

The Rhetoric of Rusticity in Roman Satire

Roman satirists were men of two worlds, if you took their word for it. They positioned themselves as occupying a balance between city and country (as noted in detail in Braund 1989), having a sort of dual residency in both, the better to present themselves as journalists of both worlds. One world was obviously better. Martial, Horace, and Juvenal all provide homilies on the simple, virtuous life lived out in rural areas, in line with themes common to the rhetoric of Roman poverty in ancestral time: agricultural bounty, the nobility of working in the fields, simple meals of greens and tubers, and the clean-living, self-sufficient farmer at the portrait's center. By plugging themselves into conventional scenarios of rustic joy, the satirists provide a counterpoint to the difficulties and humiliations of the rat race in which the would-be *cliens* found himself harassed by a million troubles (for a summary, see Ferris-Hill 2015 56n46). When authors situated their *personae* in this well-trod space, they could easily slip into an inherited discourse about morality, money, and the limited and prudent ambitions of a proper citizen man, the kind of person they claimed, often explicitly, to be. This paper, while covering briefly this set of norms, will focus on divergences from them, especially in Horace and Juvenal.

Martial and Horace present this line of rustic rhetoric in normative ways, with Horace occasionally bringing the audience's attention to the stereotype. Idealized rustic bounty features in Martial's career ambitions: in 1.55 he states to a patron his wish to be a farmer on a small farm of his own (*petit esse sui nec magni ruris arator*, 3), working with rough and meager means (*sordidaque in parvis otia rebus amat*, 4), a life Martial depicts as full of material, if non-monetary, reward (*exuviis nemoris rurisque*, 7; *plenas... plagas*, 8) – a farm he describes enjoying in later epigrams. Horace's sojourns to his "Sabine Farm" present him as a participant

in a bountiful, contented agrarian fantasy, but with an undercurrent of winking self-awareness as to the degree to which he's participating in a rhetorical game: he doesn't call his farm "small", only "not large" (*Satires* 2.6.1: *modus agri non ita magnus* – Oliensis 1998 170: "Horace regularly proclaims that he is blissfully content to be 'poor' and that he neither needs nor want any further gifts from his patron"), and on numerous occasions targets himself as a figure of potential hypocrisy by having slaves and freedmen skewer (*Satires* 2.7, *Epistles* 1.13) his self-satisfied assumption of the role of blissful, moral plantation owner.

Whereas Horace reveals that this strand of rhetoric is all a game, Juvenal reveals it as fiction almost without exception; his pictures of rustic self-affectation (one might say "cos-play") appear as either presumptuous performances or grotesque distortions of a less idyllic reality. In addition to the blowhard Umbricius' unreliable praise of country living in *Satire* 3 (which Braund 1989 27 calls "as much as an idealisation as the picture of city life is an exaggeration and a caricature") and the hypocritical "farm-to-table" dinner of *Satire* 11 (cf. Rimell 2005 89), his main picture of Golden Age Rome in *Satire* 13 presents the simplicity of pre-Urban life not as comfortable Utopia, but as a grotesque parody, populated by cave people with rough-and-tumble women "shaggier than their husbands belching up acorns" (*horridior glandem ructante marito*, 10). Juvenal provides no indication that idealizing rustic rhetoric carries any weight for him, nor does he bask in it as part of his self-fashioning. In his *Satires* the concept of Rome's ancestral poverty has the status of an archaic and obsolete cultural cliché, useful only for unveiling the self-absorption and delusion of the men who employed it.

Works Cited

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