

## Trajan as Satire in Late Antiquity

Trajan appears in satirical content in late antiquity, which validates the realities of imperial address and historical discourse in the fourth century. In other words, satire confirms that Trajan and other emperors were extensively mined from their historical exploits for rhetorical purposes.

Satire, as genre, is generally an amalgam of literary styles and other genres, and it serves to criticize contemporary society through devices such as comedy, juxtaposition, word play, farce, and use of absurdity (Muecke 2005, Habinek 2005, Hooley 2007). Whereas other genres, such as history or panegyric, often seek to idealize the world, satire attempts to expose the realities of it. In late antiquity, the genre of satire remained popular—both in the renewed reading of earlier satirists, and in the production of new satire, like Julian's *Caesares*.

Furthermore, satire was transformed by later authors, and satirical elements are woven into other genres (Hooley 2007, Sogno 2012). The *Historia Augusta*, for example, is deemed dubious history, which is a correct observation. It was not, however, written as a true history, but rather as a pseudo-history intertwined with satirical elements (Honoré 1987, Thomson 2012). Trajan appears in both works as a historical figure-turned-literary-character to fulfill a comedic role. In addition, the manner in which Trajan was used in satire is a critical reflection of the traditional fourth-century discourse of imperial exemplars.

The author of the *Historia Augusta* uses Trajan to make absurd comparisons to emperors like Alexander Severus. At first glimpse, the association may seem flattering, but it becomes clear that the link between these two is ultimately comical. For instance, on the day of Alexander's birth, an image of Trajan, hanging above his father's bed, fell down, implying an omen of military likeness (or unlikeness) (*Alexander* 13.3–4). The passage is framed as a

fortuitous portent, but the reader could infer the problematic comparison between Trajan, beloved by the military, and Alexander, hated by them. An elite audience would understand that such foolish comparisons were regularly made in the senate and in panegyric speeches to the emperors. While this passage comments on Alexander, it is ultimately a critique on the flattery heaped on emperors.

Julian wrote a Menippean satire, *Caesares*, in which the emperors dine in the presence of the gods at the festival of Saturnalia, and Trajan is among the chosen to give an account of his career and contend for the prize. He is lampooned for his inability to articulate and his love of wine and boys. Eventually the contest devolves and no winner is declared. This is comical in its own right, but the effect of the satire ridicules the contemporary practice of selecting imperial exempla by emperors. As Joel Relihan (2005) concludes, the satire is ultimately reflective upon the author, and the subtext of his poem is that “Julian alone is the true emperor.”

Trajan’s legacy as emperor persisted as a feature of discourse for fourth-century Romans (Syme 1971, Bennett 2001, Chenault 2012). He was not the only prior exemplary emperor to appear in late antique literature, but Trajan was held in particular regard as the greatest military conqueror in recent history, which became relevant to the conditions of the later Roman Empire. Trajan’s legacy not only existed as Rome’s past, but also addressed the present challenges facing the later Roman Empire. The later emperors, therefore, found Trajan to be a suitable model. Likewise, Roman senators invoked him to serve as an exemplar for current emperors. Eutropius (*Brev.* 8.5.3) famously recorded that senators praised emperors with the line, “may you be luckier than Augustus and better than Trajan.” In other words, Trajan was not just an artifact of history. His popularity confirms the rhetoric of looking for a “new Trajan” to meet the challenges

of the present. He is part of the fourth-century discourse in panegyrics and histories, and it is because of such habits that Trajan entered into satire.

### Bibliography

- Bennett, J. 2001. *Trajan: Optimus Princeps*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Indiana University Press.
- Chenault, R. 2012. "Statues of Senators in the Forum of Trajan and the Roman Forum in Late Antiquity." *JRS*. 102: 103–32.
- Habinek, T. 2005. "Satire as aristocratic play." In Freudenburg. 2005: 177–91.
- Honoré, T. 1987. "Scriptor Historiae Augustae." *JRS*. 77: 156-76.
- Hooley, D. 2007. *Roman Satire*. Blackwell.
- Muecke, F. 2005. "Rome's first "satirists." In Freudenburg. 2005: 33–47.
- Relihan, J. 2005. "Late Arrivals: Julian and Boethius" In Freudenburg. 2005: 109–22.
- Sogno, C. 2012. "Persius, Juvenal, and the Transformation of Satire in Late Antiquity." In *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal*. Edited by Braund and Osgood, 363–85. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Syme, R. 1971. *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the 'Historia Augusta.'* Clarendon Press.
- Thomson, M. 2012. *Studies in the Historia Augusta*. Latomus.