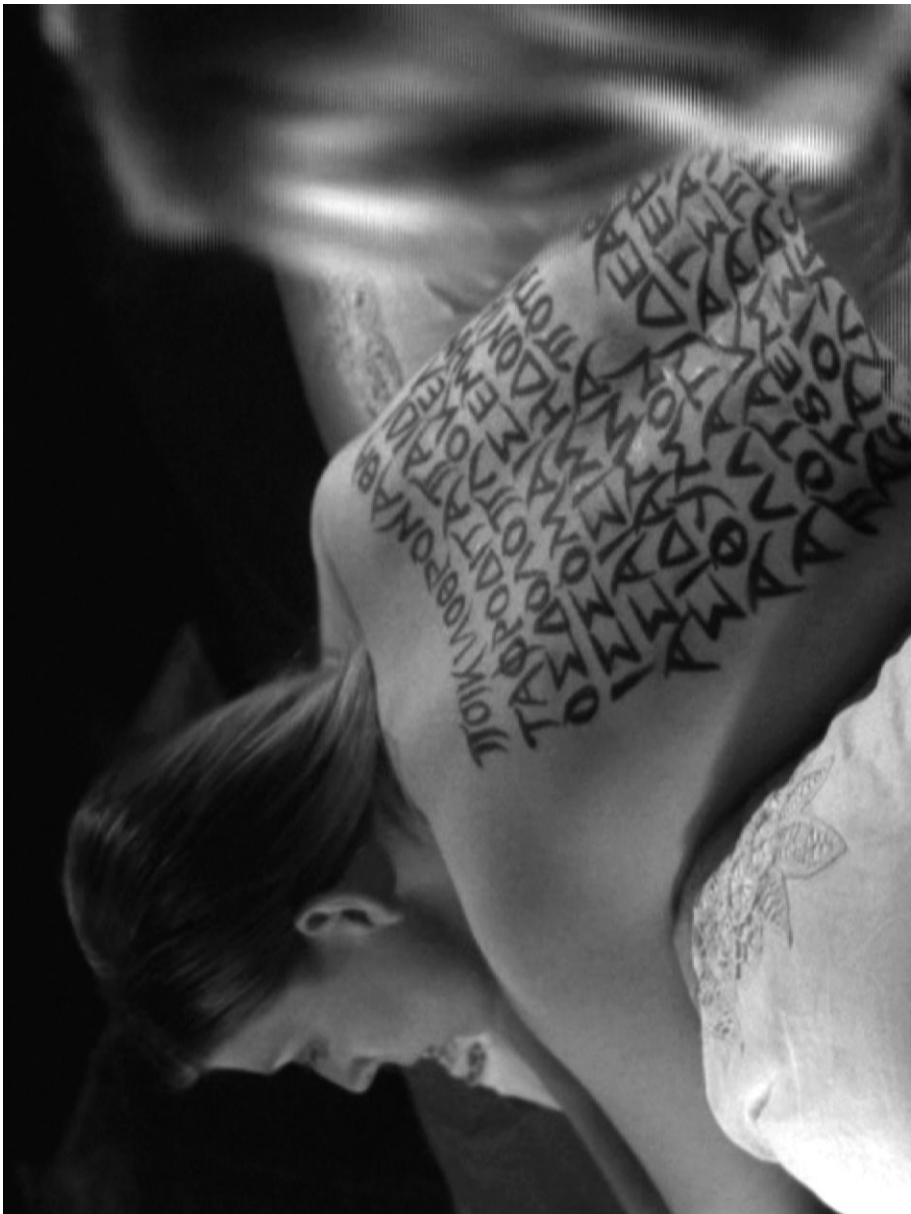


Figure 1.1. Willow paints Sappho’s poem 1 on Tara’s back, in the episode “Restless” of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

(In its broader narrative aspects, *Buffy* absolutely invites comparison to established patterns of heroic saga; Buffy even undergoes a shocking *katabasis*—a descent to the underworld—and a triumphant, practically messianic return.) Although the show makes fun of its cartoony, monster-dispatching archetypes (indeed, the characters refer to themselves as “The Scooby Gang,” a nod to the syndicated 1970s *Scooby-Doo* cartoon serial), true Buffyphiles appreciate that the show is as literary and knowingly allusive as the best of American fiction. A season finale penned by the show’s creator is not apt to feature meaningless Greek.²

