Two Homeric Women in Juvenal's Sixth Satire

No reader of Juvenal doubts his considerable learning in earlier Roman literature, including, but not limited to, works by Cicero and Vergil. A less commonly studied area of intertextuality is Juvenal's reference directly to Greek texts. In this paper, I will examine two striking vignettes from *Satire* 6 that, I will argue, come straight from the text of Homer without a particularly Roman pedigree even if they are set squarely in Juvenal's satiric version of Rome. The passages in question are the episode in which Eppia, a senator's wife, follows her gladiator lover to Egypt (6.82-114) and the notorious description of Claudius' wife Messalina and her nightly routine of working in a seedy brothel (6.115-132).

Eppia leaves behind a child and a wealthy husband to follow her beloved Sergiolus to Egypt (Nappa 2018, 134-36). She illustrates the speaker's point that there are upper class Roman women who prefer gladiators (and other *infames* men) to their respectable husbands. In her sojourn in Egypt, Eppia thus resembles the Homeric (and lyric and tragic) Helen, who leaves Menelaus (and their daughter Hermione) in Sparta (*Od.* 2.262-64). Juvenal hints that in Egypt, Eppia is likely to lose interest in her version of Paris as soon as he retires (6.112-13). (On the importance of Paris here, see Sulprizio 2020, 107.) The hard wooden sword that shows Sergius has retired will perhaps lead her back to Rome. The imagined sexual prowess of gladiators was, after all, what appealed to Eppia in the first place.

Messalina's nocturnal preparations are as interesting as her work in the brothel itself (Nappa 2018, 162-64). She leaves her sleeping husband behind and, wearing a cloak to disguise herself while she walks through the streets, she goes from the Palatine to a brothel (Courtney 1980, 276). She is accompanied by one servant only; her walk brings her to a part of the city

inappropriate for her. Messalina's journey to the brothel ends with her on full display, nipples gilded in a display of opulence. This, and the unsavory nature of her activities, may have obscured the epic model for the passage: Andromache's crossing Troy to see her husband Hector (*Il.* 6.388-94). She travels cloaked, accompanied by a single servant and carrying the infant Astyanax. Messalina may not bring the infant Britannicus along, but Juvenal makes it clear that she ostentatiously displays the belly that carried him when she undresses at the brothel. Andromache meets only her husband, but Messalina services as many men as she can (Watson and Watson 2014, 113). Thus, the Messalina episode inverts the Andromache passage.

Just as Aeneas and Turnus are pressed into service as stand-ins for a safe kind of writing in Juvenal's Rome (1.162-164), the Homeric models let Juvenal use well-known epic exemplars to establish that the decay in the Rome he portrays produces a world that makes no sense even as it appears to echo the high literature (epic) of Roman education. Eppia is not Helen and Messalina is certainly not a Roman Andromache, but they are, as the poet-satirist sees it, inversions that shows how far (down) the world has come.

It is also worth noting that Eppia and Messalina are essentially the same: women motivated by lust for what they shouldn't have or want and a concomitant need for disgrace. Eppia and Messalina both make trips that would embarrass their families. Eppia shows us what the notorious Helen looks like in imperial Rome, and Messalina shows that Rome's first family is not that of Troy: Rome's storied history as Troy reborn is exposed as hollow when the imperial household turns out to consist of a sleeping, indifferent emperor and a prostitute wife whose promiscuity contrasts with her role as mother of a high-born prince.

Works Cited

Courtney, E. 1980. *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal*. London.

Nappa, C. 2018. *Making Men Ridiculous: Juvenal and the Anxieties of the Individual.* Ann Arbor.

Sulprizio, C. 2020. *Gender and Sexuality in Juvenal's Rome: Satire 2 and Satire 6.* Norman, OK.

Watson, L., and P. Watson. 2014. *Juvenal: Satire 6*. Cambridge.