



Exploring the classical world

Satire in the city of Rome

Hello, I'm Val Hope, 'Exploring the Classical World'. Paula James, Trevor Fear and myself are going to explore some literary texts – written from a satirical viewpoint – and assess their importance to the social historian of ancient Rome.

To begin with, I'm going to talk about using satire and social history with particular reference to the Latin author, Petronius. Social history was once defined as 'history with the politics left out'. Indeed when we seek to define social history it is often easier to state what we feel it shouldn't include. Social history is not political history or military history or constitutional history or legal history. However the reality is that the material used by historians cannot be divided up into neat and watertight compartments. Social history isn't just about leaving the politics out since there is a social dimension in politics and a political dimension in society. So the study of politics or economics or law may all be relevant to the social historian. It is simply a matter of emphasis.

For the social historian of Rome, literary texts are a fundamental source. But how should we use and approach these? Some ancient writers were interested in social relations. For example, biographers such as Suetonius and Plutarch, explored the personal lives of their subjects as well as their political and military achievements. But in general social context was only discussed when it was relevant to the history of the state; or it formed an incidental backdrop for legal debates or poetic incident. Of course we should not be surprised at this; ancient authors were not writing with modern social historians in mind. However there is danger that we will take relevant bits and pieces of evidence on a chosen topic, be it slavery, dining or family, and pull these together to create an unreliable and unrealistic picture. We might be tempted to create, for example, a composite average Roman and use varied literary sources to establish what time he woke up, went to work, visited the baths, dined and went to bed. Insights into every day life are fascinating, but we need to be cautious of who is telling us what, how they are doing it and why. There is a good chance that our average Roman would be a mishmash of the experiences of differing people - many of them not even real people - from differing backgrounds, times and places.

A major factor in evaluating literary sources is genre. Latin authors wrote in varied ways and forms. There were letters, histories, biographies, epics, epigrams, elegies - to name but a few - all of which had their conventions and expectations in terms of form, content and tone. Scholars can spend a lifetime studying specific genres or specific authors, focusing on technique as much as content. These people would not describe themselves as social historians, but what they work on can illuminate social history. In their turn social historians do not wish to replicate this work of literary scholars, but they need to be aware of it. We cannot read, use and study any Latin author without evaluating what they wrote, when they wrote it and why. This may seem like a daunting task and at this level you are not expected to be familiar with every author in the Latin cannon, but you do need to ask questions of those literary sources that you do use. The social historian may plunder the works of Pliny and Seneca for the insights they provide, but without some knowledge of who these men were, what and how they wrote, our conclusions would be near meaningless.

Satirical writings provide an interesting case study.

Pause for a minute and consider the term satire as used in modern life? What types of things do you think of?

Well, probably think of comedians and comic writings that make fun of people and situations. Irony, especially about one's own inadequacies or those of others, may be key. Satire may also involve an element of self analysis placed against the broader cultural context. The comedian may imply that he or she has a sense of proportion that society has lost. A good example of a satirical magazine on sale in the UK would be *Private Eye*. This sends people up and exploits the foibles of individuals and groups of people.

In the Roman world there was a specific genre of satire that conformed to certain traditions and conventions. Paula James will explore this later in looking at the Satires of Juvenal. But a satirical tone could pervade all sorts of writings. Martial, for example, wrote Epigrams, a genre that will be introduced by Trevor Fear, but Martial's epigrams were often satirical.

How should the social historian use these satirical literary sources? In many ways they are a potential gold mine for social history – since a good part of the fun comes from exploring social conventions and social relations. However considering this is satire can we believe anything that is said and revealed in these sources? Satire isn't just a straight take on Roman society, but one twisted for comic or even sarcastic impact. Equally, knowing that the Romans enjoyed satire, is there a danger that we will miss satirical comments present in all sorts of genres? After 2000 years it may be the case that we just don't get the joke; humour can lose a lot in translation.

One of the best known pieces of Latin satirical writing is a novel by Petronius known as the *Satyricon*. It is a vast work that survives only in part. It is a bawdy parody of both aspects of Roman life and other types of literature. The author, Petronius, may have been a fun-loving courtier of the emperor Nero, who was forced to suicide in CE 66. If so the novel may have had a political dimension encapsulating and mocking some aspects of life under the extravagant and self-indulgent Nero – but this remains speculative. The most famous section of the *Satyricon* is the dinner with Trimalchio, a wealthy but crass ex-slave. The dinner consists of elaborate and exotic courses interspersed with conversations between guests and with Trimalchio expounding his views on the world.

Listen now to Leighton Pugh reading an extract from *Satyricon* Chapter 70. Do you find it funny? If so, where does the humour lie?

'All of a sudden in came two slaves, apparently having had a quarrel at the well; at any rate they still had water jugs on their shoulders. But while Trimalchio was giving his decision about their respective cases, neither of them paid any attention to his verdict: instead they broke each other's jugs with their sticks. Staggered by their drunken insolence, we couldn't take our eyes away from the fight till we noticed oysters and scallops sliding out of the jugs, which a boy collected and carried round on a dish. The ingenious chef was equal to these elegant refinements – he brought in snails on a silver gridiron, singing all the time in a high grating voice.

I blush to say what happened next. Boys with their hair down their backs came round with perfumed cream in a silver bowl and rubbed it in our feet as we lay there, but first they wrapped our legs and ankles in wreaths of flowers.'

The extract is entertaining perhaps more than funny. The tricks with the food are a visual feast and dining becomes theatre. Everything is designed to surprise, entertain and even shock the guests and thus also the reader. The narrator is one of the guests and from his perspective it is all a bit ridiculous. It is not the done thing to have slaves massage your feet in the middle of dinner! Nonetheless the narrator does not avert his eyes from the spectacle or refuse what is on offer. Part of the humour of the piece is the narrator's feigned discomfort. What is happening at the dinner is over-the-top, but it is the reactions and interpretations of the guest, who is our narrator, that structure our response.

If we didn't have the narrator's voice passing comment on Trimalchio and his feast, would we react differently? Trimalchio, and his dinner party, are the objects of fun, because Trimalchio goes beyond the bounds of what is socially acceptable, at least in the narrator's eyes. Trimalchio is a caricature, an exaggerated and vulgar stereotype. A freed slave who has

money, but no taste. But the narrator also plays his part – providing a judgmental, almost a snobbish voice. We cannot remove the satire from either Trimalchio or the narrator.

So where does this leave us as social historians? Trimalchio's dinner party is satire and thus it is probably safe to conclude that people didn't dine like this and that he is not representative of wealthy freed slaves. But that does not mean to say that we have to dismiss all that is said in Petronius as somehow fake. Satire works because it draws on real people and real situations. It exaggerates and stereotypes, but the humour will not work if it is complete and utter fancy. Trimalchio's dinner does border on the ridiculous, but at the very least it highlights how dinner parties could say a lot about a Roman host - and his guests.

Indeed food and dining were a popular choice in literature that aimed to comment upon social mores. In particular extravagant food was viewed as a sign of a luxurious style of living that was morally suspect and corrupting. To note how and what a man ate, as literary sources of all types often do, reflects how food could be used as a method for illustrating an individual's moral and cultural values. As social historians we don't just want to know about what people ate, but also the social significance of food and dining. Petronius may be writing from a satirical perspective, but he makes it clear that Roman food could be loaded with extra meaning.

Reading Petronius raises some of the central issues about how we use and interpret satirical writing.