

CHAPTER 15

Persius

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The literary record of the Neronian age is dominated by authors, including Seneca, Petronius, and Lucan, who orbited the “Sun King” and eventually were consumed by the heat. What then shall we make of the high-born poet Aulus Persius Flaccus (AD 34–62), who had been Lucan’s schoolmate and was well acquainted with many other members of the Roman literati, yet maintained a cool distance from the imperial court and made not a single overt reference to Nero in his extant work? By the year 62, when an early death, apparently from a stomach ailment (*vitio stomachi*, *Vita Persii*), overtook Persius just shy of 28, Nero’s literary enthusiasm had already had a transformative impact on Roman politics and culture. As early as 59, the emperor had assembled around him a circle of literary advisors, whose assistance and encouragement he rewarded with political offices and material gain. Persius was not among them. This imperial entourage seems to have inspired cliques of poetic imitators, eager to mimic the tastes and activities of the prolific and powerful (see Sullivan (1985) 74–114; Griffin (1984) 143–60). Persius has long been considered one of the most eloquent informants on the literary culture and courtly politics of this period precisely because he offers the alternative perspective of a nonconformist and detractor. His *Satires*, dedicated to no benefactor or sovereign, vehemently reject the standard means of securing and retaining poetic patronage as utterly corrupt. The poet implies that he cannot see much difference between a contemporary poetry recitation and a tawdry sex show (*Satires* 1.15–21). In Persius’ *Satire* 1, the nobility glut themselves upon a performance of clichéd and melodramatic epic (1.30–36):

*I would like to express my gratitude to the editors of the volume Martin Dinter and Emma Buckley and to Kate Meng Brassel, Ian Goh, and Carey Seal, who kindly commented on earlier versions of this chapter.

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Behold, during a drinking bout, Romulus' overstuffed descendants want to hear what the immortal poems recount. Immediately someone, who has a hyacinth cloak around his shoulders, articulating through his nose some putrid little thing, slowly recites *Phyllis*-es, *Hypsipyle*-s, anything typical of bards and worthy of tears, and he even stutters through the words on the delicate roof of his mouth. The men nod their approval.

The cantankerous persona who narrates this spectacle denies the aspiration to reach such audiences – or really anyone at all, save “maybe two, maybe one” (*vel duo vel nemo*, *Satires* 1.3). To the multitude of poets who seek immediate, unreflecting acclaim, Persius retorts “I balk at the suggestion that your ‘terrific!’ and ‘nice one!’ are the summit and ceiling of all merit!” (*sed recti finemque extremumque esse recuso / ‘euge’ tuum et ‘belle’*, 1.48–9). So exceptional, it seems, is such reticence among Persius’ greedy, opportunistic peers that the speaker must argue his case against an incredulous interlocutor. Persius distances his poetry still further from literary society by asserting that this interlocutor is not a real person, but rather “you whom I have just now invented to put the opposite case” (*Quisquis es, o modo quem ex adverso dicere feci*, 1.44). The refusal to face his adversaries, even as sparring partners, makes Persius’ rejection of these conformists absolute.

Persius never released his poetry for wide circulation. For this reason, scholars often have assumed that the author intended the *Satires* only for the restricted audience of close friends and acquaintances who read unfinished drafts or heard the poet recite during his lifetime (Hooley (2007) 89). It is impossible to know if such diffidence to recognition would have continued had Persius lived past the age of 27. His predecessor Horace, for example, was at least 29 when he issued *Satires* 1 (c. 35–33 BC), his first book; assertions within it, if taken literally, could lead one to believe that Horace did not pursue publication or performances either (Horace, *Satires* 1.4.22–3) – though we know that he did. After Persius’ death, under the direction of his beloved Stoic teacher Lucius Annaeus Cornutus (see Bryan in this volume), the lyric poet Caesius Bassus edited six complete hexameter satires and a short “prologue” in the choliambic metre for dissemination (664 verses in total). Commentaries were quick to appear. The Roman grammarian and critic Marcus Valerius Probus, a native of Berytus (modern-day Beirut) who flourished during the Flavian dynasty (AD 69–96), was the probable author of the brief extant *Life of Persius* (*Vita Persii*), from which most of what is known of Persius’ life has been gleaned, to accompany his commentary on the poems. (This *Life* has survived on account of its inclusion in manuscripts of Suetonius’ *Lives of the Poets*.) The poet Martial, in epigram 29 of his fourth book, published for the Saturnalia of AD 88, playfully attributes Persius’ popularity to the brevity of his oeuvre. Quintilian’s handbook for rhetorical education *Institutio Oratoria* (c. AD 95) states that even though he wrote only one book, Persius’ reputation is both high and well deserved (10.1.94). Decimus

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Iunius Iuvenalis, or “Juvenal,” (AD 67–130s (?)), the next of the Roman satirists whose works survive, could not but allude to the works of Persius, which were already classics.

