

Stuffed Bodies and Bad Taste: Persius and the Poem Made Flesh

Persius: born 34CE, died ('of stomach trouble', according to Valerius Probus, at the age of 30, i.e. around 64CE)

The *Satires/Saturae*:

- A 14-verse 'prologue' written in scazons (otherwise known as 'choliambics' or 'limping iambics')
- 6 verse satires of varying length (669 vv in all) written in hexameters.

1. The limping scazon and disability/lameness in antiquity

Think Hephaestus/Vulcan (thrown down from Olympus for having a withered leg). See e.g. Homer *Iliad* 1.590); 'swollen footed' Oedipus – limping as tragic/moral flaw; descriptions of the emperor Claudius (often punning on *claudicare*, the Latin verb meaning to limp or be lame)...

with

A. Plato *Republic* 7.535ff. (Here Plato makes a distinction btw well-born souls made for philosophy, and souls that are "deformed and lame". Cf. also Xenophon *Hellenica* III.3.1-2, Plutarch *Agesilaus*, III.1-9)

I said, "the aspirant to philosophy must not limp¹ in his industry, in the one half of him loving, in the other shunning toil. This happens when anyone is a lover of gymnastics and hunting and all the labours of the body, yet is not fond of learning or of listening² or inquiring, but in all such matters hates work. And he too is lame whose industry is one-sided in the reverse way." "Most true," he said. "Likewise in respect of truth," I said, "we shall regard as maimed [535e] in precisely the same way the soul that hates the voluntary lie and is troubled by it in its own self and greatly angered by it in others, but cheerfully accepts the involuntary falsehood³ and is not distressed when convicted of lack of knowledge, but wallows in the mud of ignorance as insensitively as a pig.⁴"

1. Cf. *Laws* 634 A, *Tim.* 44 C.

2. Cf. 548 E, *Lysis* 206 C, *Euthyd.* 274 C, 304 C, and Vol. I. p. 515 on 475 D.

3. Cf. 382 A-B-C.

4. Cf. *Laws* 819 D, *Rep.* 372 D, *Politicus* 266 C, and note in *Class. Phil.* xii. (1917) pp. 308-310. Cf. too the proverbial ὄς γνοίη, *Laches* 196 D and *Rivals* 134 A; and Apelt's emendation of *Cratyl.* 393 C, *Progr. Jena*, 1905, p. 19.

B. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Claudius ch.30

'He possessed majesty and dignity of appearance, but only when he was standing still or lying down; for he was tall but not slender, with an attractive face, becoming white hair, and a full neck. But when he walked, his weak knees gave way under him and he had many disagreeable traits both in his lighter moments and when he was engaged in business: his laughter was unseemly and his anger still more disgusting, for he would foam at the mouth and trickle at the nose; he also stammered, and his head was very

shaky at all times...’ (cf. Seneca *Apocolocyntosis* ch 1: ‘ask the man who saw Drusilla on her way to heaven; he will say that he saw Claudius making the same journey “with unequal steps” ...’)

Further reading:

J-P.Vernant and P.Vidal-Naquet (1990) ‘The lame tyrant’ in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*.

C.Laes, C.Goody and M.Lynn Rose (eds.) (2013) *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity*.

2. The ‘more boiled down’(*decoctius*): Persius’ hard-to-swallow *brevitas*

Persius 1.123-8:

Whoever grows pale at Aristophanes’ anger,
That grand old man, or Eupolis, or is fired by bold Cratinus,
Glance at this too, maybe you’ll like to hear what’s more boiled down (*aliquid decoctius*).
I want readers with cleansed ears, fired by such stuff, not
Some wretch who delights in poking fun at Greek sandals;
Or a one-eyed man who loves to call another man ‘One-eye’...

Cf. Horace *Sat.1.4.1-10*:

Whenever anyone deserved to be shown as a crook,
a thief, a libertine, a murderer, or merely notorious
in some other way, the true poets, those who powered
the Old Comedy - Eupolis, Aristophanes,
Cratinus - used to mark (*notabant*) such a man out quite freely (*multa cum libertate*).
Lucilius derives from them, as a follower
who only changed rhythm and metre: witty
with a sharp nose, true, but the verse he wrote was rough. (*durus*, +ve or -ve?)
That’s where the fault lay: often, epically, he’d dictate
two hundred lines, do it standing on one foot even! (*pun on metrical/human foot*)
A lot should have been dredged from his murky stream.

3. The *callida iunctura* – *acris iunctura* (clever juncture – sharp juncture)

Horace, *Ars Poetica* 46-8

in verbis etiam tenuis cautusque serendis
dixeris egregie, notum si **callida** verbum
reddiderit **iunctura** novum.

Moreover, with good taste and care in weaving words together, you will express yourself most happily, if a **skillful juncture** makes a familiar word seem new.

Persius *Sat.5.14-16*

verba togae sequeris iunctura callidus acri,
ore teres modico, pallentis radere mores
doctus et ingenuo culpam deligere ludo.

You follow the language of everyday life, **skilled** in the **sharp connection**, rounding a modest mouth, adept at trimming pallid morals and at nailing every fault with playful genius...

Horace *Sat.2.1.1-2*: ‘There is a whole class of people who think I’m too harsh (*nimis acer*) in satire, and that I am stretching the genre past its legal limit’.

