

Mensura Incognita: Problems of Reception and Interpretation of Juvenal's Ninth Satire
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Juvenal's ninth satire is a dialogue between a fictionalized version of Juvenal and Naevolus, a "dedicated and devoted client" who has sex with his patron and his patron's wife and father's his patron's children, but has now been thrown over for a younger, prettier boy. The modern response to Satire 9 has been dominated by three modes: censorship, biographical criticism, and persona theory. In this paper, I will describe each type of response and discuss the problems of reception and interpretation inherent in each of these modes. My contention is that all of these approaches have been used to contain, neutralize, or negate the transgressive quality of the poem. By "transgressive" I mean those aspects of the poem that either challenge the moral and ideological status quo or seem to endorse immoral attitudes or behaviors. While it may seem odd to call censorship a mode of interpretation, I will argue that censorship functions not unlike forms of institutionalized social oppression to dehumanize the text, rendering it unfit for consumption by the humanistic literary tradition and in effect marking the poem as unworthy of interpretation. As representative examples, I will explore the way Gilbert Highet used a biographical approach to explain away aspects of the poem that do not accord well with bourgeois humanistic values (Juvenal turned to boys because he had a bad experience with a woman); and the way Susanna Morton Braund used persona theory to claim that the text says what it says only ironically and therefore actually says the opposite (so that she, like Highet, ends up reading Juvenal's sympathy for Naevolus as thinly veiled mockery and scorn, albeit in her view the ridicule is in the voice of an ironic persona, not that of the historical Juvenal).¹ In addition to showing these three interpretive modes at work and characterizing them as strategies of containment, I will address the broader cultural concerns at stake: first, how and why has this happened; and second, why should we care? I will argue that Satire 9 has long been read through a moralistic lens because classics as a discipline has historically served a conservative ideological function; that is, defending dominant moral positions is part of the job that classics was created to do—part of the "disciplinary" nature of the discipline. I will position this type of analysis as part of a broader effort to move beyond the old model of classical tradition to an emerging model of classical reception that includes taking the measure of the discipline itself and opening up our material objects of study—texts, art, architecture, and artifacts—to new and potentially dissident readings.²

¹ Highet, G. 1954. *Juvenal the Satirist*. Oxford; Braund, S.M. 1988. *Beyond Anger: A Study of Juvenal's Third Book of Satires*. Cambridge.

² In recent years, Juvenal 9 has been subject to analyses that go beyond biographical criticism and persona theory, and I will note these as indicative of new directions in classical reception. The most recent example is the treatment by Ralph M. Rosen in *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire*, Oxford (2007).