



Juvenal (ca. 55 or 60 - ca. 130)

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Frontispiece from an edition of John Dryden, et al., *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis and of Aulus Persius Flaccus* (London, 1711).

Around 1450, Ugolino Pisani commented: "Juvenal, Persius, Martial, and others should not be publicly read and taught, but kept for private study--so that knowledge can be increased without contaminating young men."

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, English readers interested in Juvenal had available J. E. B. Mayor's *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal* (1880-81, many reprints), C. H. Pearson and Herbert A. Strong's *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal* (1892, many subsequent editions), J. D. Duff's *Fourteen Satires of Juvenal* (1899, often reprinted, at least until 1970), or S. G. Owen's *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal Translated into English* (1903).

But Juvenal wrote *sixteen* satires. For reasons of prudery and censorship, the Second, Sixth, and Ninth satires, all crucial for exploring Roman attitudes toward sex and sexuality, were systematically excised from his oeuvre.

For purposes of glbtq history, the Second Satire is especially important. It offers a revealing glimpse into attitudes toward a certain kind of homosexual activity in ancient Rome, at least from the perspective of a satirist; it is also an important document for a supposed law restricting homosexual intercourse (the *Lex Scantinia*) and for the history of sexuality, offering evidence that counters (extreme) constructionist claims. The Ninth Satire gives a picture of homosexual abuse of the traditional patron/client relationship.

Biography

We know little about Juvenal's life. Even his date of death is speculative: not before 127 and possibly as late as 140 C. E. He was a contemporary of Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Martial (with whom Juvenal was friends and exchanged letters), but they never refer to his poetry.

Juvenal was born in Aquinum (later the birthplace of St. Thomas Aquinas), about eighty miles south-east of Rome and near the monastery of Monte Cassino, between 55 and 60 C. E. His family was well-to-do and successful, but Juvenal failed to enter the administrative or military service of the emperor Domitian (81-96 C. E.). His first satiric verses, attacking Domitian and his court, were born from the bitterness of career disappointment.

Domitian was not to be trifled with. He, for example, impregnated his niece Julia and coerced her into an abortion, as a result of which she died (all the while he was promoting a national standard of purity). Scholars generally refer to Domitian's rule as a "reign of terror." Juvenal was duly banished to Egypt (or, as some ancient biographies have it, Scotland or Ireland, which is unlikely), where he lived in abject poverty, acute fear, and profound disappointment.

In 96, after Domitian's assassination, Juvenal returned to Rome, where he gradually recovered from his exile, helped probably by a gift from a patron of the arts. He eventually lived comfortably on a farm at

Tibur (now Tivoli).

Constructed from the internal evidence of his poetry, Juvenal's personality is described by his biographer Gilbert Highet: "harsh and cruel yet timid and evasive, indignant about the past, withdrawn from the present, despairing of the future, lonely and defeated, furious at first and gradually growing resigned in pessimism, brilliant and cultured but poor and embittered, whose fierce denunciations and harsh broken laughter we can hear from every page of Juvenal's satires."

Peter Green, Juvenal's recent English translator, contends: "Juvenal is a writer for his age. He has (in spite of his personal preoccupations) the universal eye for unchanging human corruption He crystallizes for us all the faults and weaknesses we have watched gaining strength at Rome through the centuries."

Juvenal's sixteen satires span the reigns of Domitian, Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian. They were published in five books, approximately between 110 and 130. The Second Satire and the Ninth Satire focus on homosexual activity. The Sixth Satire is a virulent attack against women, accusing them of virtually all the vices imaginable, but, maybe surprisingly, lesbian activity does not feature prominently.

The Second Satire

Juvenal begins his Second Satire attacking practitioners of same-sex sexual activity for cant and hypocrisy: "I hear high moral discourse / from raging queens who affect ancestral peasant virtues." These "philosophers" are hypocritical because they conceal their passivity behind the mask of masculinity and learning. They display skin that teems with hair but whose depilated buttocks are as smooth as baby-skin; moreover, they have anal warts, something they got from having (too much) passive intercourse. Romans should therefore not trust these *Socraticos cinaedos* ("Socratic bottoms").

Juvenal wants to unmask men who behave like women. Hispo (whose name means "shag"), for example, has surrendered his social power by succumbing to penetration--the ultimate failure of Roman *honos* and *virtus*: *Hispo subit iuuenes* ("Hispo submitted to young men"). Rabun Taylor stresses Hispo's erotic confusion: "The intentionally ambiguous meaning of the verb *subeo*, which can also mean 'to enter' or 'to assault' on the one hand, or 'to submit to' on the other, suggests that Hispo's two illnesses are the compounded results of the active and passive roles."