Persius continued to be read and enjoyed in the centuries that followed as well: though the satirist certainly had his detractors, the bitter attacks which Marcus Cornelius Fronto (c. AD 95–166) leveled against Lucan in the second century AD, and which many others directed at both Lucan and Juvenal in later antiquity, seem not to have tarnished Persius’ reputation. The *Historia Augusta* spins the tale that the emperor Alexander Severus (AD 222–35) paraphrased from the *Satires* in a letter to the governor of Gaul (*Historia Augusta* Pescennius Niger 3.11; Persius, *Satires* 1.103–4). Severus’ rumored “muttering” (*susurrans*) of a line of Persius seems a singularly appropriate form of recitation (*Historia Augusta* Alexander Severus 44.9; Persius, *Satires* 2.69). Persius frequently refers to muttering in the *Satires* (2.6: *susurros*; 2.6: *murmurque*; 2.9: *murmurat*; 3.81: *murmura*; 5.11: *murmure*), and even conflates this manner of speaking with his own poetic art (“am I forbidden to mutter?” *me muttire nefas*, *Satires* 1.119). The poet’s moralizing ingratiated him with teachers, who used him as a school text, and among Christian fathers, most notably St. Jerome. The sound preservation of the text results from a robust manuscript tradition. Persius retained a readership with relative consistency from late antiquity through the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The *Satires* were among the first printed books. The earliest edition appeared in Rome in 1469 or 1470; 1605 marked the publication of Casaubon’s masterful one. The merits and flaws of the *Satires* were of great interest to John Dryden. Persius influenced Alexander Pope and John Donne; Thomas Sheridan, father of R. B. Sheridan, was among his translators (Frost (1968); Reckford (2009)).

To many of Persius’ recent readers, the poet’s mainstream critical appeal in ages past seems odd: after all, Persius’ writing is, to our sensibilities, some of the most bizarre and inscrutable in the classical canon. Condensed and idiosyncratic syntax, unexpected or discombobulated imagery and rapid shifts in topic make for difficult reading. It is hard to imagine even contemporary, native speakers of Latin digesting Persius’ “strong brew” (*aliquid decoctius*, literally “something more boiled down,” *Satires* 1.125) without struggle. For several decades, however, literary scholars have enlivened us to the possibility that Persius may have adopted this perplexing, even exasperating, style as a means of illustrating his frustration at the distorted, disfigured society around him (e.g. Anderson (1966); Gowers (1994); Freudenburg (2001) 173–83). By cultivating a poetics willfully disjointed, in other words, Persius makes the medium the message. This chapter provides inroads into such notoriously complex poetry by considering the relationship of Persius’ satires to their generic predecessors and analyzing the means by which the poet crafts a unique authorial persona in dialogue with this tradition. After a closer look at an ancient biography of the poet and at each of the seven extant satires, the chapter also discusses Persius’ Stoicism and the poet’s relationships with his literary and political milieus. The challenge these satires pose to the study of Neronian literature and culture lies not only in the idiosyncratic style with which the poet conveys his poetic, moral, and philosophical ideas, but also in Persius’ often seamless integration of allusions to the literary past with reflection upon the troubling concerns of his own time.

Isolation, not just from the literary culture of his day, but also from society at large, is a recurrent theme within Persius’ *Satires* (Ragghianti (2007)). Both his aggressive moralizing and his claim to eschew literary polish in favor of the rough diction of

everyday speech qualities, however, are part of the Roman satirist’s lineage of poetry type of Roman poetry was a little more than the Romans reacted.

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everyday speech present the author as an outsider in Neronian Rome. These very qualities, however, also convey to readers that Persius is an insider within the tradition of Roman satire. By rejecting a posse of contemporaries, Persius joins an intergenerational lineage of poets writing in a unique genre. An understanding of verse satire as a particular type of Roman poetry is crucial to appreciating the ancient contexts in which Persius' poetry was composed, performed, and assessed. Today, the label of "satire" often conveys little more than that an illustration, text, or performance is both humorous and critical. Romans reading Persius' poetry, however, would have understood a narrower meaning.

An anthology of verse in various meters by Quintus Ennius (239–169 BC) is the earliest known work to be called *Saturae*, though it is unclear whether Ennius himself or a later editor chose the title. Diomedes, a grammarian of the fourth century AD, states that Ennius' nephew Pacuvius (220–130 BC) also composed satires. Few fragments survive of Ennius' satires; of Pacuvius' attempts, nothing remains (Flintoff (1990)). The name *satura* almost certainly derives from the Latin adjective *satur*, meaning full or sated. The common employment of this word to describe a dish full to its brim with food for religious offerings, the *lanx satura*, made it an apt choice to characterize the creation of a literary hodgepodge of diverse subjects and forms. Over time, as Roman satirists increasingly defined themselves as castigators of vice, very often including excessive banqueting and gluttony, such culinary echoes took on added resonance.

Today the words "satyr" and "satire" are considered to be etymologically unrelated, but in antiquity, some satiric practitioners and their commentators speculated that the two might share a common origin and drew attention to resemblances between the Roman satirists – aggressive, yet playful, scourges of society – and the mythological satyrs – companions of Dionysus known not only for their appetites for wine and sex and penchant for mischief-making, but also for their wisdom (see discussions in Van Rooy (1965) 2–20; Gowers (1993a) 109–26). Greek "satyr plays" were placed at the end of each series of three tragedies at the Athenian Dionysia to lighten the mood. Like Roman satire, this form of drama pulled back a curtain to reveal the vulgar and banal aspects of life, poking fun, all the while, at loftier, more dignified forms of artistry in which bestial desires and weaknesses remained veiled.

