

Xenophobia, Racism, and Hate Speech: Re-reading Juvenal in the Era of Donald Trump

Although Juvenal has never been unproblematic, arguably, it is more problematic today than it has ever been. What are we to do with the xenophobic, ethnocentric, sexist, able-ist narrator whose vitriolic and pseudo-moral censure resonates all too clearly with the bluster that now passes for political discourse? In short, how does living under the Presidency of Donald Trump change the way that we read, interpret, and teach Juvenal? Arguably, many traditional strains of interpretation in Juvenalian studies have generally allowed us to distance ourselves from the content of the satirist's rhetoric. Interpretations grounded in persona theory (Kernan 1959, esp. 14-30; Anderson 1982, 305-311; Braund 1988, esp. 108-122, et al.), genre or performance analysis (Freudenburg, 2001; Keane 2006; Larmour 2016, et al.), rhetorical technique and intertext (Uden 2015), or invective or humor theory (Rosen 2007, Plaza 2006, Vincent 2010) each in their own way provide a comfortable distance between form and content. By focusing on techniques, similarities and differences within the tradition, and the unique features of the poet's own historical context, we are invited to forget the substance of the poet's comments, whether about foreigners (*Sat.* 3.62-65), Jews (*Sat.* 14.96-106), homosexuals (*Sat.* 2, 9), women (*Sat.* 6), or myriad others.

This paper begins with the understanding that form and content are not separable entities; rather, as I show, it is the ambiguity in the formal structure of Juvenalian satire that renders its content powerful. As recent work from the field of media psychology demonstrates, satiric content can operate in polysemic and polyvalent ways, speaking to radically different sub-audiences in whose intersections the message of division is amplified (Cf. Lamarre, et al. 2009). Because of its various audiences and effects, satire—and in particular the railing and harsh satire of the sort that Juvenal writes—is a literature uniquely designed for the echo chambers of

isolated sub-communities. Perhaps Juvenalian satire presages the dangers of social media. In the classroom, then, we do more harm than good when we rely on the distance of traditional strands of interpretation. Instead, as authors such as Umurhan (2018) have shown, we must confront the similarities between our own world and the world of the satirist, recognizing that the instability and discomfort of satiric rhetoric resonates with and against the individual and collective uncertainties, tribalist affinities, and reactionary fears of our own age.

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