To plead in court, the lawyer Creticus wears a transparent toga, which means his genitals and buttocks can be seen through the cloth. Two of Juvenal's favorite issues appear here: effeminacy (female prostitutes wear these garments in the Eleventh Satire) and hypocrisy (Creticus pretends to have no secrets, hence his see-through toga, but shortly he will be prosecuting adulteresses, meanwhile never considering his own outrageous behavior).

Creticus later joins priests to celebrate the Bona Dea rites (to which, according to tradition, no men were admitted). To adorn themselves for the festivities, the priests put on ribbons (*redimicula*) and cover their necks with necklaces (*monilia*). They stage what Susanna Braund calls a "travesty by transvestites." One initiate drinks wine from a Priapic vessel, simulating oral sex with ejaculation of semen in his mouth; another initiate puts on make-up and applies mascara to his eyebrows, and a third one is so in love with himself that he never leaves his mirror.

Otho seems a good military commander: he gives orders to his troops, dons a mighty armor, and courageously rides into battle--but not before making sure that his outfit looks impeccable. The world is going topsy-turvy. The bread that others eat, Otho applies to his face as a moisturizer for his delicate skin and to prevent the growth of a beard, *the* symbol of male power, hence his rivalry of two other beauty-queens of antiquity: Cleopatra and Semiramis. Otho is a *pathicus*, just one of the many Latin terms for passive homosexuals and also the worst invective that can be leveled at a Roman man.

Gracchus, a *retiarius* or "net-gladiator," contracted a homosexual marriage as a bride, brought a dowry, and reclined in his husband's lap. His noble birth and solemn name only heighten his depravity; he arrays himself for his fight in a tunic, an image that suggests a strip-show rather than a bloody battle; not surprisingly, Gracchus disgraces himself by fleeing the arena. The speaker is outraged: "Would you be more horrified, or think it a more ghastly / portent, if women calved, or cows gave birth to lambs?"

In the Second Satire, Juvenal does not stigmatize homosexual activity *per se*, but homosexual behavior that transgresses the gender boundaries male/female. He derides sexually passive Roman citizens, whom he views as fearfully effeminate, but praises homosexuals who admit their sexual inversion, because it was ordained by fate and thus forgivable *and* because it put them in a special category, eunuchs: "Give me the open, honest / eunuch priest: gait, gestures proclaim his twisted nature. / He's a freak of fate--indeed, his wretched self-exposure, / the very strength of his passion, demands our forgiveness / and pity." In accordance with Roman gender ideology, men who take the insertive role in homosexual intercourse are not really satirized.

The Ninth Satire

In the Ninth Satire, Juvenal presents a conversation between an active male prostitute, Naevolus ("Warty"), and his wealthy client, the sexually receptive Virro. Naevolus penetrates both him and his wife, which is hard work: "You think it's easy, or fun, this job of cramming / my cock up into your guts until it's stopped by last night's supper?"

Naevolus' profession causes little criticism; Juvenal's anger is directed at Virro, who has submitted to passivity and who has allowed Naevolus to father two children with his wife, thus seriously jeopardizing his role as *pater familias*. Virro also reclines, wife-like, in a woman's chair, a *cathedra*, thus faintly alluding to a marital bond. Virro is lustful, weak, secretive, vindictive, and mean--an ideal object of satire.

Now Naevolus has fallen out of favor because fickle Virro has met "some other two-legged donkey." Naevolus complains: "Mankind is ruled by the Fates, they even govern those private / parts that our clothes conceal. If your stars go against you / the fantastic size of your cock will get you precisely nowhere, / though Virro may have drooled at the sight of your naked charms, / though long coaxing love-letters come all begging your favours, / though--quote--*What naturally draws a man is--a pansy.*"

At the end, the interlocutor, probably Juvenal himself, reassures Naevolus: "Never fear: so long as these Seven Hills stand fast / you'll always have friends in the trade, they'll still come flocking / from near and far, by ship or by coach, these gentry / who scratch their heads with one finger." Homosexual activity is so wide-spread that the oldest trade in the world will also be the longest-lasting.

Eva Cantarella amplifies the ideological ramifications of this sex-reversal: "Naevolus is an active homosexual. The Romans have sunk to such a level of depravity that they no longer pay to put someone else underneath them--they now pay someone to go on top. The ideology, then, has not changed: a man is only a man if he is gloriously active. But the facts show that real Roman males are getting rarer and rarer."

The Lex Scantinia

In the Second Satire, Juvenal (or, more precisely, the woman Laronia) refers to an obscure law, probably enacted after 227 B. C. E. (possibly as late as 149 B. C. E.) and first mentioned by Cicero (our four other sources being Suetonius, Ausonius, Tertullian, and Prudentius). The *Lex Sca[n]tinia de nefanda venere* (the Scantinian Law about venereal wantonness) may have regulated male same-sex activity, but little is known about what exactly it penalized. Juvenal also calls it dormant.