Quintilian, cataloguing literary forms in his *Institutio Oratoria*, draws attention to the special status of satire as the only genre completely Roman in its conception: "satire, at least, is all ours" (*satura, quidem, tota nostra est*, 10.1.93). Like many forms of Latin literature, however, satire took inspiration from Greek prototypes. In formulating the broad social criticisms and biting personal attacks that became trademarks of their genre, Roman satirists were influenced by the invective poets of the seventh to sixth centuries BC, whose surviving works include Hipponax' caustic verses against the sculptor Bupalus (apparently so damaging that Bupalus committed suicide), Archilochus' forceful claims to hate his enemies, and Semonides' extended diatribe against women of various types. As both Horace and Persius attest (Horace, *Satires* 1.4.1–7; Persius 1.123–5), Roman satirists also looked to the fifth-century BC Athenian playwrights of Old Comedy, who mimicked, mocked, and disparaged the prominent men of their city and questioned the value systems that empowered them. Other contributions to the genre came from the diatribes of the Cynic and Stoic philosophers, the gentler New Comedy of the fourth to third century BC, and even Homeric epic. The move to create a new type of Roman literature in response to these Greek influences, nonetheless, was a bold and exceptional one.

The adoption of seemingly self-referential authorial personae, alleged truth-tellers of their own experiences, set Roman satirists apart from the poetic mainstream. This quality has at times beguiled scholars into viewing the world depicted in satire as transparently historical. Satire does, after all, provide our richest poetic source of references to Roman daily life, as well as to the city's cultural, architectural, and social landscapes. Over the past several decades, however, in the wake of William S. Anderson's pivotal scholarship, originating in his doctoral dissertation (1954), scholars have been increasingly aware of the flexibility with which Roman satirists assume a panoply of roles, including preacher, censor, friend, reprobate, clown, philosopher, and teacher, as well as the rapidity with which their tone can change – from angry to jovial, from thoughtful to bored (Braund (1996)). Shape-shifting of this kind makes satire seem less open-heartedly confessional. Not unlike the oratory, drama, or pedagogy that were all important influences upon it (Keane (2006)), satire relies upon the performance of multiple personae, the art of self-fashioning, the masquerade.

Gaius Lucilius (d. 103/102 BC) deserves the title of founder of the genre; while preserving the sense of smorgasbord or medley, his poetry also established numerous emblematic features of Roman satire, including the predominant use of dactylic hexameter, an assertively critical authorial persona, and a thematic interest in the limits of free speech (*libertas*). Satire, in his wake, became highly self-reflexive; his literary successors continually reconsider the definition of the genre and their places within it (Freudenburg (2001)). Lucilius' 30 books of satires were widely read and quoted at many points during antiquity. Only around 1,400 lines survive, in fragments. Written in a conversational voice, the satires are rife with acute witticisms, racy personal anecdotes, sensationalist rumors, and insults leveled against contemporaries. Generally agreed to have been born into an affluent family of senatorial status, Lucilius exercised his privilege by acquiring and enjoying powerful friendships, including that of P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus, destroyer of Carthage in 146 BC, rather than by seeking office himself. The sense of security that accompanied his social position, it is often thought, also emboldened him to follow the Greek invective poets in reviling by name those who had committed offences great (such as political corruption) and small (for example, neglecting to visit the poet during his illness) (Gruen (1993)).

The reverence in which the Romans held Lucilius' works, and the charisma of his unique authorial voice, may have made it difficult to follow in his footsteps. Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65–8 BC), or Horace, achieved that feat in two books of satires (c. 35–33 and 30 BC), by contradicting the standards set by Lucilius as often as he heeded them (Muecke (2007)). The circumstances under which Horace wrote satire were decidedly different from those that gave rise to his literary forebear. A member of the generation who lived through the bloody and divisive transition from Republic to Principate, Horace was keenly aware of new restrictions placed on free speech. Horace was, so we understand both from his *Satires* and from a *Life* composed by Suetonius, a freedman's son born in Venusia in Apulia. Well educated in Rome and Athens, Horace fought in Brutus' army, the losing side at Philippi in 42 BC. Through the recommendations of Virgil and Varius, he nevertheless entered the patronage of Maecenas and, eventually, Augustus. The *Satires* and *Epodes*, his earliest works, represent a period when both Horace's status and the political situation at Rome were in flux. As a financial and social dependent of more powerful men, Horace was hardly in a

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position to write freewheeling, controversial satire in the Lucilian vein (Oliensis (1998); Freudenburg (2001) 15–124). Horace's *Satires* convey familiarity through the narration of supposedly personal experiences: the poet takes readers on both a short walk and a long journey and, without friendship-endangering indiscretions, allows them to listen in on conversations and witness his most private and corporeal embarrassments (Gowers (2003)). Such self-presentation, nonetheless, appears guarded in the wake of Lucilius. When the whipping boy and the speaker consistently are one, satire loses some of its edge. Rather than identifying this as a limitation to *libertas*, Horace argues for the superiority of judicious restraint. Allusions to contemporary politics are, for the most part, glancing and coy. In an Epicurean manner, Horatian satire makes the case that true freedom lies in the escape from political involvement into the calm and leisure of the private realm (Gowers (1993b)).

Lucilius' legacy is pervasive in Horace's *Satires*, both when openly acknowledged and confronted and when evoked in setting, theme, or subject matter. Yet where Lucilius' temper was volatile, Horace remains placid and bemused in the satires he entitled *Sermones*, or "Chats." Lucilius was a gossip; Horace refrains from divulging details of his famous friends' lives, adhering to the mundane particulars of his own experience even when narrating a shared journey rife with political intrigue (Horace, *Satires* 1.5). Horace followed Lucilius' example in attacking vice in generalized, philosophical terms, much less often than he indulged Lucilius' penchant for pointing fingers. Lucilius was prolific; Horace likens his forefather's verbosity to a muddy stream overburdened with silt (*Satires* 1.10.50–51). Roman poets of the late Republic had adopted principles of succinctness and artistic control in admiration for the third-century BC scholar and poet Callimachus, who encouraged the cultivation of a "slender Muse" (Zetzel (2002)). In Horace's hands, satire became a more meticulous and concise form of poetry, and thus an outgrowth of the Hellenistic literary aesthetics popular during his own time (Freudenburg (1993)).