Immediately after the finale, therefore, curious Buffyphiles harnessed the power of the internet to discover what a few erudite viewers had already grasped on a first “reading”: that Willow was not inscribing just *any* poem on Tara’s back, but the most extensive fragment we possess of Sappho, the famous poet of Lesbos from the early sixth century BCE. And here we begin our exploration of what happens when contemporary artists appropriate, or “receive,” a classical text: in other words, here we begin our examination of how (and why) ancient literature continues to be inspiration for contemporary social agitation. Even as late as the turn of the millennium, a lesbian story arc on television ran afoul of both popular attitudes towards sexuality as well as network censors, who allowed the erotic storyline of Tara and Willow only as long as there was no “kissing” (or worse!): that is, as long as Tara and Willow’s homosexuality remained notional rather than physical. After all, it had been only been three years since Ellen Degeneres’ controversial “coming-out” episode on ABC’s *Ellen*, which cost the network two corporate sponsors (Chrysler and J. C. Penney) and which generated angry and impassioned editorials across the country (including Reverend Jerry Falwell’s timeless denunciation of “Ellen Degenerate”).³ Other networks, as well, remained skittish about including openly homosexual characters in their programming.⁴ At the highest levels of televised media, homosexuality was still a controversial—and therefore unwelcome—theme.

² For a reading of Buffy’s fifth season through the lens of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, see Marshall 2003. (As Marshall notes, at least one other character in the show—Giles the Librarian—could be expected to possess some level of classical education.)

³ For an overview of the fallout from Ellen’s “coming-out” episode, see Lacey Rose’s “The Booming Business of Ellen DeGeneres: From Broke and Banished to Daytime’s Top Earner,” [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ellen-degeneres-show-oprah-winfrey-jay-leno-364373?](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ellen-degeneres-show-oprah-winfrey-jay-leno-364373?page=1) page=1. Accessed April 21, 2014.

⁴ Hubert 1999: 609.

As Joss Whedon noted on the show's blog in May 2000,⁵ the WB network's restrictions on open displays of same-sex desire forced him to be "creative" as an artist: in season four's sixteenth episode, which prefigures the finale, a magical spell, mutually performed by Tara and Willow, "substitutes" for sex, thereby enabling the show's creators to explore the characters' relationship through the symbols of another discourse entirely: the sisterhood of witchcraft.⁶ As so often, then, homosexuality, denied the opportunity for transparent discourse, operates only metaphorically, with its themes, priorities, and contradictions mapped onto another symbolic system. In this way, American television seems to be mirroring—at a remove of some fifty years—the arc of American stage drama, which too had its efflorescence of "closeted" theater of the type penned by mid-century authors Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams. Tony Kushner's 1993 opus *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on American Themes* neatly reversed America's "closeting" of homosexuals by "closeting" America within an unabashedly gay and sweeping epic, and one would be hard pressed today to locate systematized censorship of homosexuality in the production of New York theater.⁷

In the same period, however, television remained an unwelcome space for openly homosexual characters and themes. Ellen's "coming-out" episode notwithstanding, the appearance of homosexuality on American television was uncommon, if not outright taboo; homosexuality thus remained metaphorically displaced and "closeted." In the May finale of the fourth season of *Buffy*, then, Whedon complicates this metaphorical displacement of homosexuality by including a love spell that's not only erotic, but *specifically* (even, in a sense, punningly) lesbian/Lesbian: the two operating planes of *Buffy*'s discourse on Tara and Willow—the textually magical and the subtextually homosexual—thus mirror and reify each other.⁸ In the poem inscribed on Tara's back, the narrator—who, for

⁵ The original blog for *Buffy*—named *The Bronze*, after a featured bar within the show—remains archived and searchable; the URL for Joss Whedon's May 4, 2000 comments is currently: www.cise.ufl.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/hsiao/buffy/get-archive?date=20000504.

