

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

ANCIENT ROMAN FICTION

Petronius (?–65 A.D.)

Juvenal (55 A.D.–138 A.D.)

Petronius

History of Roman Literature. Though our emphasis is falling on the development of genres, or of diverse forms of imagination, in Roman literature, we are inevitably constructing an image of the chronological *flow* of Roman literature and culture. It will have become clear, from what we have been reading to date, that the half century following the death of Augustus was fraught with social conflicts and vivid human passions. Tacitus and Seneca have made the point for us, and we will soon have lyric poetry, like that of Catullus, to amplify the point from another direction. Our attention this week will fall on a brilliant satirist of just the period we are considering.

Life of Petronius. Little is known of the life of Petronius. Like Seneca, who had only contempt for the hedonistic life-style of the first century A.D., Petronius too was implicated in the goings on of imperial society ‘at the highest level.’ He himself came, apparently, of a wealthy family, and moved naturally into the intense life of metropolitan Rome. We may know him best for a raucous pre novel, the *Satyricon*, but must realize that he also did responsible work as a citizen, serving as Governor of the Province of Bithynia in 62 A.D., and after that as Consul, or First Magistrate, of Rome. These posts, however, led ‘yet higher’ in to the inner circle of Nero’s court—remember the machinations of Nero, in the account given by Tacitus—and from there to appointment as Nero’s *arbiter elegantiae*, or court judge of fashion. That this post was official and recognized is a measure of the high-life level that dominated the Imperial Court.

Petronius’ fate. We do know that, after having achieved significant influence over the Emperor Petronius inevitably found himself the object of jealousy. Tigellinus, commander of Nero’s public guard, accused Petronius—wrongly, as we know—of conspiring to kill the Emperor, whereupon Petronius was arrested, in 65 A.D. Before the Emperor had returned from campaign, Petronius, who was to the max a hedonist and not a masochist, proceeded to commit suicide. The way he did so was as distinctive as the way he lived his life. He cut his veins, which bled only feebly, so that he temporarily postponed his death, while chatting with his friends, listening to pop music, and reclining. Only after it had become evident that he needed help, in dispatching himself, did his companions essentially suffocate him with steam from his bath. (Remember Seneca?)

Ancient satire. *The Satyricon*, the only text Petronius left us, has been a smash hit with readers from the beginning. On the surface, the explanation might seem to be the over the top luxury and eroticism climate of the text—the anal, the urinary, and the phallic competing for top role. The fact is, though, that the *Satyricon* is an exceptionally innovative form of that satirical genre which is occasionally a byproduct of conspicuously over-sophisticated societies. (We will turn, next week, to another brilliant Roman satirist, Juvenal, whose chief target, like that of Petronius, was the decadence of first century A. D. Rome. We will be asking ourselves, as we advance, why Greek society generated almost no satire—except for aspects of Aristophanes’ comic drama—while Roman was rich in the genre.) The narrator of the tale, Encolpius, recounts events as do the narrators of early English novels, like Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, where the tale teller is also immersed in the events being told about. Formally, therefore, Petronius’ tale makes moves toward the novel, in its earliest western form. And there is much more to say about those moves, for the world Encolpius tells us about smacks of that ‘real world’ so forcefully brought to the literary text by the novels of Renaissance Europe—cf. *Gil Blas* or *Don Quixote*—in which literary convention often steps aside to let the rawness of ordinary life assert itself.

The *Satyricon*. It might well be added that the narrator of the *Satyricon* travels dark paths of irony, which complement his broadly satirical view of the society he portrays. The passage below both caricatures the

indifference of the 'elite' to the trashed people of their society, and leaves us gasping, as we absorb the bitter subtext of the narrator's words.

We had had enough of these novelties and started to enter the dining-room when a slave, detailed to this duty, cried out, "Right foot first." Naturally, we were afraid that some of us might break some rule of conduct and cross the threshold the wrong way; nevertheless, we started out, stepping off together with the right foot, when all of a sudden, a slave who had been stripped, threw himself at our feet, and commenced begging us to save him from punishment, as it was no serious offense for which he was in jeopardy; the steward's clothing had been stolen from him in the baths, and the whole value could scarcely amount to ten sesterces. So we drew back our right feet and intervened with the steward, who was counting gold pieces in the hall, begging him to remit the slave's punishment. Putting a haughty face on the matter, "It's not the loss I mind so much," he said, "as it is the carelessness of this worthless rascal. He lost my dinner clothes, given me on my birthday they were, by a certain client, Tyrian purple too, but it had been washed once already. But what does it amount to? I make you a present of the scoundrel!"

Readings: Petronius, *Satyricon*, trans. Arrowsmith (New York, 1983).

Courtney, Edward, *A Companion to Petronius* (Oxford, 2001.)

Sullivan, J.P., *The Satyricon of Petronius: A Literary Study* (London, 1968).

Discussion questions:

The life Petronius pillories is that of the Roman *nouveaux riches* of Nero's moment. What does Petronius think of the 'little guy'? What is his attitude toward the slaves in Trimalchio's house?