Persius was certainly not alone among his contemporaries in writing in a sarcastic or critical mode. Two works of so-called "Menippean satire" (a mix of prose and verse) survive from the Neronian period, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and Petronius' *Satyricon* (see Whitton and Murgatroyd in this volume). Persius' *Satires*, however, stand apart from these in their interest in the tradition – and adherence to the form – of verse satire. On account of the fragmentary state of Lucilius' poetry, the full extent of Horace's debt to that earlier satirist remains unknown. Persius' relationship with Horace's well-preserved satires, by contrast, amply rewards study in detail (see especially Hooley (1997)). Persius provides his reader with a brief outline of his views on Lucilius and Horace: the former uses his teeth to tear into "the City" and breaks a molar on his targets Lupus and Mucius; the latter prefers less aggressive actions, the moral superiority of dangling the public from a "blown nose" and the subtlety of seizing a moment while a friend is laughing to finger the friend's hidden vices (Persius, *Satires* 1.114–118). In general, however, Persius' satires eschew the kind of programmatic statements used by Horace to situate himself in relation to Lucilius. Persius favors continual, pointed references that turn Horatian words, phrases, lines, situations, and themes on their heads. The Neronian satirist presumes readers' exhaustive familiarity with Horace's *Odes* and *Epistles*, as well as his *Satires*. Evocations of Horace suffuse nearly every line of Persius. In spite of this, there is no danger of confusing two satirists of such disparate styles. The effect may be

summed up in Persius' claim to be "skilled at the harsh juxtaposition" (*iunctura callidus acri*, *Satires* 5.14), a spin on Horace's poetic advice to pursue the "skilful juxtaposition" (*callida... iunctura*, Horace, *Ars Poetica* 47–8) that points up Persius' quite different aesthetic aims. Persius, whose poetic persona does not share Horace's calm and steady demeanor, transforms Horace's sunny vista on humanity into a nightmare vision of disgust and despair. People are inherently wicked (2.63), and little can be done to redeem them. Persius characterizes himself as adept at giving fading morals a good scrub and at striking at a defect with candid humor (5.15–16).

The previously established satiric trend towards a narrowing of word count and a decline in apparent candor continued with Persius. Contrast Horace's over 2000 lines of satire with Persius' fewer than 700. In comparison with the satires of Lucilius and Horace, Persius' poetry provides strikingly few of the kind of intimate details and views on contemporary persons and events that once were read as transparently autobiographical and now more often are considered the hallmarks of a carefully crafted literary persona. Often when Persius employs an anecdotal mode, he takes pains to mar any sense of intimacy. In the dialogue between a hungover student and a disapproving interlocutor (*Satire* 3), for example, the satirist switches masks at a dizzying pace and it is impossible to know for sure whether one or both nameless characters is to be identified with the poet. While Horace's satires praise the character of his patron Maecenas and colorfully illustrate the inner sensations of the poet during their first encounter (Horace, *Satire* 1.6), Persius' celebration of his mentor Cornutus focuses upon their philosophical and astrological compatibility, with little in the way of individualizing details (Persius, *Satire* 5). Moral generalities, rather than distinct characters, form the core of Persius' *Satires*. Persius' contribution to the genre of satire was to pull away from personalized details and stories in favor of stock caricatures (e.g. the centurion, the wealthy man, the grandmother) and generalized harangues that encourage readers to look inward while keeping the author's own private world out of view.

What we know about the poet's life largely derives from Probus' brief *Life of Persius* (*Vita Persii*). For some readers, this *Life* has compensated for Persius' disinclination towards the personal anecdote by creating a sense of familiarity with the poet himself. Thus, in 1909, H. E. Butler said that it was "possible to form a clearer picture of the personality of Aulus Persius Flaccus, the satirist, than of any other poet of the Silver Age" (Butler (1969) 79). Most scholars today, however, would wager that the author of the *Life* invented or embellished many details, for instance that Persius was of "mildest manner, virginal bashfulness and good looks" (*morum lenissimorum, verecundiae virginalis, formae pulchrae*), in order to heighten the moral color, human interest, or rhetorical effect of the portrait. Even so, it remains customary to consider the *Life* reliable in its representation of the basic facts and general outline of Persius' life. From it, we learn that Persius was a wealthy member of the equestrian class and a native of the city of Volaterrae (present-day Volterra) on the western coast of Italy, in Etruria. This account of his origins coheres well with his Etruscan *praenomen* Aules, sometimes Latinized as "Aulus," and the Etruscan name of his mother Fulvia Sisennia. It also adds humor to the Stoic interlocutor's snide references to both the Etruscan pedigree and equestrian status of the lazy student of the third satire (*Satires* 3.27–9).

The Persii, relatives of the Caecinae, appear to have been a leading family of Volaterrae. As would have been customary for men of his status, Persius was educated in

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Rome by prominent pedagogues from the age of 12. He studied under both Remmius Palaemon, one of Rome's most prominent teachers (whom Suetonius renders as a kind of satiric caricature on account of his reputation for luxury (*On Grammarians* 23)), and Verginius Flavus, who authored a well-received text on rhetoric (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 7.4.40). The *Life* also suggests that Persius, who it seems was not politically ambitious, lived a somewhat secluded philosophical and literary life (though trips to Rome must have been frequent) and died on his ancestral estate.