4. Philosophical texture: the Stoic satirist

Horace *Sat.1.1.102-1* (final lines): ‘That’s enough (*iam satis est*). Not a word more will I add, or you’ll think I’ve ransacked the rolls of blear-eyed Crispinus’ (Crispinus = long-winded Stoic preacher)

Stoic ideas in Persius:

- Critique of attachment to wealth
- Mockery of laziness
- Control of the emotions or passions (anger, desire, greed)
- Promotion of self-knowledge and self-scrutiny

Nb: *Sat.4* alludes to the pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Alcibaides I* (Socrates criticizes the young Alcibiades for his arrogant ambition); *Sat.3* sees the satiric persona giving a Stoic lecture to a boozing, lazy student; *Sat.5* deals with Persius’ role as student of Stoic teacher Cornutus.

5. No pain, no gain? Bitter medicine (not Lucretius’ honeyed cup, or Horace’s toned-down ‘moderation’)

Horace, *Ars Poetica* 333-4, 343-44:

Poets wish either to be helpful or to please, or to say simultaneously what is both pleasant and appropriate for living...
He who has mixed usefulness and sweetness wins every vote,
by delighting and advising the reader equally.

Cf. Lucretius 1.935-50, 4.1-25; Plato *Gorgias* 501d-502d (poetry offers sweet pleasures, yet the sweetness of persuasive language arouses suspicion)

- Persius, *Prol.14* mocks those who praise poets for producing ‘the nectar of the Muses’.
- For Persius’ use of the adjective *acer* (bitter, sharp), see *Sat.2.13*, 3.23, 4.34, 5.14, 5.127.

6. Is Stoic satire a contradiction in terms, or does it make perfect sense?

- Satire a traditional vehicle for sharp moral exhortation. Established relationship between verse satire and diatribe.
- Aesthetically, Stoic thinking is compatible with the critical, aggressive tone of satire. (See Cicero, *de Oratore* 3.66 on Stoic style as pointed, unfamiliar, jarring, obscure...)
- Roman Stoic thought, like Roman satire, is polemical, wants to jolt people out of assumptions and beliefs, attacks the status quo.

- Satiric *sermo*, with its embrace of dialogue, can allude to Platonic dialogue and to the model of didactic exchange that lies at the heart of stoic praxis. Cf. Seneca and Lucilius in the *Letters*.
- Can satire operate as a kind of Stoic therapy? Roman Stoicism is primarily focused on ethics, rather than on physics and logic, while satire in Rome has the function of grappling with corruption and especially with the corrupt, bodily passions – greed, lust, anger, bitterness – which Stoic training seeks to understand and control.
- Satire and Stoic thinking/praxis share metaphors: the Stoic teacher is a ‘doctor’ treating ‘patients’ with ‘medicine’, and healing moral and emotional weaknesses as illnesses or wounds; Satire is the most corporeal of Roman literary forms: bodies, especially depraved, loose, deformed, weakened and repulsive bodies, are its bread and butter.

7. Metaphors to think with

- Poetry/satire as medicine and as food
 - Poetry/satire as something ingested (gets inside us/under our skin)
 - Body as container for the soul.
 - Poetry as (human) body, (human) body as poetry
 - Reading as cannibalism?
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Seminar/googledoc discussion

Prologue

I haven't rinsed my lips in the Nag's spring
Nor **remember dreaming** on two-headed Parnasus, 2
That I should **suddenly** emerge like this – a poet.
The Heliconiads and pale Pirene
I leave to those whose effigies are lapped 5
By obsequious ivy. Myself, I bring our song
To the bards' rites as **half a country-member**.
Who made his 'Hello' possible for the parrot
And who taught the magpie to attempt our speech?
Belly, master of art and talent-briber, 10
Artist to copy utterance denied him.
And should there gleam a hope of tricky cash, 12
You'd think that poet crows and magpie poet-
esses were chanting Pegaseian nectar!

PROLOGVS

Nec fonte labra prolui caballino
nec in bicipiti **somniasse** Parnaso
memini, ut **repente** sic poeta prodirem.
Heliconidasque pallidamque Pirenen 5
illis remitto quorum imagines lambunt
hederae sequaces; ipse **semipaganus**
ad sacra uatum carmen adfero nostrum.
quis expediuit psittaco suum 'chaere'
picamque docuit nostra uerba conari? 10
magister artis ingenique largitor
uenter, negatas artifex sequi uoces.
quod si dolosi spes refulserit nummi,
coruos poetas et poetridas picas
cantare credas Pegaseium nectar.

Notes:

v1: Nag's spring = the spring on Mount Helicon in Boeotia created when the winged horse Pegasus struck the spot with his hoof. This spring was sacred to the Muses and a source of Poetic inspiration.

2: What might this dream refer to? Possibly Ennius' dream of Homer appearing at his side in fr 5 of his *Annals*.

2-3: two-headed Parnasus: the mountain, sacred to the Muses, had two peaks.

4: Pirene: the spring in Corinth where Pegasus was captured by Bellerophon. Like Hippocrene, it was associated with the Muses.

5-6: it was the custom to place the busts of living and dead poets in public and private libraries. These busts were garlanded with ivy, which was sacred to Bacchus.

6-7: Persius is probably thinking of the *Paganalia*, the festival of the *pagi* or village communities. P is saying he is only half *paganus*, meaning ‘country dweller/peasant/civilian’. The term – a neologism – has been much debated.

12-14: poets who just imitate are compared to squawking crows and magpies.

14: Pindar *Ol.*7.7. and Theocritus 7.82 both refer to inspired poetry as nectar.

Cf. Callimachus, *Iamb* 1 (Hipponax comes back from the dead to address the audience in limping scazons)

Questions for discussion:

- What is Persius saying here about contemporary literary culture, and how does he use metaphor to do so?
- From what position does the poet speak in this poem, and where have we seen this kind of posturing before (in this module)?
- Does it take one to know one? Look at shapes and listen to the sounds of the poem, especially the final two lines (in Latin: you don’t need necessarily to understand the grammar to do this exercise!)