



Exploring the classical world

The satirical verse of Juvenal

I'm now joined by my colleague, Paula James.

Paula, can you tell us a little about Juvenal – who he was and when he was writing?

Paula

'Little' is the operative word, I'm afraid. We know his full citizen name was Decimus Junius Juvenalis, that he was friends with the poet Martial (who addresses him in three of his poems), we think his Satires are roughly contemporary with the writing of the Annals by the historian Tacitus. That would place Juvenal's literary career in the second and third decades of the 2nd century CE. Now, this is the sort of information the OCCC entry cautiously gives us, along with a helpful overview of the poet's subject matter and his approach and style. The OCCC points out that he was not the first to write long, satiric poems in dactylic hexameter, but that he deliberately gave satire an epic timbre. Basically, I suppose, he could please himself what he did. He seems to be financially self sufficient, one of the elite, he certainly doesn't dedicate his work to a particular patron, after all.

Val

Does his work provide any other insights into his life?

Paula

Well, gone are the days when scholars would readily reconstruct an author's life from the things he says in his literary works. At least some of Juvenal's readers would know his circumstances and have a fair idea what might have been the poet's lived experience, and what was a mix of observation, embellishment and literary tradition.

Val

So how does Juvenal present himself in his poems?

Paula

Ah. This leads us into the interesting territory of the poetic voice and how far the poet might indulge in role-play and create a persona or mask to gain and to give a striking perspective on the state of society. Susanna Braund in her introduction to Juvenal's first book of Satires sums this up rather neatly. She writes: *Roman verse satire uses the autobiographical monologue as the chief mode of presentation. This does not mean that satirists are necessarily using their satires to convey their personal feelings to the world. Far from it. Authors in all genres of Roman literature, including Roman verse satire, were accustomed to creating characters.*

Val

So is Juvenal just pretending to be angry, then?

Paula

Well Susanna Braund does point out that the 'persona' theory has its problems. We could run the risk, as she puts it, of containing, emasculating an explosive and anarchic character – the voice of the Satires, with something important to say. We could undermine that voice as a reliable witness, if we focus instead on a mature and sophisticated authorial figure who just wants to target everyone for a cheap laugh.

And I think I have shifted my position on Juvenal over the years. He has a lot to tell us about life in Rome under the emperors and if we asked students to study any literary text simply to

learn about the history of a genre or the performative mode a poet was in, it would be an impoverished experience all around.

Val

And yet you're saying that Juvenal may be more critically distant than his irate and seething tones suggests? That he is performing the part of a satirist without feeling strongly about injustice and bad behaviour?

Paula

I think with Juvenal, the perceptions have his personal stamp, his poetic characteristics. Now whether Juvenal had been personally disadvantaged and had a stake in this angry persona is not such a straight-forward question. It is interesting that in Satire 3 - the subject is on leaving the big city for a country retreat - the whole poem is voiced not by satiric Juvenal but by one of his disconsolate and maybe fictional friends, Umbricius. Umbricius is bewailing his lot in a Rome that no longer belongs to him. And he also talks about humiliating dinners when foreigners, especially Asiatic Greeks, are seated and treated above him at the table. Umbricius comes across as pretty comical himself and when he talks about all the prostitution in Rome, he simultaneously bemoans how pricey their services are! So, Umbricius' moral high ground is very much built on shifting sands!

Val

I suppose even here Juvenal is following an earlier satirist, Persius, in visualising all Romans with asses's ears? If we are having a chuckle at Umbricius' expense.

Paula

His targets are frequently taken from a satirical tradition and he can be re-working social scenes and re-creating characters from the poetic past, voicing a long established dissent or discontent with city life, bad behaviour, and with wealth and power going in the wrong direction. For Roman readers these are familiar topics for satire and actually, I suppose, they are not so strange for us if we think in terms of themes like pretentiousness, social climbers, the nouveaux riches, themes like getting away from it all and so on.