The *Life* emphasizes Persius' close relationship with his mother, his sister (or perhaps sisters – the narrative is inconsistent), and his aunts. We read not only that Persius' father died when the poet was six, but also that his stepfather Fusius perished soon after marrying Sisennia. Many scholars have noted that these details (coupled with the above-mentioned description of the poet's sweet nature) create an impression of Persius as coddled and sheltered, just "one of the girls." However, they also implicitly contrast the home life of Persius with that of his satiric predecessor Horace (who emphasizes the positive moral influence and academic support of his father in *Satire* 1.6) and pave the way for highlighting the importance of Persius' scholarly mentors. The *Life* explicitly mentions, for example, that Persius honored the historian Servilius Nonianus as a father (*Coluit ut patrem Servilium Nonianum*). It also describes Cornutus as the poet's constant companion. The social status of Persius, a man of independent means without need of a patron, was more like that of Maecenas, another well-connected Etruscan equestrian, than like that of Horace. While Horace repeatedly thanks his patron and companion Maecenas, Persius offers a similar expression of thanks to Cornutus (*Satire* 5).

The *Life* portrays Persius not as friendless and reclusive, but rather as nested within a diverse group of intellectuals. Many of these acquaintances may well have originated from the foot traffic at Cornutus' house, where Persius met the physician Claudius Agathurnus and Petronius Aristocrates of Magnesia, who became his friends. Regarding two other acquaintances of Persius whom the poet presumably encountered at this house, the *Life* offers choice gossip: Lucan, it seems, was a great fan of Persius' poetry, and Persius no admirer of Seneca. Cornutus was not just a guiding influence during Persius' life, but also the architect of the poet's legacy after his death. The *Life* informs us that Cornutus advised the poet's mother to destroy a *praetexta*, or historical drama on a Roman topic, which Persius wrote early in his career, as well as another work that was perhaps an account of Persius' own travels (the manuscript tradition is corrupted), and a few verses on the elder Arria, the wife of Caecina Paetus.

A summary of Persius' extant poems can do only partial justice to the variety of themes and imagery contained within them. In 14 lines usually considered a prologue (though in some manuscripts they conclude the book), the poet fails to fulfill expectations: he does not declare his satiric principles or objectives; he does not catalog a litany of vices to be condemned. Instead of the standard dactylic hexameter, Persius opts for choliambics, referred to as "limping iambs" because of modifications to the stress in the last foot of each line. The Greek invective poet Hipponax pioneered the meter, which both Callimachus and Horace later adopted. In the opening lines, Persius denies that he patterns himself according to standard models of the poet who receives divine inspiration at Hippocrene (in Greek, "the horse's spring"), on Mount Helicon, or by sleeping at a sacred place: "I neither moistened my lips at the horse's spring, nor do I remember dreaming on twin-peaked Parnassus, so that I might, suddenly, spring forth

a poet" (*Nec fonte labra prolui caballino / nec in bicipiti somniasse Parnaso / memini, ut repente sic poeta prodirem*, Preface 1–3). The allusion to Parnassus, which had one peak dedicated to Apollo and the other to Dionysus, as a locus of poetry-making is unsurprising. Yet according to tradition, such dreams occurred on Mount Helicon. By mangling the tradition, Persius demonstrates his indifference, or even scorn (but see other interpretive possibilities in Freudenburg (2001) 134–6). The targets of such abuse are not the canonical poets who originated such practices, but rather the poetasters he likens to magpies and ravens (Preface 13–14), the contemptible mimics who aspire to style, neglecting substance.

Criticism and disavowal of contemporary Roman literary society continues in *Satire 1* (134 lines). The satirist rejects numerous potential audiences. Only fans of Old Comedy, he admits near the end of the poem, might be able to stomach him (*Satires* 1.123–5). Somewhat paradoxically, Persius also voices frustration at the limitations placed on his free expression, which keep him silent, or at least bar him from telling a prized secret. Though presumably Persius could summon the *gravitas* of the satiric tradition to ennoble his desire to divulge, he instead belittles the urge, likening it to the impulses of children to urinate in public (*Satires* 1.113–14) – an allusion to the description of the mad poet in Horace's *Ars Poetica* ("Nor is it completely clear why he habitually composes verses, whether he has urinated on ancestral ashes or has sinfully discomposed a sacred place. He is definitely crazy," *nec satis apparet cur versus factitet, utrum / minxerit in patrios cineres, an triste bidental / moverit incestus. certe furit, Ars Poetica* 470–72). Suspense in this first satire builds around Persius' secret, which ultimately slips out: "is there anyone who does not have donkey's ears?" (*auriculas asini quis non habet, Satires* 1.121). Can this universal critique of humanity really have been such a skeleton in the poet's closet? There was a rumor in antiquity that during the course of preparing the *Satires* for publication, Cornutus modified a line written by Persius, "King Midas has donkey's ears" (*auriculas asini Mida rex habet*) to the more open-ended version that appears in all the manuscripts (*Satires* 1.121), for the reason that such an explicit reference to the ruler with the golden touch might be read not as a condemnation of undiscerning patrons in general, but as a gibe against Nero (*Vita Persii*). Persius seems to court precisely this kind of intrigue by delaying the revelation and emphasizing the stakes that surround it. He will not even whisper it into a hole in the ground (*Satires* 1.119–20), like the barber who divulged Midas' secret was known to have done.

