

The Invention of Fiction in Juvenal *Satire 15*

In his penultimate satire, Juvenal tells his most outrageous story yet: an account of spontaneous, vengeful cannibalism in contemporary Egypt. *Pace* Moreau 1940 and Highet 1949, Juvenal's insistence that this is a true story is disingenuous and unsupported by evidence; scholars now understand it to be an ideological fiction. This paper zeroes in on the comparatively light prelude to this horrific story. Anticipating that readers may not believe his Egyptian tale, Juvenal envisions an analogous scenario: an "alternate ending" to Homer *Odyssey* 9-12, in which Odysseus finds his tales of man-eaters mocked and rejected as lies by a sassy Phaeacian (Juv. 15.13-26). The satirist then asserts that, unlike Odysseus' unverified account, his Egyptian tale is all too true (27-32). The miniature scene of reception plays with satiric programmatic themes (parody, laughter, anger, social division, violence; Ehrhardt 2014: 483-5, Geue 2017: 262-5, Umurhan 2018: 113-14). What has been overlooked is the scene's fictional nature – the fact that Juvenal invents a pseudo-Homeric episode to bolster his self-presentation as truth-teller before spinning a longer and far more troubling fiction. I argue that Juvenal presents the Phaeacian episode as a "warmup" for what is to come, claiming the right to practice fiction as an educated imperial Roman. By juxtaposing small and big fictions, he leads the audience into what we should see as a much more discomfiting contract.

First I show how Juvenal uses his knowledge of Homer to stitch an un-Homeric episode into the record. He neatly captures the Homeric version of the reception of the "Wanderings" in the opening clause (*attonito cum/ tale super cenam facinus narraret Vlixes/ Alcinoos*, 13-15; cf. the "silent and spellbound" audience at Hom. *Od.* 13.1-2). Then he abandons it, planting anonymous skeptics at that *cena* whom the hero "perhaps provoked to anger or laughter"

(bilem aut risum fortasse quibusdam/ mouerat, 15-16). I propose that Juvenal teases the concept for this fiction out of an earlier Homeric scene, when the less-than-friendly Phaeacian youth needle and “haze” their as-yet-unidentified guest (*Od.* 8.158-64). Being a perceptive reader makes Juvenal a clever inventor.

Next I read the Phaeacian skeptic’s eight-line speech. This speaker does more than satirize the Homeric Wanderings: he weaves together centuries of Homeric reception, sounding learned and jaded and certainly unlike Homer’s isolated, naïve Phaeacians. As I will show, his scornful recapitulation of the Wanderings, which covers not just the stories of man-eaters (Laestrygonians and Cyclopes, 18) but other famous episodes (Scylla, the Wandering Rocks, Aeolus’ bag, Circe, and Elpenor, 19-22), skillfully synthesizes material and adds Alexandrian and Roman epic accents. Despite being uttered by a member of the first audience ever to hear Odysseus’ tale, this is a performance of learning. In addition, the Phaeacian’s direct attacks on Odysseus channel Juvenalian humor: his opening joke *in mare nemo/ hunc abicit saeua dignum ueraque Charybdi?* (16-17) echoes *Lentulus ... dignus uera cruce* (8.187-8), and his closing barb *tam uacui capitis populum Phaeaca putauit?* (26) adapts *uacuumque cerebro ... caput* (14.57-8). Juvenal unabashedly scripts this speech from his own literary and satiric toolkit.

Last and definitely not least, in closing, Juvenal repackages his little fiction as usable fact. What began as a thought experiment about reception (*fortasse*) becomes a straight-up comparison between two tales, Odysseus’ and Juvenal’s: the skeptic was justified because Odysseus had no witnesses (24-26), but the Egyptian incident must be true because it is recent (27). This sleight of hand has worked well: scholars have entertained the proposed parallels and differences, but have not discussed the hypothetical nature of the Phaeacian episode or its

composition style. The passage is thus a successful test of audience tolerance for invented stories.

I close by arguing that the Phaeacian episode's fictionality and placement have larger implications for *Satire 15* and its reception. The prelude is brief, witty, and harmless; what follows is long, gory, racist, and bleak. Yet the latter is just as much a product of the satirist's learning – a veritable mashup of Greek and Roman ethnography, epic, philosophy, and rhetoric. That the ugly core narrative about “barbarism” is the brainchild of the professed spokesperson of “civilization” should trouble readers. I propose that it is precisely Juvenal's intention to highlight this paradox; he is never one to hide the dirty work of satire, or indeed of civilization.

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