So, it is important to distinguish in Juvenal an equally derisive portrayal of the victims. The penny pinching, mean spirited host is behaving outrageously but the guest connives at the shredding of his own status – he becomes the buffoon and the butt of humour, providing a sort of cabaret in his discomfiture so that the whole occasion could be performed as a theatrical mime if anyone were to convert the verses to a stage production.

Val

But that doesn't mean though that Juvenal had no serious satirical purpose in writing his vitriolic poetry? Maybe the 21st century critical reader can find yet another twist to his motivations?

Paula

We shouldn't bend the stick too far in the direction of satire for satire's sake, perhaps. It's interesting that in the 20th century, scholars of Juvenal moved away from seeing him as a serious moralist, lashing the vices of the town. But a great deal of Juvenal's poetry is concerned with power games amongst the Romans, how hierarchy has turned from *noblesse oblige* (and that's an idealised view of how the old aristocracy used to behave) to a vulgar display of extravagance and exclusivity.

Now, Juvenal lived much of his life under a punitively controlling emperor, Domitian, and though evidence suggests that he wrote the bulk of his work during more liberal regimes - those of Trajan and Hadrian - he may well have an old axe to grind about the treatment of the upper classes during the uncomfortable and dangerous years of Domitian's time. So, his depiction of social occasions where patrons meet clients and both the powerful control freaks and the luckless recipients of their meagre gifts are ridiculed, well that may well be a kind of metaphor or comment upon the nature of life under Domitian.

Val

But what impact does Juvenal's use of epic imagery have on our reading of the poetry?

Paula

The extracts you have chosen, Val, in the Readings Book, they readily demonstrate Juvenal's exuberance in amplifying a theme. His attack on the distortion of the client patron relationship is realised through gritty detail. We have the unequal feast, the grading of guests and what that means in practice for the unfortunate client so that it is humiliation not hospitality that we visualise at the feast. The level of detail can give us the impression of grim realism.

But as you have suggested though, and Trevor Fear will reinforce this in his lecture on Martial as an epigrammatic poet – poetic creativity invariably has more than one agenda. The poet's motivation and intention in composing critical verse about Roman society was unlikely to be a straightforward recording of contemporary injustices for a readership of the distant future – that's us! - to mull over. I don't think we can reinforce this too much. All the figures and situations in Juvenal are subjected to epic level exaggeration. But he alternates this with quite stark, shorter, pithier and cruder insults and he punctuates the epic by quite striking one liners.

Val

Can you give us some examples of those?

Paula

I came up with the same examples as the OCCC, actually. Lines that have survived to the present day as precepts, quoted as astute ancient observations; for instance, 'a sound mind in a sound body' (*mens sana in corpore sano.*) or 'Who will guard the guardians themselves?' (*quis custodiet ipsos custodes.*). But *in context* these lines are not half so sententious and ethically loaded as they sound to our ears. Also, Juvenal consciously chose the epic metre of dactylic hexameter, and yet he can employ its lofty rhythms as a kind of counterpoint to his images of low life and farcical moments as he illustrates his various themes.

Val

One-liners aside, what about the epic 'feel' to the poems?

Paula

Juvenal's poems are showcases for his literary skills. He is a craftsman in control of his material – even or especially when he is building up to hysterical crescendos – this apparent outpouring of indignation! In his first agenda setting Satire Juvenal almost addresses *Indignatio* as a Muse or minor deity who has impelled him to write satiric verse on an epic scale. So, getting angry about contemporary Roman society is part of his inspirational package and a guarantee of literary success.

Val

So can we focus now on how Juvenal displays his skills in Satire 5 in particular? As a Social Historian I'm interested in how we can read his description of the meal.

Paula

Well, I suppose on the one hand we wouldn't want to just try and reconstruct a real Roman feast from that scene; on the other hand, maybe we could get a little bit more out of it.

Susanna Braund points out in her book on Juvenal's satire (and this is a bit of a mouthful) that 'the cena is above all a socio-politico-economic occasion.' So the process of patronage which should be delicately expressed as a kind of friendship of giving and receiving, is revealed by Juvenal as little more than the transaction between masters and slaves, it's making a metaphor of the meal.