⁶ Jowett 2005: 50.

⁷ For a notorious and homophobic exposé of "disguised" homosexuality, see Kaufmann 1966, a contemporary indictment of both Williams and Albee.

⁸ For Mendlesohn 2002: 69, such a displacement "actually undercuts a queer reading of Willow at all, first by neutralizing her sexuality and then by rechanneling thoughts of lesbian relationships in a safe direction." I disagree; queerness necessarily displaces more straightforward patterns of sexual discourse, and the inclusion of Sappho 1 absolutely reinscribes Willow into the framework of modern sexual desire. Mendlesohn concedes that the inclusion of Sappho helps halt the "deerotization" of Willow, but is generally disappointed by Whedon's gesture.

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Excerpt

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simplicity's sake, we shall call Sappho—calls out to the goddess Aphrodite after her lover has spurned her:

Iridescent-throned and immortal Aphrodite,
Wile-weaving daughter of Zeus: I implore you!
Do not crush my spirit with curses or torments,
O reverend one,

But approach here! If ever you have heard
My pleadings, then return: for once before
Having left your father's golden
House. . .

[you said. . .]

"Whom should Persuasion again
force into affection for you? Who,
O Sappho, is doing you wrong?"

"For even if she flees; quickly she shall pursue;
Even if she spurns gifts, she shall give them;
Even if she does not love, soon she will love,
Though entirely unwilling."

As scholars such as Segal and Faraone have observed, this first poem of Sappho includes all the hallmarks of a literary love spell: the invocation to a deity; the indignant expression of injustice; and, most chillingly perhaps, the unwilling subjugation of the object of desire.⁹ (Left unsaid, but implicit, are the punishments inflicted upon the unwilling, including sleep deprivation, fever, and physical pain. There is little that is sentimental about an Ancient Greek love spell.¹⁰) Sappho thus witnesses a theophany in which Aphrodite promises to restore Sappho's girlfriend: however troubled the relationship, Sappho's lover will return to her, if only through magic. While many of Sappho's fragmentary poems glance at potentially homoerotic themes—such as fragment 16's praise of Anactoria's "lovely walk and bright visage," or the suggestively ripening apple of fragment 105—Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" tackles the issue head-on. The poem's

⁹ Segal 1974; Faraone 1999: 136–7.

¹⁰ For the general category of ancient Greek *agogê*, or 'charm' spells, see Faraone 1999: 41–95; a fine comparandum to the Sappho poem is PGM XIXa.50–54: "Aye, lord demon, attract, inflame, destroy, burn, cause her to swoon from love as she is being burnt, inflamed. Goad the tortured soul, the heart of Karosa, whom Thelo bore, until she leaps forth and comes to Apalos. . . Do not allow Karosa herself . . . to think of her own husband, her child, drink, food, but let her come melting for passion and love and intercourse. . ."

passionate, urgent evocation of same-sex desire dovetails exactly with Whedon’s subtextual drive to “out” Willow and Tara as passionate, physical lovers; frustrated and stonewalled by modern network censors, Whedon turns to antiquity in order to criticize and interrogate modern sexual mores, however obliquely. Artistically, the poem even prefigures the eventual break-up of Willow and Tara in season six, and Willow’s transformation—after Tara’s shocking death—into “Dark Willow,” a witch who only uses magic for self-serving, ultimately destructive ends. In this respect, she is not unlike the Sapphic narrator of poem 1: an erotic being who channels supernatural energy for morally dubious purposes. (Fragment 1 may be a “love” poem in some senses, but it’s hardly a cheery gloss on same-sex attachments.)

