

Reading Antiquity

Rising Rome

Early Roman literature: Satire and
Epic

Time line of authors mentioned



Republican period

- Livius Andronicus – cf. Apollonius of Rhodes
- Naevius, Ennius, Lucilius



Early empire (Julio-Claudians)

- Horace



The empire

- Juvenal; Martial
- Ausonius (much later!)

Where does Roman literature begin?

- The traditional answer to this is:
- Livius Andronicus, likely of Greek descent, dated to the second half of the 3rd C BC:
 - The *Odyssey* in Latin
 - Now only in fragments
 - Andronicus main work would, however, have been for the stage: comedy and tragedy: the date for his first performed tragedy is traditionally 240 BC
- That means that the earliest piece of ‘Roman literature’ is dated to roughly the same period as Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica*



Filling the holes

- Later grammarians mention songs of heroes of old sung at banquets potentially similar to Greek oral tradition
 - Similar practice at Rome tempting as scholars presuppose shared Indo-European roots for archaic literature in both cultures
 - Also tempting to posit such a tradition as it would have conveyed ideas of early Roman history to later historiographers

More importantly: Song in daily life

Song as accompaniment to work, drink, dance, ritual, lament were intrinsic to Roman life from the very beginning

- Songs of heroes for banquets
- *Fescennina carmina*: likely originating from harvest festivals but later sung especially at weddings
- Verses sung by soldiers at the triumph
- Songs used in religious or legal rituals/ceremonies

*My page is naughty, but my life is clean," as Martial says. But let them remember, learned as they are, that Pliny, a most honourable man, shows looseness in his scraps of verse, rigour in his private life [...]. **For what shall I say of the Fescennine verses of Annianus**, what of the volumes of the *Jeu d'Amour* of Laevius, that most ancient poet ? (Ausonius, *Cento Nuptialis*, preface)*

Two religious songs: Arval brothers

- *Carmen Arvale*: chant of the Arval priests
 - Task of the priesthood: annual sacrifices to the Lares and Dea Dia (sometimes identified with Ceres/Demeter) for good harvest
 - Cult fairly well-known as restored by Augustus
 - Preserved in an AD 218 inscription (strewn with errors) but referred to in literature on many instances
 - Features: rhythm (accompanied by dance), alliteration, rhyme

enos Lases iuuate
enos Lases iuuate
enos Lases iuuate
[...]

enos Marmor
iuuato

enos Marmor
iuuato

enos Marmor
iuuato

The Salii

*[...] there, twice
every day, see
the young boys
beat the ground
with their
snow-white
feet,
in a triple
measure, like
Salian dancers.*

*(Horace, Odes,
4.1.26-28)*

- Song and dance of the Salii
 - Group of priests said to have been instituted by the early king, Numa
 - Task of the priesthood: festival of Mars
 - Words found unintelligible by later writers (e.g. Horace, Ovid)

- This indigenous type of song or text provides the foundation on which Greek literary influence impacts from the 3rd century BC onwards
- ‘When Roman poets do begin to write epic, they do so not as strangers to Greek literary culture, but as participants in a cultural transformation that had been shaping the entire Mediterranean world since the death of Alexander the Great.’

(Farrell, 2007, 428)

A little more on Livius

- Influenced by Alexandrian criticism and practise
 - Cf. Sheets, 1981
- The *Odyssey* translation in Saturnian verse
 - Indigenous Latin verse
 - Differs from Greek verse in that it relies on word stress rather than syllable quantity
- The Saturnian verse is later held as the ‘old’ (and old-fashioned + clumsy) Latin meter and becomes associated with early Latin epic:

Latin literature after 240 BC

- Genres dominating the scene:
 - Drama: comedy and tragedy
 - Range of dramatists, usually working in both genres, known through fragments – cf. next lecture
 - Epic: initially in Saturnian verse, now in fragments:
 - Livius Andronicus (S)
 - Naevius (S)
 - Ennius (H)
 - Rhetoric
 - Satire

Early Roman epic

- **Naevius:** The first to write a Latin epic on Roman history – his *Bellum Punicum* details the events of the first Punic war (late 3rd C BC)
 - ‘linked Roman history to the legendary past of Homer through flashbacks [...], telling of Aeneas’ flight from Troy, his visit to Carthage, and the foundation of Rome.’ (Hardie, in: Harrison, 2005, 84)
- **Ennius:** *The Annals* – an epic on Rome’s history from foundation to Ennius’ own time (3/2nd C BC)
 - the growing state now has its own national epic
 - Makes hexameter the verse for epic in Latin too

