

Distance between Philosopher and Satirist: The Ins and Outs of Persius' Third Satire

Persius' third poem appears to be presented as a series of dualities: teacher and student, wise and foolish, Roman and foreign, philosophy and satire. The poem describes a conversation held between two men: an *unus comitum* and an unnamed figure whose activities are described in the first person (an *ego* figure). As Daniel Hooley reasons, the inclusion of this *ego* problematizes the issue of with whom the reader should sympathize, and similarly brings into question exactly whose perspective is represented by the *unus comitum* (1997; see also Reckford 2009). This, in turn, begs the question of what behaviors are criticized in this poem, who is being mocked, and who gets to do the mocking. Persius, a Stoic, should theoretically align himself with the *unus comitum*; yet the *ego* forces the reader to wonder whether Persius is ridiculing himself in the poem. The subsequent conflation of these disparate identities (ridiculer and ridiculed, respectively) thus draws attention to the other dualities and, I argue, ultimately undermines them. Persius can, in fact, be both mocker and mocked, satirist and philosopher. He uses, as I will elucidate, the rhetorical collapse of the distance between city and country to communicate this.

The first half of the satire is filled with motifs of proximity and distance, vocalized by both characters in their recurring references to rustic settings (Arcadia, Etruria, and Sicily). Notably, each digression to the country is quickly diverted back to urban Rome, which is the setting in which we both begin and end the poem. In this paper, I propose that through these sudden, even jarring, digressions into the countryside—and, more importantly, through their equally sudden, seamless returns to the present time and place—Persius first provides and then subverts distance and duality. Unlike in the pastoral genre, where distance from the city is

emphasized and in which the otherness of the rustic inhabitants is itself thematized, city and country here merge together, representing a continuity rather than a dichotomy.

By subverting these marked instances of distance one after another, Persius not only subtly calls into question the other presented dualities in his poem, but also recalls his singular description of himself as *semipaganus* in his prologue, a poet who is at home in both the country and the city, who is both foolish and wise, both philosopher and satirist. Thus by careful attention to Persius' elusive use of distance in the third satire, it becomes clear that his is no simple dichotomy between philosophy and satire, but a blurring between the two: a clear ambiguity that invites at once a more ironic humor and more productive introspection.

Bibliography

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