So what seems a throwaway moment in *Buffy*—a Greek tattoo on a sinuous back—in fact permits a bifocal examination of the poetics of modern homosexual discourse, compelled (as so often) to swerve into other poetic and semiotic systems, this time into the classical. But, intriguingly, the discourse of such a reception works both ways; at the same time that the inclusion of Sappho’s poem “queers” the relationship between Willow and Sappho—thereby evading network censors—*Buffy* is indubitably and assuredly queering Sappho.¹¹ For there is nothing *necessarily* gay or homosexual about Sappho’s poetry; indeed, for most readers in most times, Sappho has been assuredly, even aggressively, heterosexual. Even in antiquity, Sappho’s name was attached to a beautiful young man named Phaon—“the bright one”—out of despair for whom the poetess hurls herself from a cliff.¹² This sorry affair finds reflections in traditions both ancient and modern. The (pseudo-Ovidian) epistle from Sappho to Phaon pitifully laments “Phaon, even as you frequent the faraway fields of Sicily’s Aetna, a flame burns in me no less than Aetna’s own!” (*Heroides* 15.11–12), while Mary Robinson’s 1796 Sapphic sonnet cycle includes the following ecstatic reflection on Phaon’s powers of attraction:

Why, when I gaze on Phaon’s beauteous eyes,
Why does each thought in wild disorder stray?
Why does each fainting faculty decay,
And my chill’d breast in throbbing tumults rise?
(4.1–4)¹³

¹¹ For a sociological analysis of the queering of Willow in terms of fan response, see Driver 2007: 57–90. For Driver, the inscription of Sappho on Tara marks the exchange as “one of the most sensual scenes in the show. . . fluid yet flesh-bound, this [is] a corporeally luscious scene. . .” (68).

¹² Knox 1995: 278–9. ¹³ Robinson 1796.

Sappho's shadowy *historical* presence has allowed—perhaps encouraged—a parallel *artistic* and *fictional* presence, one far more powerful and influential than, paradoxically, the “real” Sappho. As Dimitrios Yatromanolakis has demonstrated, such a semiotic diffusion took place almost immediately after Sappho's death: “Sappho” thus proliferated as a nexus of *ideas*—ideas that often blossomed into long-running traditions (such as the torrid Phaon/Sappho affair), or which languished after their original social contexts no longer applied. In her afterlife, “Sappho” was thus remolded into a staggering number of shapes and forms: from a heterosexual vixen; to a female symposiast; to a lustful courtesan (one who opted to *lesbiazein*, or, in Ancient Greek, ‘to perform oral sex’); and even (in a notorious comparison) to a prim and virginal schoolmistress.¹⁴ This last maneuver was a desperate bid by nineteenth-century Prussian classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to sanitize a recent and troubling trend: the Victorian equation of Sappho's biography and lyrics with contemporary same-sex impulses and desires. Only among the Victorians, then, did Sappho finally emerge as a “modern” homosexual, or lesbian;¹⁵ and it was this “idea” of Sappho that American lesbians in the 1950s adopted as a sort of calling card, a password, a code.¹⁶

When Whedon introduced Sappho's poem into *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, he inserted “Sappho,” not Sappho: he placed himself at a long line of artists who have appropriated Sappho's work for contemporary ideological ends. Indeed, as Whedon has himself remarked, he considers himself a feminist: the underlying generic assumption of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is that the naïve female “victim” in prototypical slasher films—say, from the *Halloween* series, or its brethren—constitutes a misogynistic projection of female insecurity, ineptitude, and impotence. As a general rule, women in such horror films rarely defeat their (masculine, sadistic)

¹⁴ For Sappho-as-symposiast, see Yatromanolakis 2007: 197–220; for the sexual fetishes of Lesbian women, see Yatromanolakis 2007: 183–9; for the early twentieth-century reception of Sappho as a virginal proto-gym teacher, see Parker 1993. See especially Parker's important formulation: “Every age creates its own Sappho. Her position as *the* woman poet (as Homer is the male poet), the first female voice heard in the West, elevates her to a status where she is forced to be a metonym for all women. Sappho ceases to become an author and becomes a symbol” (Parker 1993: 149–50).

¹⁵ See especially Prins 1997: 94: “Although questions about Sappho have persisted for many centuries, her association with lesbian identity is a particularly Victorian phenomenon, and a legacy that persists in modern lesbian studies.” Wood 1994 explores the “queering” of Sappho in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, including its musical subcultures (especially opera). Goldhill 2006: 250–74 examines the similar destabilization of Sappho's sexuality in the visual arts.

