

Vivite (Dis)Contenti: Populism and the Politics of Disaffection in Juvenal

From his portraits of acorn- and berry-eating peasants (*Sat.* 3.84-85, 6.5-10, 13. 54-56, 14.182-184) to his use of “Golden Age” motifs (6.1-24, 6.286-293, 13.38-59) and stock historical *exempla* from the Roman Republic (2.1-3, 8.231-268, 11.78-119, 14.161-171 *et al.*), Juvenal’s descriptions of virtue adhere to a formulaic pattern, elevating the rustic over the urban, the historical over the modern, and the simple over the sophisticated. In some ways, the poet is reworking the familiar satiric themes that his predecessor Horace had so charmingly popularized (e.g. *Serm.* 2.6.79–116; *Ep.* 2.1–8, and cf. Braund 1992: 23-48). More broadly, though, the tension between a nostalgic past and the seeming corruption of the present is felt throughout Roman literature from the late Republic on (Harrison 2005 and 2007), and it may be tempting to regard Juvenal’s employment of these tropes as darker and more terse variations on the theme. A broader survey of the literary landscape may also point toward the literary subgenre of *laudes rusticae* that stretched backward through Alciphron to Hesiod, and forward at least to the early modern period in the work of Ben Jonson.

While acknowledging the clear literary progenitors and descendants of Juvenal’s unique brand of rustic nostalgia, this paper adopts a different heuristic drawn from contemporary political theory to demonstrate how the poet’s nostalgic tropes (e.g. praises of the country life, simple foods, poverty, and traditional “manliness”) work in concert to shape an ethos of aggrievement and discontent that today we recognize as the familiar hallmark of populist rhetoric. “Populism” as a globalized phenomenon with recognizable and universal features was first theorized in the 1960’s (e.g. Berlin, *et al.* 1968, Wiles 1969). Some of the tenets that have become quasi-canonical include the idea that “virtue resides in the simple people”; that

traditional rural values are in conflict with modern, urban mores; and that minority “elites” threaten the franchise and rights of the majority (Walicki in Berlin, *et al.* 1968, Canovan 1981, LaClau 2005). Using populism as an interpretive framework for related themes in Juvenal illuminates unifying elements in the poet’s otherwise haphazard approach to narrative and suggests thematic arcs that connect the poems both within and across the five books.

The thesis of this paper is complementary to some recent trends in Juvenalian scholarship, especially Umurhan’s interpretation of the *Satires* as reflections of the era of imperial “globalization” and its attendant xenophobic tensions (Umurhan 2017, esp. 71-93 on food in *Sat.* 4, 5, and 11). In addition, I find common ground with Geue’s theory of poetic anonymity and Uden’s claims of the “invisibility” of the satiric narrator’s persona (Geue 2017 and Uden 2015), for populist rhetoric, too, demands that the charismatic speaker hide his true identity in favor of generic characteristics designed to resonate and reinforce ties with the disaffected. Although my interpretation of specific nostalgic tropes and vignettes sometimes differs from Geue’s (e.g. at 14.179-184), the present paper provides support and an additional rationale for the “master sense of paranoia conjured by the text” (Geue 2017: 286).

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