And Emily Gowers takes a stimulating look at Satire 5 and the metaphor of the organised banquet in her book, *The Loaded Table*. She sees clear comment on the slow degradation of past values and concludes, and I'll quote, that 'the satirical impulse is alive even at a dinner that commemorates the loss of political liberty'. Now Emily Gowers explores the divisive

dinner party as a charged theme of the period, and she teases out the dialogue Juvenal is conducting with Petronius and Martial, and suggests that Satire 5 has an extra dimension. And I rather like her comment, so I'll quote it in full. She says:

it brings to life the eating metaphors that informed Juvenal's programme for his own writing. He began Satire 1 by condemning the bloated tragedies that consumed whole days and burst at the seams, and aspired to make his own work a gargantuan consumer by filling notebooks with a farrago of human corruption.

Val

If we look closely at a short extract from Satire 5, it might help us to see Juvenal from several different angles, then. We can't all read in him the original, so could you give us a sense of how he crafts a vivid scene without giving us a Latin lesson !

Paula

I'd really like to do that. I think an appreciation of Juvenal's art and craft in composing satirical verses is really helped along by hearing both Latin and English versions of the targeted verses read aloud. Both versions give you sweep and pace and no one needs to feel anxious about listening to the selections in the original and then hearing our discussion of Juvenal's techniques. I shall not be assuming any acquaintance with Latin and I've got you here, Val, to pull me up if I get carried away about nuances of the language. We can certainly identify common ground when it comes to poetic effects so we shouldn't let the issue of reading in translation become an obstacle although of course it is always a challenge!

Val

Ok Paula, let's take you at your word and ask you to say something about techniques, sound effects and the structure of the narrative. Let's listen to Martin Thorpe and Leighton Pugh reading both in Latin and translation Satire 5 lines 12 to 23.

Reading in Latin of Satire 5 – lines 12 to 23: “Primo fige loco.....”

Reading in English of Satire 5 – lines 12 to 23

Paula

You can hear from the Latin that the line *primo fige loco* ('get one thing clear from the start') that it grabs the attention with a short sharp shock treatment. 'get real' would be another one way of rendering it – literally it means 'fix (yourself) in the first place.' Then we have *Quod tu discumbere iussus*. This invitation to dinner is all you are going to get. It is a meagre meal and the Latin suggests a peremptory summons with the word *iussus*, having been ordered. Well *iussus* has lost its force a bit as 'ordered' here, but where it appears in the line, I think gives us that kind of emphasis at the end there, and it rather spoils what could have been a genteel offer to recline and dine! (*discumbere* has both senses there). So just let's read that again, *Quod tu discumbere iussus* and see if you can hear the abruptness of the end.

We could re-translate the lines as 'the fact that you have been summoned to dine means you have received (and accept) this as full payment for previous services.' And I'd like to look a little bit more closely at the Latin of the 'previous services', it's this *Mercadem solidam Wetrum capus officiorum*. The 'm' endings of the words – and 'm' was a nasalised consonant in Latin, so it got a bit swallowed - the equal number of syllables in the words until you get to the longer drawn out *officiorum* at the very end, to me reinforces just how protracted the client's attentions must have been. And that's why when you get to the recompense for all of this, as *cibus* in this *Fructus amicitiae magnea cibus*, the *cibus* is very general and rather unexciting, it just means 'food'. This is the fruit of your great friendship. And the *amicitiae magnae* doesn't actually mean a great friendship so much as 'friendship with a great person'. And clearly Juvenal is being deeply sarcastic about this 'great person', and the way this 'great person' behaves.

