CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

The central question put to Roman satire has always been "What is it?" Since antiquity scholars have struggled to identify that solid "something" beneath the shifting surfaces of Ennius, Lucilius, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal (works not of Roman satire generally, but of "verse satire," and with the most prolific of these, Lucilius, now only a smattering of fragments, and the first, Ennius, much slighter still) that would allow us to contain the stunning variety of their works by means of a single, streamlined generic formula.[1] But their best attempts to control the mess have managed only to tell us that the genre's failure to hold together *is* its zero-grade, and its best way of constituting itself as a genre. Their many metaphors for satire, whether of "stuffing," "mish-mash," "heaps," or "overloaded plates," all manage to tell us only that this is a hybrid, blow-out feast, an "anti-genre," where anything goes, so we had better be prepared to "open wide." Their favorite metaphor, that of a "stuffed plate" (*lanx satura*) heaped high with a variety of foodstuffs, spilling over its edges, is less a description of the genre's salient qualities than it is an admission of defeat, and an expression of the scholar's own frustration in trying to contain satire inside the narrow confines of a too-specific generic formula. Failing to plumb the works of Roman verse satire down to that rock-hard, streamlined core (because "it" is not there), scholars have been forced simply to heap these works *en masse* onto a single generic plate (an impressive *lanx*, and no mere *patella*) and to call that plate "satire."[2] Once crammed with the full enormity of what

[1] Having mentioned Ennius here, I must abruptly leave him behind, unstudied. The remains of his 4 books of satires are so slight that very little of real use can be adduced from them.

[2] These works are thus "satire" because "on the plate," and not "on the plate" because "satire."

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

we automatically "count" as satire because that is what Lucilius, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal told us they were writing, the plate spills over, defying our efforts to neatly categorize and contain the works we have heaped it with.

But the problem "What is satire?" has embarrassed not only professional scholars since antiquity. It was there to be wrestled with, and staged as a problem of writing, by the ancient satirists themselves. They take on that problem well before the grammarians step in with their commentary solutions, and they treat it in great detail, performing their attention to it for as long as satire is written in Rome. We can no longer determine what Lucilius' audiences may have expected from his poems by finding Ennius' title, "satires," atop his page. But we can be quite sure that Lucilius did not give them what they expected. The shift from Lucilius to Horace is, by all accounts, and especially by Horace's own, equally abrupt and disorienting, to be repeated again in the transition from Horace to Persius, and, wildest of them all, the last, from Persius to Juvenal. But the fact that each of these satirists seems free to turn his work in whatever bold new direction he likes should not lead us to assume that the genre's demands are slight (mere "friendly suggestions"), or that the stakes of their making these changes are either inconsequential, or precisely the same for each new satirist down the road. Far from it. By Horace's day, the stakes of changing satire are much larger than they ever could have been for Lucilius. For it was taken as gospel by many in Horace's audience that satire had reached its *telos* already a century before, with Lucilius, in his massive thirty books of *Saturae*. Horace's problem, as he puts it in his *Sermones* (not even calling them "satires"), is not that his audiences have no clear sense of what to expect from him. It is that they expect him to write satire just the way Lucilius, *their* Lucilius, had written it; or, better in Horace's particular case, not at all. For them, Lucilius is an unassailable classic, not to be tampered with.

Horace pokes fun at these "Lucilius fans" in his poems, putting on them the onus of his elaborately drawn out paranoia at undertaking to improve upon *their* icon. But the pressure they apply, I hope to show, is more than a clever fiction that plays within a few chiding poems where the satirist's "Lucilius problem" is taken up as an explicit theme (1.4, 1.10, and 2.1). Its influence broods over the entire work, heard in the curiously soft voice that issues from

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

the *Sermones*' every page. For this is a voice that does not simply raise the problem of Lucilius from time to time. It is a voice that is itself an elaborately performed side-effect of that problem, and thus always expressive of it.