Persius could hardly have criticized the living Nero in bald terms. Rather, the satirist's talent lies in lodging possible insults to Nero just below the surface (Sullivan (1978); Gowers (1994); Freudenburg (2001) 125–298). Should the "belly" named as the "art director and talent scout" of bad poets, for instance, be identified with the corpulent ruler (*magister artis ingenique largitor / venter*, Preface 10–11)? Any contemporary of Persius who might have interpreted the *Satires* as slander against Nero would have exposed him- or herself as an imperial detractor. The overblown and clichéd poetic quotations at *Satires* 1.99–102, possibly excerpted from Nero's own works, might be an exception to Persius' discretion. Suetonius claims to have had access to some of Nero's poetry (*Nero* 52), but does not quote it. The epigrammatist Martial employs the jargon of an earlier generation of Hellenistic poets at Rome, the Neoterics, to characterize the emperor's literary pretensions ("learned," *doctus*, Martial 8.70.8). Whether or not the

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lines in Persius' *Satire* 1.99–102 are Nero's, the blunt force of Persius' literary criticism falls hard against the Greek-inspired principles his ruler cherished.

Persius' only overt reference to a Roman emperor is an assertion of eagerness to make a contribution towards Caligula's triumph (*Satires* 6.43). It may be true that the similarities between the young Caligula and the young Nero make Persius' sarcastic enthusiasm for Caligula's triumph an implicit criticism of Nero. Crucially, however, Persius keeps his tone ambiguous in order to rest the similarity or difference between the two rulers in the eyes of the beholder. Persius composed his *Satires* during the first years of Nero's reign, when the emperor's reputation was not yet spoiled – thus any reflection on Nero in these lines should be located along a spectrum of developing opinions, at a time when, in some corners, enthusiasm for Nero was certainly strong (Freudenburg (2001) 127). Indiscernibility of this kind is a carefully crafted feature of Persius' poetics, as is superfluous or exaggerated secrecy, as seen in Persius' beckoning to his interlocutor to come away from the crowd in order to hear a secret everyone knows (*Satires* 6.41–2). In light of this, the satirist's self-identification as a secret-keeper in *Satire* 1 seems like a programmatic statement.

Disparagement of contemporary society continues in *Satire* 2 (75 lines), introduced as a birthday-poem in honor of his friend Plotius Macrinus, but principally concerned with the wickedness of others. Persius imports the tone and subject matter of "diatribe" (works of popular moral philosophy, often originating in street address or teaching contexts and focusing on singular vices) into the form of verse satire. Numerous precedents in Horace's *Satires* shape Persius' approach to the diatribe tradition (Horace, *Satires* 1.1–3, 2.2, 2.3, 2.7). Moreover, Persius' *Satire* 2 would later lend its theme, vain prayers, to Juvenal's well-known *Satire* 10. *Satire* 2 calls attention to the superficiality of most peoples' prayers, whispered entreaties to the gods for such selfish things as the death of a rich relative from whom they might inherit (2.9–10). Persius undercuts individuals' attempts to bribe the divine; adopting a haughty stance, he supports only such offerings as "justice and right conjoined in the spirit" (*compositum ius fasque animo*, 2.73).

The two satires that follow structure diatribe as a conversation in a manner reminiscent of Horace's *Satires* 2.3 and 2.7. In Persius' *Satire* 3 (118 lines), a hungover student is awoken by an interlocutor, perhaps an overbearing friend or his own conscience, who excoriates the drunkard and encourages him to get back to his studies. This unnamed person sternly reminds the student of Stoic principles. Sensing resistance, he employs graphic and grotesque medical imagery – a sore (*Satires* 3.113); boiling blood (*Satires* 3.116) – in order to illustrate the dangers of giving into the madness of a pleasure-seeking, lazy, and superficial life. The brief *Satire* 4 (52 lines) is an adaptation of *Alcibiades* 1, a dialogue attributed to Plato (Denyer (2001)). A Socrates figure cautions Alcibiades not to give way to external flatteries; instead the young politician should direct his attention inward, in order to contemplate virtue.

Satire 5 is the longest (191 lines) and can be said to consist of two parts. The first (5.1–51) contains a conversation between the poet and his Stoic teacher Cornutus, in which each confirms his regard for the other. It is believed that Persius met Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, of Leptis in Africa, shortly after he assumed the *toga virilis* (on his sixteenth birthday). Cornutus, whose birth and death dates are unknown, was presumably a freedman of the Annaei, the family of Seneca and his nephew Lucan, who was Cornutus' pupil (Most (1989)). An extremely learned man, Cornutus was

knowledgeable in philosophy, rhetoric, and grammar. He also gained renown as a tragedian; possibly he wrote satire as well. Cornutus' main influence upon Persius' poetry, however, was as an instructor in Stoicism. In a description of their encounter, which harkens back to Horace's description of his first meeting with Maecenas in *Satire* 1.6, Persius describes Cornutus' mentorship as a "Socratic embrace" using a phrase that embraces the very name of Cornutus (*Socratico, Cornute, sinu*, 5.37). It is in tribute to their shared Stoicism that Persius devotes almost the entirety of *Satire* 5 to philosophical concerns: the second part of *Satire* 5, after a narrative bridge (5.52–72) of generalities about humankind, which champions the value of philosophy, adapts the theme of Horace's *Satire* 2.7, in order to present an extended meditation on the Stoic paradox that only the sage is free and every fool a slave to weakness of some kind (*Satires* 5.73–191).