Another interesting word here *officium*, you have it in the plural form *officiorum*. It's significant for the Romans. It suggests serious duties that one owed to friends and political allies. One would expect *beneficia* in return – meaningful services for favours rendered not a one-off

dinner of dubious quality. That's in line 14, where we also have this end *inputat hunc rex* – 'the king calculates this'. That really punches the point home about the patron considering the dinner as payment in full. It is a crisp and uncompromising end of the line. The metre falls in step with the words here, (the last two feet of the hexameter line usually have a 'rasberry jam pot' rhythm), and it does here, but we have to kind of distort it a bit, *inputat hunc rex* – it jerks along rather than flowing across the three words, and perhaps into the next line. Actually in the next line Juvenal repeats the word *inputat* to drive home the insulting and pragmatic approach the host has towards his guest.

Val

So if all these individual words have such weight, what is the translator to do? If Latin words are so culturally specific, isn't it tricky to match them to English words?

Paula

That's true – for instance, the translation 'patron' for the Latin word *rex*, 'king' in this very line by passes an important cultural point - to call anyone 'king', as Juvenal does very deliberately too, suggests tyranny and oriental autocracy. And to have a king calculate in business terms how to discharge his debt to a subject raises the image of a host holding court but reducing acts of generosity and largesse to crude accounting. In fact in the space of two lines we have the host veering from patron to potentate, with a hint of magnanimous friend as the failed ideal in the middle.

Val

But doesn't the guest called Trebius, doesn't he act like a subject in this scene?

Paula

Well, this client Trebius is pathetically grateful for crumbs from the table, it's true. The very occasional meal (*quamvis rarum*) and the promise *una simis*, 'let's get together' has the submissive addressee in seventh heaven; *votorum summa* is 'the pinnacle of your prayers' – *quid ultra quaeris* is aptly rendered 'What more could he hope for?' So Trebius heads out with his trailing shoelaces anxious that he is not too late to pay his respects in the early morning rounds and have his meal – even though this is just a last-minute invitation to sit as far away as possible from the host at the top table.

Val

Even in translation it's a very vivid scene.

Paula

Yes, and if you listen again to Martin's reading from *habet Trebius* in line 19, you may pick up on the mellifluous and musical sound of the concluding lines. In order to keep up the pace of the narrative and not to delay you with unfamiliar images and names the translation (read with appropriate gusto by Leighton) has dispensed with some of the specific allusions of the Latin. What Juvenal does in these lines is strike a very epic pose by paralleling the circuit made by the crowd of clients (that's *tota salutatrix iam turba peregerit orbem*) with the circling of the chill constellations. This periphrastic (that's around the houses) way of letting us know about a time of day or night is a feature of epic poetry. It is particularly ironic here when we know that Trebius is hardly embarking upon an heroic activity that needs marking with an elaborate picture of the atmospheric moment. It both elevates and deflates him and the crowd of clients simultaneously. Juvenal pinpoints the constellation we know as the Great Bear or the Plough or Charles's Wain. *Illo tempore quo se frigida circumagunt pigri serraca Bootae* literally translates as 'at that time when the cold cart of slothful Bootes is wheeling around.'

Juvenal is perhaps drawing a fairly standard picture of its legendary charioteer. But it seems to me that we do lose something in translation because the reference to Bootes really reinforces the aerial overview and lets us look down on the pathetic scurrying mortal – the lofty view of the icily observant satirist perhaps!

Val

Is that your take on those lines there, Paula?

Paula

Well it's a fair cop – it is really, and maybe I'm over-reading Juvenal here. I can't for certain say whether this visualisation would strike a chord of empathy in a Roman reader – going out before light and on your own like the luckless Trebius was not necessarily the safest thing to do in a city like Rome, as we know from other parts of Juvenal's poetry, so that would show just how desperate Trebius was to be accepted.

Val

That's a good way to round off with an historical observation on ancient Rome. I think we can all better appreciate now, Juvenal's poetic art, and his ways of re-invigorating the satiric genre.

Paula

Well yes I hope so. But to take your part, the social historian part for a moment, Val, he does have great value to us as a commentator on Roman society with all its pressures and tensions top to bottom. He really does give us an epic sweep of the empire's capital city.