¹⁶ Richlin 2005.

attackers: the vanquishing of the enemy is thus left to the male hero, and the pretty heroines must make do with virtual arias of screaming. (A particularly unattractive corollary is that sexually active heroines—those who flaunt or otherwise exercise their sexuality in ways that could be considered threatening or transgressive—are sure to meet particularly grisly ends.) The postmodern *Buffy*, by contrast, posits a universe in which the notional epitome of slasher-victimhood—a blue-eyed, blonde minx with a Valley Girl moniker—is, ironically, a being of immense power, savvy, and smarts: the eternal savior instead of the eternally saved. While *Buffy* scholars are split on the range and impact of Whedon's feminism, the inclusion of Sappho's poem 1 helps to skew—even “queer”—*Buffy* as a site of contested feminine identities, lesbian and otherwise.¹⁷ In his bid to subvert the dominant discourses of gender in American horror and action films, Whedon turns to antiquity, however briefly, to support the construction of a controlling, even awesome feminine subject.

In Whedon's season finale, Sappho's poem thus functions in at least two different discursive modes: one, entirely as form (an ancient Greek poem or spell), the other, as content (the inscription of same-sex desire). There is, perhaps, a third mode here as well: readers who intuit that the Greek must have *some* homoerotic implication, but cannot actually read the Greek, thereby inscribing or constructing “Sapphic” lesbianism as unknowable or inscrutable. Depending on the narrative “frame,” the text thus yields multiple meanings, including a controversial one: the reformulation of Willow and Tara as modern, American lesbians. I turn now to similar collision of form and content, of antiquity and modernity, with an even stronger bent towards the postmodern: what happens when we launch an ancient Roman poet—for example, Horace—into cyberspace? What happens when a poem concerning first-century BCE Augustan social reform finds itself commenting—by accident or design—on Clinton-era social devolution? As so often, the result is a semiotic maelstrom, and a glimpse into the continuing negotiation of classical antiquity as a precursor—or metaphor—for American society itself.

Horace's *Odes*—a series of lyric poems published in three books in 23 BCE, with a fourth added in 13 BCE—remain one of the cornerstones of Augustan literature.¹⁸ Taken as a unit, they cover an impressive swath of

¹⁷ For the ongoing debates on the extent of Whedon's feminism, see Levine 2007. For an impassioned diatribe against the self-importance of *Buffy* studies, see Jenkins 2002.

¹⁸ For the date of 23 BCE, see Nisbet and Rudd 2004: xix; Hutchinson 2002 argues for separately published volumes.

human experience—from meditations on erotic experience, with both women and boys; to philosophical ruminations on time, death, and aging; to social inquiry and commentary on contemporary events. In terms of technique, they remain a tour de force: for the most part, Horace adopts complex Greek meters—Alcaics, Sapphics, Glyconics, Asclepiads, among them—and wrestles his Latin into these graceful, albeit non-native, forms. Consonant with Roman toleration for self-admiration, Horace is happy to offer that as a collection, these odes constitute a *monumentum aere perennius*, “a monument more lasting than bronze” (3.30.1).

But not all parts of the *Odes* have earned an equal immortality. While *Odes* 1.5—concerning the traumatizing lass Pyrrha—has been so popular that Ronald Storrs could assemble a book consisting *entirely* of translations of this single ode—Horace’s so-called *Roman Odes* (the first six odes of the third book) have resisted continued appropriation.¹⁹ Poems on love, death, aging, and the evanescence of youth: such aperçus possess universal appeal and are easily adaptable.²⁰ The *Roman Odes*’ emphasis on morality, coupled with far-flung allusions to myth and to contemporary foreign policy, sits less comfortably with modern artists, and the poems seem far less amenable to creative adaptation. The *Odes*’ increasing cynicism about the morals of contemporary Romans features an illustrative fable in *Odes* 3.5, in which the Roman hero Regulus, captured in Africa by the Carthaginians in 255 BCE, receives a parole to Rome in which to argue for prisoner exchange. Instead, Regulus persuades the Roman Senate to reject the proposal; he then (honorably) returns to Carthage, where he is re-imprisoned, hideously tortured, and executed.²¹ Horace’s point is that men of old were made of sterner stuff, happy to die for cause and country (in contradistinction, perhaps, to the effete and nervous populace of Horace’s contemporary cityscape). In fact, the poem ends (3.5.53–56) with Regulus returning to Carthage as if merely concluding a day in court—as if about to retire to an estate in Venafrum (a rural town south-east of Rome) or

¹⁹ Storrs 1959.