Satire 6 (80 lines) is an experiment in letter-writing; Persius writes from the Ligurian coast to his friend the poet Caesius Bassus, who is, in Horatian style, at a Sabine retreat. Persius' theme is living a comfortable life without greed. The satire thus matches a Horatian theme (the "golden mean") to Horace's – perhaps also Lucilius' – signature epistolary style in order to address a scholar of Horace's poetry and imitator of Horace's *Odes*. The blunt force of Persius' anger and criticism is dulled in this final poem, though the satire does roundly criticize the hopes of a hypothetical heir. These lines may also comment on Persius' problematic position as both an heir to the genre and a conveyor of the tradition to future generations of satirists.

Though Persius was long classified as the "Stoic satirist" and believed to have pursued philosophy "with an ardour beyond that conventionally thought proper by the Romans" (Jenkinson (1980) 1), current scholarship emphasizes the playful attitude and degree of freedom with which Persius both reconfigured and questioned Stoic doctrine (Cucchiarelli (2005)). Authorial personae within Roman satire could hardly absent themselves, or their chosen creeds, from mockery. Persius conforms to this convention in *Satire* 3, in which the satirist can plausibly be identified with the figure of a lazy and hungover Stoic student. We may also note the centurion at the end of *Satire* 5, whose coarse laughter may or may not undercut the seriousness of the intense philosophical admonitions that precede it (5.189–91). In *Satire* 6, moreover, the authorial persona seems to lack commitment to any dogma, relying instead upon the conventions and sentiments of a Horatian epistle to dictate an interest in countryside leisure.

The injection of Stoic commonplaces, paradoxes, and metaphors into Persius' verse, nevertheless serves as one of the Neronian satirist's greatest departures from his predecessor. Stoic sages and teachers elicit scorn in Horace's *Satires*. Epicureanism as championed by Horace, a gently rambling high road, strongly contrasts with Stoicism as promoted by Persius, an uphill struggle, beset with brambles (Gowers (1993a) 180–81). Stoic influence is most apparent in *Satires* 3 and 4, where Persius alludes to his Stoic education, and in *Satire* 5, where the satirist identifies himself as having been, at one time, a Stoic student and espouses many Stoic tenets. Persius' harangues against all manner of folly, including weakness, greed, self-indulgence, ambition, gluttony, laziness, hypocrisy, and decadence, sound to us like angry sermons or moral essays. Ancient readers would have recognized the subject matter of Stoic diatribe. Graphic images of sex, violence, and bodily functions, for instance, call to mind the didactic strategies used by Stoic moralists to turn their audiences against vice. Persius' description of the insidious nature of vice

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and the danger it poses to the moral self evokes Stoic wisdom (*Satires* 3.32–4). The satirist urges his readers to become more ethical through self-criticism, to learn to know themselves: “spit out what you are not” (*respue quod non es*, *Satires* 4.51). In a Stoic manner, he associates wrongdoing with insanity. While Horace had poked fun at the Stoic maxim that only a wise man is sane (Horace *Satires* 2.3.43–6), Persius presents it as gospel. Manifesting a concern central to both Stoics and satirists, Persius encourages his readers to uncover hidden flaws and unmask disguised ones (*Satires* 3.113–14; 4.44–5).

Persius was not a philosopher: his *Satires* do little to nuance or advance the creed. Their contribution, rather, is to embed Stoicism within an artistic medium where it had not previously found a voice. Persius’ treatment of the figure of the “ambitious builder,” or patron of decadent private architecture often targeted by Stoic moralists, exemplifies this process of recontextualization. In the *Satires* we find no coherent, clichéd portrait of a homeowner who bedecks his oversized house with costly furnishings and elaborate wall paintings carried out in exorbitant pigments (Edwards (1993)). Rather, Persius intersperses motifs from Roman moralizing in passing, in a manner that assumes his readers’ familiarity (and even satiety) with the discourse. He conveys the over-stylization and excessiveness of contemporary literature by likening it, in *Satire* 1, to an extremely expensive type of furniture: “in short, really, is it not engraved on citron-wood couches?” (*non quidquid denique lectis / scribitur in citreis*, 1.52–3) and, in *Satire* 5, to a painted wall: “you [Cornutus] are on your guard to distinguish between what rings solid and the stucco of a painted tongue” (*dinoscere cautus / quid solidum crepet et pictae tectoria linguae*, 5.24–5). A fragment of Lucilian satire (84–5, Warmington), which compares speech ornamented with Graecisms to a tessellated pavement, confirms that images from the decorative arts entered the critical repertoire of the Roman satirists early on. Much more frequently, however, Persius uses culinary, corporeal, and medical imagery to convey judgments that are both aesthetic and moral. The human body provides Persius with some of his most distinctive and memorable descriptions: the recitation audience-member’s ejaculating eye (1.18); a greedy heart, trembling with pleasure, that shakes out drops from the left breast (2.53–4); the bottle-green bile of a hungover student (3.8); the vain attempts of the nudist to groom his pubic and buttock hair (4.33–41); the centurions both bulging-veined (5.189) and smelly (3.77); the would-be heir, stuffed with goose innards, whose sexual intercourse with a patrician woman is described in gory detail (6.71–3).

