

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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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).

Discussion 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?