²⁰ Theodore Ziolkowski 2005 notes that mid-century American receptions of Horace’s poetry tend to be emphatically a-political. He cites, for example, a portion of Lawrence Durrell’s 1944 “On First Looking into Loeb’s Horace”: “This lover of vines and slave to quietness/ Walking like a figure of smoke here, musing/ Among his high and lovely Tuscan pines” (196). Here, Horace’s political poetry is ignored in favor of his more reflective pastoral musings. Later adaptations—such as Robert Lowell’s adaptation of *Odes* 2.7 (1967)—could indeed espouse a political viewpoint (in this case, pardon for conscientious objectors of the Vietnam war (204)). As we will see, Mezey’s *To the Americans* continues this interpretative vein of politicizing Horace.

²¹ For Cicero’s version of events, see *De Off.* 3.99 and *In Pisonem* 43; Blätter 1944/5 is a useful compendium of the variants of the Regulus tale.

perhaps to Tarentum, a resort town and place of relaxation. Horace thus juxtaposes the mundane (and implicitly contemporary) life of *otium*, 'leisure,' to the perils faced by the heroes of the past.

The following poem is even bleaker in its portrayal of contemporary (Roman) society and thus leads us to a curious collision of Augustus and Clinton, of papyrus and the blogosphere, of Roman defeat and terrorism's ascension. If *Odes* 3.5 features an implicit warning about the deterioration of the Roman stock, 3.6 pulls no punches in its uninviting assessment of current and future Roman depravity. It begins with a crisis in Roman religion: "Though guiltless, you will continue to pay for the sins of your forefathers, Roman, until you repair the crumbling temples and shrines of the gods, and the statues that are begrimed with black smoke."²² Only because Romans have traditionally held themselves humble before the gods (*dis te minorem quod geris*, 3.6.5) have they been able to rule; Horace further argues that Roman impiety is to blame for the recent military disasters in the Eastern provinces. Because of Roman irreverence, "Monaeses and the troops of Pacorus have twice squashed our ill-omened attacks"—once in 40 BCE when the Parthians destroyed the army of Marc Antony's legate Decidius Saxa, and again in 36 BCE during Antony's disastrous invasion of the same province.²³ Worse yet, these setbacks left Rome vulnerable to "The Ethiopian" (3.6.14), a thinly veiled reference to the much-reviled Egyptian queen Cleopatra.

And this is just the beginning. From martial affairs Horace turns to marital ones, as generations fertile in sin (*fecunda culpae*) defile marriage, the home, and the populace in general. First, Horace focuses on the family. A young Roman girl takes up the art of dancing – and as if this action weren't sufficiently alarming, she learns *Ionian* dancing: the most effeminate and most raunchy type, tainted as it is with the luxuriance of the East. Hand in hand with dancing go the family's "incestuous loves" (*incestos amores*): as soon as the husband and *pater familias* reels with wine, the wife seeks out young adulterers. Worse yet—could it get any worse?—the husband doesn't care, and to be frank, it's good money when the wife lands a high-paying Spanish captain for a trick (3.6.29). It may be degrading (*dedecorum*), but it's also lucrative. In contrast, Horace juxtaposes these incarnations of iniquity with the nobler stuff of yesteryear: "Not from parents like these came the young men who stained the sea with Punic blood . . . No, they were the manly children of peasant soldiers" (3.6.33–38), able to plough the earth with Sabellian mattocks, while hauling

²² Translation from Nisbet and Rudd 2004: 163.

²³ For the historical background see Nisbet and Rudd 2004: 103; West 2002: 67.