Does the *Satyricon* read like a novel to you? Do you see a plot developing, and a 'growth' in the central characters?

Do you leave Petronius' satire with the sense that he has scourged evil, or does he himself seem to delight in the fallen world he describes.

Juvenal (55 A. D. -138 A.D.)

Life of Juvenal. As with many of the authors we have met in Ancient Rome, little is known about Juvenal. Born in the second half of the first century A.D., he lives out his life in a settling, and gradually less turbulent, phase of the imperial experience. He was born in Aquinum, scion of a wealthy freedman, studied in Rome as a pupil of the eminent orator Quintilian, and left us sixteen substantial dactylic hexameter satires.

Satire. Satire, said the Roman orator Quintilian, is the one genre the Romans can claim as their own. He had something there. We have remarked that for the Greeks—with the exception of the comic dramatic genius Aristophanes, a mime writer like Herondas, and perhaps in places a Hellenistic playwright like Menander—tragedy, riotous comedy, epic all came naturally, but, perhaps for some distinctive twist to Greek culture, the satire-breeding urban culture was not present. To the Romans, on the other hand, satire came naturally. Already in the second century B.C. Roman society had been suitably mocked by Lucilius, a model for Juvenal, while Horace (65 B.C.-8 B.C.), a close contemporary of Livy, had provided a more recent model, as had Petronius' Stoic contemporary, Persius (34 A.D.-62 A.D.).

Types of Satire. It should be said from the start that these Roman satirists are all different from one another, and that the genre in which they write is looser than it might seem. Lucilius, for instance, was a dark Stoic, imbued with severe moral precepts, and brought a heavy hammer to bear on the foibles of his society, while Horace, his contemporary, was far mellow, though at all times a *criticus*, and made sure that his ire was foremost art. The cases of Petronius and Juvenal are even harder to distinguish. There is no doubt that, plain on the face of their texts, both writers deal with life as it is, the common people, even the *bas fonds* and gross levels of social existence. This latter proclivity is especially marked in Petronius, who, while shocked at the wretched treatment of such menials as slaves and domestic servants, is in his camp, Fellini mode totally intrigued by the outrageous goings on in 'high society.' (It is as though Trimalcho is a slightly concealed portrait of Nero, though even Trimalchio is not worse than good naturedly degenerate; concerned, after all, with the will in which he is going to decree the freedom of all his slaves.)

Juvenal, by contrast with Petronius, is much less the caricaturist. While Petronius carries out a proto novel narrative in prose, Juvenal adopts the dactylic hexameter verse form, which links him to the grand tradition in poetry—though in a manner ever so slightly tongue in cheek. Juvenal is more the sociologist/satirist, with a sharp eye, as in Satire Three, for the self-inflicted plight of his beloved Rome. How does he handle this critique of his city?

The voice of satire, and society. He talks his satire to a friend who is moving out of the city to a removed and quiet spot along the coast south of Rome. And why is the friend making this move? He is sick of Rome. Juvenal embraces the chance to criticize the metropolis, in characterizing his friend's view. Rome is overcrowded and noisy, the aristocrats are fake and pretentious, the streets are full of the seriously poor. Morals are shot and piety to family or gods is weak. He takes pleasure in detailing each of these weaknesses. He dwells, for example, on the shoddy construction of buildings, which are doomed to rapid collapse, on the bribes that are required in order to get contracts, on the sloppy indifference of the legal system. The passage below suggests the subtlety of the author's insight into the corruption that has befallen the city.

In this passage the narrator's friend speaks, throwing up his hands before the embedded corruption of his world. In order to succeed, in the literary world, one has to kiss ass, lie about the merits of so and so's work. One must entice others with prophecies of the impending death—of those whose wills will devolve on them. One must collude in fraudulent schemes, in order to get on the governor's staff:

What can I do at Rome? I cannot lie; if a book is bad, I cannot praise it, and beg for a copy; I am ignorant of the movements of the stars; I cannot, and will not, promise to a man his father's death; I have never examined the entrails of a frog; I must leave it to others to carry to a bride the presents and messages of a paramour. No man will get my help in robbery, and therefore no governor will take me on his staff: I am treated as a maimed and useless trunk that has lost the power of its hands. What man wins favour nowadays unless he be an accomplice--one whose soul seethes and burns with secrets that must never be disclosed?

Readings: Juvenal, *Sixteen Satires*, trans. Peter Green (New York, Penguin, 2004.)

Jones, Frederick, *Juvenal and the Satiric Genre* (London, 2007).

Essay

Suggested Topics

What seem to you the chief differences between the satire of Petronius and that of Juvenal? Are the authors pillorying the same faults and/or the same level of social behavior?

What seems to you to generate the satirical spirit in the first century A.D.? Is it the decline in morals? Or is it the particularly rich target that sophisticated urban enclaves offer to the literary eye?

Does Juvenal offer us a true to life picture of the problems facing the city of Rome? Or does he, in the mouths of his 'characters,' work for literary effect? How would you know how to answer this question?