

Fish and Roman Decay in Juvenal's *Satires*

Juvenal's *Satire 4* recounts the appearance of an enormous rhombus-fish filling the entire bay off Ancona, a seaport on the Adriatic coast. The fish is discovered, then immediately shipped to the emperor Domitian's villa outside Rome in Alba Longa. Upon its arrival, general awe and confusion inspires the emperor to summon a *concilium principis* (4.130-end), a military council, with his cabinet advisors. Thereupon, they debate not serious political matters of state apt for such an assembly, but deliberate on the trivial matter of the rhombus's presentation and consumption (Winkler 1995). Juvenal draws our attention to a specific detail about the fish, namely its enormity and inability to be confined. The rhombus does not fit its serving plate, but simply overflows its confines (4.130-133).

In this paper, I argue that the rhombus-fish figures as a programmatic symbol of "fullness" and "richness" that represents Rome's vice in book 1 (satires 1-5) of the *Satires*. Recent scholarship has shown how several images of "fullness" in Juvenal's collection serve as metaphors for Rome's moral decay such as overweight men, gaping purses, bulging litters and milk-filled breasts (Keane 1997, Allen-Miller 2005). Building on this, I contend that it is useful to compare the rhombus-fish's inability to be contained within an appropriate sized plate with the ethical violations that ensue in the satire, namely the emperor Domitian's mismanagement and distortion of the proper modes of conduct that dictate the Roman political institution of the *concilium* (Wallace-Hadrill 1981, Luisi 1998). Just as overweight men represent the vice of gluttony and gaping purses greed, the fish of *Satire 4* underscores the perversion of Rome's political institution. Elsewhere, fish similarly spill over plates or are swollen with sewage from the river Tiber (*Satire 5*) to highlight the decay of another of Rome's institutions, the *cēna*, or dinner-party (Gowers 1995).

The rhombus-fish of *Satire 4* and these other objects experience expansion and a fluidity that signals Rome's corruption and vulnerability. Their flexibility informs the satirist's larger illustration of Rome's vice as "full" and "rich" and, therefore, permeable to, and characteristic of, corruption. In *Satire 4*, the rhombus-fish not only brings Domitian's threat to Rome into sharper focus, but also suggests a more serious critique of

empire. The territorial space of empire, like the fish, also overflows its borders illustrating the pervasive menace of Roman decay at home and abroad.

Citations

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