Satire

- No immediate Greek predecessors for the genre
- Quintilian in his literary history of Rome says 'Satire, at least, is entirely ours'
- Early satirists – early Roman literature:
 - Quintus Ennius (239-169 BC) – early writers tended to work in many genres
 - Gaius Lucilius (168/7-102 BC)
- Ennius and Lucilius are followed by:
 - Horace late 1st C BC
 - Persius 1st C AD
 - Juvenal 2nd C AD

Satire according to Diomedes

Satura is the name of a verse composition amongst the Romans. At present certainly it is defamatory and composed to carp at human vices in the manner of the Old (Greek) Comedy: this type of *satura* was written by Lucilius, Horace, and Persius. Previously, however, *satura* was the name of a composition in verse consisting of miscellaneous poems, such as Pacuvius and Ennius wrote. [...] Now *satura* is so called either from the Satyrs, because in this type of poem [i.e. the *satura*] laughable and shameful things are related in the same way even as those recited and performed by the Satyrs, or it is called *satura* from a platter which was laden full with a large variety of first fruits, and used to be offered to the gods in the cult of the ancients; and from the abundance and fullness of the dish it was called *satura* [...] or from a kind of stuffing which was crammed full with many ingredients and called *satura* according to the testimony of Varro. [...] Others however think it derives its name from a law, *satura*, which includes many provisions at once in a single bill, for it is evident that the verse composition *satura* also comprises many poems at once.

Diomedes, *Grammatici Latini*

Lucilius: themes

- **Human interrelations**, men, women
- **Food and drink**, scenes of “eating [are] perfect for satire; utterly trivial yet a place where class, social codes, and personal habits come under scrutiny.” (Hooley)
- **Philosophy**, common sense vs. pretentiousness
- **How a real Roman behaves**

Lucilius: themes and poses

- Himself (i.e. his narrator), his poses, his writing: justifying the outspokenness – he claims to want to be read by normal people, not scholars
 - Delineates the genre: epic and tragedy are on offer, but they are not satire
- The narrator makes the claim that he *has* to speak up – even if it means talking about things not proper
 - Juvenal and Horace will adopt this pose too!
- Vicious attacks

A taste of satire: Juvenal *Satire* 1

What? Am I to be a listener only all my days? Am I never to get my word in----I that have been so often bored by the Theseid of the ranting Cordus? Shall this one have spouted to me his comedies, and that one his love ditties, and I be unavenged? Shall I have no revenge on one who has taken up the whole day with an interminable Telephus, or with an Orestes, which, after filling the margin at the top of the roll and the back as well, hasn't even yet come to an end? No one knows his own house so well as I know the groves of Mars, and the cave of Vulcan near the cliffs of Aeolus. What the winds are brewing; whose souls Aeacus has on the rack; from what country another worthy is carrying off that stolen golden fleece; how big are the ash trees which Monychus tosses about: these are the themes with which Fronto's plane trees and marble halls are for ever ringing until the pillars quiver and quake under the continual recitations; such is the kind of stuff you may look for from every poet, greatest or least. Well, I too have slipped my hand from under the cane; I too have counselled Sulla to retire from public life and sleep his fill ; it is a foolish clemency when you jostle against poets at every corner, to spare paper that will be wasted anyhow. But if you can give me time, and will listen quietly to reason, I will tell you why I prefer to run in the same course over which the great nursling of Aurunca drove his steeds.

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- **The pose of the speaker:** forced to write satire in reaction to literary products of others
- ...and as you'll have seen in the following, in reaction to their lack of morals
- **Satire as an alternative**, more genuine genre: it is not epic, not drama, not poetry, and it does not follow any rules
 - ...at least not according to the narrator

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- Satire in the middle of ordinary life:
- Information on education
 - Rhetorical exercises
- Information on literary life
- Satire linked to its past: note the reference to Lucilius

Juvenal Satire 1

Would you not like to fill up a whole note-book at the street crossings when you see a forger borne along upon the necks of six porters, and exposed to view on this side and on that in his almost naked litter, and reminding you of the lounging Maecenas: one who by help of a scrap of paper and a moistened seal has converted himself into a fine and wealthy gentleman?

- Satire in the middle of life – literally?
 - But cf. the medium
- Satire on changes in society...
- ...or things perceived as changes – satirists always tend to cry out for the good old days
- Need to question the narrator's voice – is *he* the butt of the joke?

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To take away

- Roman literature thrives thanks to Greek influence, but only because semi-literary texts were already crucial to Roman society
- We know very little of early Republican literature – most authors and texts known to us only as fragments
- Early Roman epic takes off at the same time as Rome's expansion – following the Punic wars
- Satire an early genre – and an entirely Roman one!