But Horace's critics, we shall see, are extremely persistent. They are not done away with easily, or at all, by Horace's two books of *Sermones*. Being brushed aside was not the point of their being there to begin with. Rather, they remain a nagging source of pressure, and a way of seeing the satirists' respective efforts at "satire," throughout the history of the genre. Each satirist after Horace recasts his Lucilius problem as theirs, too, to solve, because each steps into a generic arena where he is once again challenged to speak like Lucilius. But none does. Instead, every writer of satire after Lucilius fights a losing battle against him, and by trying to fight it, they perform the activity of their losing it. Without question, Lucilius remains this genre's inventor and most celebrated practitioner in antiquity. Not Horace. Not Juvenal. And certainly not Persius. Studying Roman satire is thus comparable to being left the full epic output of Ovid, Statius, and Lucan, with only the merest scraps of Virgil to help us reckon with what their works mean. But Virgil, we know, is not just "back there" for these poets, and incidentally "referred to" by them from time to time. He is an ever-present pressure put on them, and always at the heart of "how" they mean. So, too Lucilius, in the sphere of satire.

It is my intention with this book to draw the study of Roman satire out from the shadowy margins of Roman literary history, where it is usually put, by locating its most salient possibilities and effects at the center of every Roman reader's cultural and political self-understanding. To do this I set out to describe the genre's numerous shifts in focus and tone over several centuries (from Lucilius in the second century BCE to Juvenal in the second century CE) not as mere "generic adjustments" that reflect the personal preferences of its authors, but as separate chapters in a special, generically encoded story of Rome's lost, and much lionized, Republican identity, an identity that was heavily influenced, and emblematized, by Lucilius. Satire's story can and should be told this way because expectations of aggressive and uncompromised speech are not just built into the genre as its defining, "Lucilian," hallmark, they are a key defining feature of the elite, male self. I

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

begin from a very basic, if not self-evident, premise that *libertas* ("free speech") in Rome is equivalent to, and only ever as good as, one's *libertas* ("freedom"). It cannot be otherwise: freedom "speaks" itself into the Roman ear. It exists in performance, and only there. As a result, satire's programmatic shifts, from "open," to "understated," to "cryptic," and so on, can never be purely "literary" and "apolitical" in focus and/or tone. In the pages that follow, I read these shifts as the genre's unique way of staging and agonizing over a crisis in Roman identity. The "genre question" is a question of the Roman self.

In the vagabond movement from Lucilius, to Horace, to Persius, to Juvenal, we are made to feel, and see deliberately performed before us, the ever-tightening turn of Rome's totalitarian pipe-wrench. In the pages that follow, I argue that "what happens to satire" is not just the story of these several authors' individual generic choices in response to one another, it is the tale of an inherited, "free-speaking," old-Republican enterprise that gets remade radically over time precisely because these authors feel and respond to the increasing pressures of totalitarian oversight. Inherited expectations, as a result, become vehicles for exploring the much bigger issue of "what has happened to us Romans, to our language, and to our once uncompromised freedom now that Lucilius, and all that he stood for, is long dead." This is to give an old "vertical" question, that of the satirists' individual critical responses to one another, a "horizontal" turn, by showing how these responses are both conditioned by, and expressive of, specific pressures felt in the separate political and social worlds that they inhabit. Existing general studies of Roman verse satire tend to do little in this regard, so that is where I hope to have something new to say. For it is all too easy to show how each author accesses and remakes his predecessor's (-s') efforts in generic, programmatic terms – for example, by way of bringing in Callimachus in Horace's case, or Stoicism in Persius', and so on – and to leave it at that. It is much harder to relate these changes to the specific social and political conditions in which the individual authors found themselves working.

The basic outline of the book is conventional, with chapter 1 on Horace, glancing back frequently towards Lucilius and, on rare occasions, towards Ennius. Chapter 2 treats Persius, and chapter 3 Juvenal. I tie these three chapters together "vertically" by looking not only at the standard canon of program poems, where satire's

