

The Essence of Horace: A New Interpretation of *quinta parte* (*Ode* 1.13.16)

*Ode* 1.13 describes the narrator's jealousy that his beloved Lydia has fallen for a younger man. He worries Lydia's beauty will be damaged by her abusive lover Telephus and shows particular concern that the young man might bite her lips (1.13.15-6):

laedentem oscula, quae Venus  
quinta parte sui nectaris imbuit.  
Harming the mouth, which Venus  
Imbued with a fifth part of her own nectar.

Horace's extended description of Lydia's sweetness in this verse has caused some to wonder why her mouth should be exactly one fifth (*quinta parte*) as sweet as Venus' nectar. Some suggest that it could be related to an ancient debate about the sweetness of honey as compared to nectar (Maclean and Chase 1866). Others cite the honey-nectar debate and add the possible interpretation that her mouth is the "quintessence" of sweetness (Smith 1895, Shorey and Laing 1906). More recently, Nisbet and Hubbard cite the aforementioned interpretations and add that there may be some allusion to Aristotle's fifth element or to the five parts of love mentioned in early commentaries; after a brief discussion, they decide in favor of the interpretation that Lydia's kisses are sweeter than honey but not so sweet as nectar (1970).

Since the idea of a quintessence seems to have originated later than Horace, it is unlikely that he had a quintessence of sweetness in mind (Nisbet and Hubbard 1970). Horace, a well-read poet, was likely aware of the debate about the sweetness of honey and perhaps intended for *quinta parte* to imply that his beloved Lydia's kisses between honey and nectar in their sweetness. He may also have alluded to Aristotle or the five parts of love by choosing a "fifth

part” instead of another fraction that would have been sweeter than honey but not so sweet as Venus’ nectar.

In addition to the previous understandings of the line, I suggest a different reading of *quinta parte*. Horace’s praenomen is Quintus, the feminine of which would be Quinta. There is a tradition in Greek and Latin poetry of associating sweetness not only with the kisses of lovers, but also with the mouths and voices of poets (i.e. Hes. *Theog.* 96-103; Theoc. *Id.* 1.1-3; Hor. *Odes* 3.9.9-10). Therefore, I believe that Horace is punning on his own name in this phrase; Venus has given Lydia’s mouth Horatian, poetic sweetness. Perhaps this poetic sweetness even passed to her when she was kissed (an act of Venus) by the poet himself. This pun would imply that Lydia’s sweet mouth rightly belongs with Horace. A subtle suggestion of their compatibility would accord with the theme of the poem, an attempt to convince Lydia to leave a younger lover and come back to the poet/narrator Horace.

### **Works Cited**

Maclean, A.J. and R.H. Chase. 1866. *[The] Works [of Horace], with English Notes*. Cambridge, MA.

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

Shorey, P. and G.J. Laing. 1906. *Horace: Odes and Epodes*. Boston.

Smith, C.L. 1895. *The Odes and Epodes of Horace*. Boston.