Still, some critics, on the basis of this law, have made such outrageous claims as that Rome set the death penalty for convicted homosexuals or that Rome forbade male homosexuality.

Rather, the law probably targeted a specific group of people, the *molles*. Cantarella explains: "*molles* were the sort of men who, by taking a subordinate position like a woman, revealed their basic unsuitability to be Roman citizens; they were incapable of playing a dominant role, and thus exposed themselves to the ridicule and jokes of real men . . . *molles*, then, were those men who broke the *Lex Scatinia*." Craig Williams, however, proposes that the law penalized *stuprum* (rape of freeborn Romans), both homosexual and heterosexual.

Whatever the exact letter of the law, punishing homosexual activity entirely would have been unthinkable in a culture like Rome. It is, thus, unfortunate that Green translates the term as "Sodomy Act." Also, the law seemed to have had little effect: "Boys continued to be pestered, just like women. The law punished those who had sexual liaisons with them . . . but the Romans went on courting them just the same," Cantarella concludes.

Essentialist or Constructionist?

Citing Juvenal's Second Satire (and other primary literature), Amy Richlin has challenged Michel Foucault's idea of (homo)sexuality as a social construction that can be dated to the end of the nineteenth century. She argues that what we call a "homosexual" nowadays was in Rome a "male penetrated by choice" (the *cinaedus* or *mollis*), characterized by a "social identity and social burden," and at home in a subculture surrounded by "homophobia."

Richlin proposes: "On the level of the stereotype, certain attributes and styles recur throughout the period as characterizing the *mollis* man: lisping speech; putting the hand on the hip, or, more commonly, scratching the head with one finger; use of makeup; depilation; and wearing certain colors, especially light green and sky blue." Duly modified (e.g., for "lisping speech" read "affected speech"), these stereotypes are still apposite--possibly to homophobes and homosexuals alike.

Certainly, Juvenal's depiction of homosexual activity seems more "modern" than, say, Plato's rather somber account in the *Symposium*, and Juvenal does present several characters who seem to band together in a subculture: *magna inter molles concordia* ("great is the concord among passive homosexuals"). Likewise, Juvenal's condemnation of a certain type of homosexual seems homophobic to us.

Based on the evidence that she uses, Richlin proffers a good thesis. That evidence, however, is satiric literature, which does not always reflect reality. Satire, to be sure, in order to resonate with the audience, has to reflect something about reality, but, in Juvenal's case, it is surely a heightened, exaggerated version of it, even a caricature.

Moreover, Juvenal is notorious for contradicting himself and seems to be willing to say whatever he needs to in order to advance his cause. What Laronia proclaims about women in the Second Satire, for example, is completely at odds with what Juvenal writes about women in the Sixth Satire. Can we really base a completely convincing argument on such evidence?

Needless to say, it is dangerous to impose modern categories on ancient sexuality. Richlin has been widely attacked for her article, but she helpfully complicates our understanding of Roman homosexual activity and points out some transhistorical continuities in conceptions of homosexuality, especially as a transgression of gender roles.

Roman society (unlike the earlier ancient Greek world) may have been moving toward an idea of sexual orientation, but we cannot be sure that it had actually gotten there. All that we can really say with some certainty is that Juvenal entertained the idea of an essentialist view of sexuality, though he may have done so for specific literary reasons.

John Boswell, even more radically than Richlin, gathers from the description of Gracchus' wedding ceremony that it was "commonplace" and stresses the "casual and accepting reception by [Juvenal's] contemporaries." Again, Boswell may be extrapolating more social history than this particular literary (and tendentious) representation actually embodies.

Considering the controversy surrounding gay marriage and the tendency to drag ancient authors into the discussion, Boswell's interpretation of the evidence will no doubt be challenged. If ancient Rome, to which modern Western civilization is heavily indebted, did indeed condone weddings between two men, supporters of gay marriage may perhaps use the Second Satire to bolster their case. Conversely, however, since homophobes frequently see the acceptance of homosexuality as one of the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, opponents of gay marriage may use the Second Satire to warn of dire consequences should gay marriage be legalized.

Afterlife

Juvenal was rescued from obscurity by the Christian propagandist Tertullian (second century C. E.), and soon several commentaries appeared. St. Jerome and St. Augustine approvingly cited his (pagan) moralizings.

Juvenal has been imitated and emulated by many authors since the Dark Ages, and he is credited with developing a particular kind of satire that many others have employed. Later writers have admired Juvenal for his superb wit, his acute observation of cultural problems, his acerbic criticism of social decay, his powerful diction, and his savage indignation.

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About the Author

Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.