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

changing ways are explicitly discussed, but at the several poems, or parts of poems, both large and small, where these changes can be tracked from one satirist to the next by means of specific, comparison-inviting imitations. Sometimes these imitations can be traced to something as small as a single metaphor, such as the "talking phallus" of Horace, *S.* 1.2.69–71, or the "dew-dripping eye" of Horace, *Ars* 429–30. That eye becomes something quite shocking in Persius, by way of Lucilius' teary member. Then it becomes something altogether different again in Juvenal, with each subsequent stage of the metaphor's metamorphosis signaling something important about the way that each satirist operates, emblematizing his new purposes and modes of expression. At other times the satirists' imitations are more extensive, as in Horace's lengthy shortening of Lucilius' third book in *S.* 1.5. Among these larger imitations, perhaps the most programmatically telling, because it seems to have been the most widely used, is that of the so-called "consultation dialogue." Horace, *S.* 2.1, we shall see, looks back to Lucilius book 26 (which Horace knew as Lucilius book 1); Persius 1 looks back to both Horace, *S.* 2.1 and Lucilius book 26, and Juvenal 1 looks back to all three. Each author uses the theme of his legal trepidations to both dwell on, and perform, his remaking of his predecessor(s), and to chart out new directions for his own satiric enterprise. Similar lines of influence can be drawn from Horace *S.* 1.1 to Persius 2, and from there to Juvenal's tenth satire, "the vanity of human wishes."

Close analysis of these poems, then, will form the book's elongated spine, to the bare bones of which I hope to add some living flesh by "horizontally" embedding these works within the specific, highly charged social and political contexts that not only shed needed light on where satire's "generic adjustments" come from, but significantly color what they (can) mean. This will involve, if not a comprehensive study of the complete works of Roman verse satire, at least a free-roaming sampling of the poems that I feel best expose the hidden pressures behind each poet's "choosing" to speak the way he speaks. My method for exposing these hidden pressures is to read the poems closely, paying strict attention not only to the social-historical issues that they explicitly raise, but to the implicit political motivations, often quite topical and author-specific, that steer them to express themselves, within a given rhetoric, in certain politically telling ways. The poems of Roman satire, scholars have long recognized, stem from a context where

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

literature is always more than "just literature," because of the roles that poets played in fashioning themselves, and their friends, by means of the poems they wrote. The problems I focus on will thus range from issues of big politics, such as Horace's refusing(?) to write Augustus' big poem, to seemingly small issues of style and self-expression, such as Persius' disdain for phrases that glide with the "liquid" sounds of the letters *l*, *m*, *n*, and *r*. Such aesthetic preferences, we shall see, are never "just personal" in what they express. At times, they are the poet's best means of becoming aggressively political.

These are the kinds of problems that I study in the pages that follow. I propose to treat these problems as meaning-filled entanglements rather than obstructions to meaning. The basic idea for reading this way is Wolfgang Iser's, though the practice of it in this book has much more to do with critical habits observed in John Henderson (especially in his work on Persius) than with reader-response theory *per se*. Along with Iser, I regard the sheer persistence of what he names "the classical norm of interpretation," i.e. demands for balance, closure, unity, and so on, over so many centuries of western criticism (from Aristotle to New Criticism, and beyond) as evidence for certain strong tendencies in the way that readers, of whatever (western) stripe, read, and for the demands that we, with them, habitually put to the poems of Roman satire, and for what we expect them to do for us. Thus, instead of insisting that traditional commentaries are wrong to obsess over the things that they tend to obsess over in their search for clear and stable meanings, I treat these obsessions as evidence for the way(s) that certain works of Roman satire tend to operate upon readers who have set themselves the task of rendering them stable, singularly meaningful, and trouble-free, i.e. acceptable *as expressions of* "the classical aesthetic." That desire to authorize them in that way has something to do not only with our being stubborn and stuck in a long, Aristotelian rut. It has to do with our being stubbornly human (not just stubbornly "western"), and thus afraid of the chaotic and the unknown. We are, at some level, hardwired to make those misguided demands.[3]

[3] Iser (1978) 15: "If one recognizes the fact that harmonization is an attempt to grapple with the unknown, then one can more easily understand why classical aesthetics have continued to exercise such influence on the interpretation of art."

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

I begin my analysis of Roman satire's meaning-filled problems with the first three poems of Horace's first book, his so-called "diatribe satires." These poems, I will argue, fail to live up to their billing as either "diatribe" or "satire" because they are too deeply embedded in, and expressive of, a parasite's-eye-view that does not fit the traditional demands of either genre. The Epicurean philosopher projected from the pages of these poems is glib, addled, and amateurish, not much of a philosopher at all. But neither is he much of a satirist.

