



A Short History of Roman Satire

The word ‘Satire’ today means a broadly critical form or discourse expressed in a wide range of media including novels, films, comedy shows, music, art and poetry. For the Romans, it was primarily a term applied to a form of poetry (with a small subset of ‘Menippean’ writings (in a mixture of prose and verse) — see below on Varro). When the tradition becomes well established, these poems were regularly in hexameters; the subject matter was varied, but it was typically urban, non-mythological, and purported in various degrees to have a moral intent. It was also, claimed the Romans, their own invention.

satura quidem tota nostra est. ‘Satire is entirely our own’, said Quintilian (10.1.93: for Quintilian see 6.75) and it seems to have been a Roman recipe, even though it helped itself to some very Greek ingredients. The first to compose literature known as *saturae* in Latin was Ennius (239-169BC): but what remains of his *Saturae* in six books is insufficient to form any clear views about his attitude to the genre. The first major figure in the history of Roman satire was clearly Gaius Lucilius (180 - 102BC) — a man right at the heart of the Roman establishment who had a reputation for aristocratic connections as a wealthy Roman knight, great uncle to Pompey and friend to Scipio Aemilianus; he composed 30 books of *Saturae* in a variety of metres. Horace presents us with a picture of Lucilius as a throwback to Athenian comedy (Horace *Satires* 1.4.1-7), and as a facile generator of abundant rough verses (‘a muddy river from which much should have removed’ (*Satires* 1.4.11)) in which he ‘scoured the city with a lot of salt’ (Horace *Satires* 1.10.3-4) — but this is a very partial reading of Lucilius, whose work showed a wide range of moods and who seems to have presented his own positive ethical programme. Lucilius attacked people by name and recounted his own sexual exploits; he denounced gluttony and political chicanery, and made use of philosophical ideas while also mocking philosophical jargon. *ars est celare artem* (‘art consists in concealing art’): Lucilius does at times read as if he is improvising his lines but there is always conscious artistry at work. Lucilius also presents himself in a more or less



ironic manner in his poetry, and thus introduces a very personal voice into the poetic language.

Lucilius had fixed on the hexameter as the rhythm of satire by his final book: Varro (116-27BC), however, who wrote voluminously on matters of agriculture and language, also produced 150 books of 'Menippean Satires' which are a blend of prose and verse, described by Cicero (*Acad.* 1.8) as 'a bit of philosophy with a dash of humour and dialogue'. Their name and their inspiration was the Greek 3rd century Cynic philosopher Menippus of Gadara - and the mixture of prose and verse in satire was to be imitated much later by Seneca (in his *Apocolocyntosis*) and Petronius (in his *Satyricon*).

Horace's satirical poems have come down to us with the title *sermones* ('conversations') rather than *saturae*. His is a gentler sort of satire, unlike the savagery of Lucilius, and he comes over as an ironic self-satirist as much as a critic of other people, famously (1.5) telling of his hopes for sex with a servant-girl, only to be stood up by her and end up 'staining his bedclothes'. He speaks frankly and crudely about sex (1.2) and food (2.2) in language worthy of an Aristophanes (who was a leading comic poet of 5th century Athens), but he avoids overt political satire and it has even been suggested (Freudenburg *Satires of Rome* 71-82) that his lack of comment implies a subtle critique of the dangers of criticising the state ethos. His targets include hypocrisy and ambition; and the set-piece descriptions of events such as the dinner-party (2.8) give us a vivid glimpse into the social world in which Horace, the freedman's son, always (no doubt) felt himself to be something of an outsider. He made good use of a variety of styles in his poems: parody of epic, philosophical discourse in the manner of a didactic poet, vivid raconteurish descriptions of Roman life, ribald humour (such as the tale of Priapus and the witches in 1.8) and even animal fables such as the famous town mouse and country mouse (2.6).

Writing under the emperor Nero, the satirist Persius (34-62AD) composed only six satires—a meagre 650 lines in all—but took the genre in a new direction with his application of Stoic philosophy as the inspiration for his work. Stoic philosophy was very much discussed in the imperial age in which he lived, as is shown in the work of Persius' approximate contemporary Seneca (for instance his *Letters to Lucilius*) and also the spoken 'sermons' (often called 'diatribes') of Epictetus (written in Greek). Persius' poetry is involved and



B L O O M S B U R Y

obscure but deals with stock themes — food, poetry, sex, power, gods — and offers a more engaged and assertive model of satirical argument than the relaxed voice of Horace.