And yet, in poems 4 and 5, this speaker stakes a powerful claim to his writing in the tradition of Lucilius. *S.* 1.4 justifies his "refining" Lucilius along Callimachean lines, and *S.* 1.5 lets us hear what his refined product sounds like. In treating these poems I will argue against the great bulk of satire scholarship that makes Horace the clear and easy winner of his battle against Lucilius. Instead I attempt to demonstrate just how impossible it is for Horace to win this battle easily, or at all, especially by making the case he makes. Losing to Lucilius, I believe, not defeating him, is the more telling point. For many in Horace's audience, his toning down of their icon would automatically be heard as a comical, freakish failure to "rank" with Lucilius in the genre he set up to speak quite differently. That, I suggest is exactly what Horace gives them: a comical, freakish performance, played in the role they had written for him. In undertaking to write satire, Horace enters a sphere of expectations where a dispossessed freedman's son and low man at Maecenas' table (constraints put on him by his critics, and by society itself) simply does not belong. Given who he (lets us believe he) is, this satirist is doomed to fail before he starts.

Seeing him struggle there, in satire's arena, unable to hoist Lucilius' long-rusted sword, is the hilarious performance to which we are treated in Horace's two books of *Sermones*. But laughing at him, we shall see, exacts a high price. For although this ambling, apolitical "friend" of the great Maecenas cannot bring himself to speak openly the way Lucilius did, he can still bury a good amount of critical aggression under the surface of his poems. And he does that without stinting. Early in the book, at *S.* 1.1.68–70, he cautions us against laughing too quickly at a miser whose constant grasping at gain likens him to Tantalus tormented in the underworld: "Why are you laughing? Change the name and the story is about you!" The poet catches us here, by deftly interposing

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

a mirror between ourselves and the fool on the page. This is a programmatic warning. "Be careful!" he hints. These poems are loaded with traps.

Proceeding through the remainder of book 1, I test the surface of several poems to see where their traps might hide. What happens, for example, when we laugh too quickly at the shadow character of *S.* 1.9, an interloper, like the witch-hags, Canidia and Sagana in 1.8, fecklessly shooed away by one of Maecenas' scarecrows, Horace. This man wants from Horace only what we want from him, but have never managed to find in his poems. He wants to get close to Maecenas, past the gates of his white-clad mansion, so that he can see what really happens there. He wants to belong. Or perhaps he wants to dig up dead men's bones in his garden, and to stir up their power to torment and curse. Either way, this poet will not take him inside, just as he refuses to take us anywhere close to Maecenas in the poems that precede, especially in *S.* 1.5 where our desire to get close and to know more is a game played on us from beginning to end. Laughing at the fool of *S.* 1.9, we see, exacts a toll, taking us into the dark of the shadows *we* cast.

If we did not happen to find ourselves in the shadow of *S.* 1.9, we have to wonder about our being abruptly hauled off to (lit. crit.) court in the opening lines of the next poem, the book's last, where we are finally bullied into casting a vote in favor of Horace's remaking of Lucilius. There is no finesse in the pleader's final words, only brute force to expose something nasty about us before hustling us abruptly away. In the opening poem of book 2 we find ourselves in Trebatius' back room, preparing for yet another trial, and another book of poems. What will the poet's strategy be this time? Here, however, the satirist lets us know from the start that the poems of this book will be very different. By taking us behind the scenes as eavesdroppers, and away from the public confrontations of book 1, Horace lets us feel the pressures that come with his undertaking to write satire in the nervous first days after Actium. That is the principal caesura that divides book 1 from book 2, a pressure strongly felt in the consultation with Trebatius. Octavian is now watching, Trebatius warns, and he has many grand, new plans for the poets whom he counts as his friends. Virgil is certainly one of them. Will Horace be one, too? If so, how will that friendship express itself *in writing*? Or will it be expressed in "song" (*bona* ***carmina***, 2.1.82–3), that is, not in satire

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

at all, but in a different "well-meaning" mode (specifically "good" songs, not bad) where expressions of goodwill towards friends of high standing do not cast such a long, parasitic shadow, because they are packaged as Pindaric song rather than satire, and thus fitted to a genre where critical reticence makes sense? The book, as a whole, shows the effects of this pressure. It will find Horace letting others speak for him, even criticizing him for not speaking, as he goes on a private search for other modes of expression, looking for a home that he can finally call "his own" (and not Lucilius'). Finally, in *S.* 2.8, he simply stands up and walks away, leaving us holding the plate.

The traps that ripple across the surface of Horace's easily ambled poems are mere etchings in the pavement compared to the mammoth caverns that break apart the terrain of Persius' *Satires*. There can be no sidestepping the extraordinary difficulty of his poems, or the bitterness of the views they express. Strangely, it is congenial Horace who stands behind much of what Persius has to say. His voice, we shall see, is filtered into Persius' nearly every line, but it is no longer congenial. The memories evoked by this voice are therefore both familiar and terribly disorienting. The honey-rimmed cups and cookies of the kindly doctors, Lucretius and Horace, have given way to a stinging, acidic decoction from Cleanthes' kitchen, to be administered straight and hot, and taken right away. The questions I put to this shift, in my study of Persius' Prologue and P. 1, concern not only the unseen pressures behind this hardening of once-congenial Horace, but the further meaningful effects of Persius' incessant "Augustan" ventriloquism within the milieu of Nero's Augustan revival. What pressures do we imagine constrain this voice, breaking it into bits that sound so grating, bitter, and disillusioned?

The pressure-cooker that reduces Horace to bitter disgust in Persius' poems is Nero's sun-drenched Rome. In the pages below I argue that the heat applied to these poems is Nero himself, the Helio-Apollo of the Palatine, whose innovations in music, literature, and governance, Persius would have us believe, commenced a new Golden Age of style without substance, and a desperate Dark Age for the Roman soul. These reforms, Persius suggests, were all the rage. But they did not penetrate past skin level, down to the inner-heart where real reform happens for this poet, and where true worth can be gauged. So Persius proposes to take us

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521803578 - Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal
Kirk Freudenburg
Excerpt
More information

there with his poems, beneath the glossy surface, to show us the ugly underside of cosmetic reforms to Nero's brash new society that is a larger expression of the emperor's egomaniacal self. To get us there, to the very beating heart of Rome, Persius admits to owing a strong debt to Horace, whose ability to take us, his "friends," inside ourselves, by turning our laughter against us as we read, Persius contrasts to the skin-deep, but painful, violence of Lucilius (P. 1.114–18). These programmatic focalizations on his predecessors tell of the specific pros and cons that Persius sees in their respective purposes and techniques. In doing satire *for himself*, Persius suggests, he will take the best of both Lucilius and Horace, by loading his poems with ever-abundant Horatian traps that inflict tremendous Lucilian pain when set off.

Persius' second hexameter poem tests our readiness for these generic adjustments by taking us out of the public streets of Rome, where satirists have always set up shop, into her smoky, shadow-strafed temples, where lovely trappings have to be checked at the door. There he proposes to show us what lies beneath the surface of Rome's best-dressed citizens. But is it realistic to think that satire can be made to take this inward, Stoic turn? Surely the only soul that Persius has any chance of getting inside is his own. Not ours. Not Nero's. Whose nasty secrets, then, do we imagine that *we* are being made privy to in these poems?

That is the diagnostic test administered by P. 4, and the final lines of P. 6. Here the invitations to taunt Nero, and to load all of Rome's problems on his shaggy back, are some of the most tempting in the book. But to accept these invitations, we shall see, is both hazardous, and painfully self-revealing. For, in the end, these poems are not about Nero. They are, first and foremost, about Persius, charting his descent into himself in order to locate, and painfully extract, the Nero within. We cannot follow him there, because only he can enter his own soul. But, if we choose to, we can mime his journey, step for step, by making the philosopher's *katabasis* into ourselves, to see what painful surgery might be required there. Deciding to blame Nero, or to detect his cancerous effects in Persius, is to fail to make that descent. It is to become the superficial reformer that you, with these poems, deride.

With Juvenal's five books of *Satires* I will become more drastic in what I choose to include, and what, regrettably, I must leave out. I shall focus my discussion primarily on Juvenal's first book, poems

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org