Persius declares that his self-consciously harsh poetry, if his audience will allow their ears to be violated by it (1.107–8), can be artistically, as well as morally, corrective. By the time Persius was composing satires, almost a century after Horace, the Hellenistic literary trend towards erudite, polished verse had, so the poet tells us, become horribly clichéd. Nero’s enthusiasm for the slender Muse, an extension of his notorious fascination with Greece and Greek artistry, could only have deepened the taint. As literary critics, Persius and Petronius seem to have been likeminded: admirers of Horace and Virgil, neither had much patience for the oratory or epic of his Neronian contemporaries. To aid his defense of the natural cadences of Latin, Persius arouses his readers’ patriotic spirit: the diction of the *Satires* is “speech characteristic of the toga” (*verba togae*, *Satires* 5.14). *Satire* 5 swears off elevated genres: “let those about to declaim in the grand style bring together the clouds of Helicon, if there are some who want to boil the pot of Procne, or of Thyestes for the frequent dinner-parties of unsalted Glyco” (*grande*

locuturi nebulas Helicone legunto, / si quibus aut Procnes aut si quibus olla Thyestae / fervebit saepe insulso cenanda Glyconi, 5.7–9). In these lines, Persius dismisses the tragic genre (alluded to in the mention of Procne and Thyestes, both characters in tragic stories in which people are cooked and served as a meal for revenge), especially when practiced by Glyco, supposedly a famous tragic actor of the first century AD. He also repeats a gesture previously seen in his choliambic prologue: that of shrugging off the Muses (the inhabitants of Mount Helicon). In the prologue, Persius renounces a fountain in Corinth favored both by Pegasus (sacred to the Muses), and by poets in search of inspiration: “the Heliconians and grey-green Pirene I leave to those whose busts the tenacious ivy licks” (*Heliconidasque pallidamque Pirenen / illis remitto quorum imagines lambunt / hederæ sequaces*, Preface 4–6). The poet, in other words, does not aspire to the honor of a bust overgrown with ivy displayed in some library or courtyard.

In order to contrast himself with the magpies who seek to imitate grand verse in the Ennian epic vein, the role Persius proposes for himself in the prologue is that of a *semipaganus*. This word might be translated “half-rustic” or “semi-yokel,” perhaps even “half-poet.” The obscurity of the term, which Persius may have coined for the occasion, was surely intentional. *Semipaganus* smacks of simplicity and rural concerns, the proffered values of the Roman moralists; it conveys disdain for lofty, artificial literary genres; it perhaps even hints at Persius’ own semi-provincial upbringing between Rome and the Italian town of Volaterrae (the Paganalia was the Roman public festival of the *pagi*, or village communities). Yet the very evasiveness and irresolution (*semi-*) of the label make a separate point: that Persius will be a poet who confuses and confounds, and one who avoids categorization. While it is true that Persius does not use many Graecisms and, in fact, makes fun of others who do, it is important to stress that his concentrated idiom was far removed from anything spoken on the street, even by the most educated. He frequently, for example, uses a verb’s infinitive as a substantive (“that unhappy life of ours,” *nostrum istud vivere triste*, 1.9). Furthermore, though he feigns disdain for stuffy literary erudition, Persius’ poetry, in which nearly every line contains an echo of Horace, is as allusive as any in the classical tradition (Hooley (1997)).

Persius’ Stoicism, which he shared in common with many imperial dissidents, and his criticism of the literary culture and aesthetics encouraged by Nero have led scholars to speculate that had he lived further into Nero’s reign, Persius would surely have been exiled or killed, in spite of his reclusiveness. The number of Persius’ friends or acquaintances named in the *Life* who ended up on the emperor’s bad side elevates suspicion still further. The elder Arria, memorialized in the extant Martial 1.13 and mentioned above as the subject of lost verses by Persius, became a kind of Stoic martyr. Arria not only committed suicide alongside her condemned husband Caecina Paetus, but even inspired his courage by setting the example. She was also a distant relative of Persius and the mother-in-law of Persius’ close friend, Thræsea Paetus. From the *Life*, we learn that Persius was very close to and travelled with Thræsea Paetus, who like many Neronian dissenters held staunch Stoic beliefs. Thræsea Paetus was forced to commit suicide in AD 66 on account of his opposition to the state. Both Seneca and Lucan were said to have been involved in the “Pisonian conspiracy” and were, once Nero uncovered the plot in AD 65, compelled to commit suicide. The two teachers under whom Persius had studied who were still alive at the time, Verginius Flavus and Cornutus, were banished.

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Nero exiled Cornutus to an island in AD 65, reportedly on account of his impudence in suggesting that Nero's planned epic on Roman history would be too long: at 400 books, could it garner a readership? One of Nero's flatterers interjected that the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus had written much more, a fact that could hardly have been unfamiliar to Cornutus, who, we learn from the *Life of Persius*, had recently received 700 volumes of that very author from Persius' will. Cornutus' fate was sealed when he protested that Chrysippus' philosophy provided important life lessons, thereby implying that Nero's history would not (Dio 62.29). Cornutus' relationship with Nero and proximity to his circle, both during Persius' life and after it, are not well understood. We are left to wonder, if Persius had survived past AD 62, would he have joined his mentor in open mockery of the emperor?

The differences among Lucilius, Horace, and Persius shed light not only upon the tension between tradition and innovation in Latin poetry, but also upon the disparities among their social and political circumstances. While Lucilius had exploited the freedoms of a private citizen and man of leisure under the Republic, Horace wrote to maintain patronage and favor during the uncertain early years of Octavian's rule, when personal liberties became increasingly restricted. (Augustus looked over criticisms of himself, but he was known for book burning, when criticisms of his friends and associates were made known to him. The pamphleteer Cassius Severus was exiled for just such an offence.) The highly restricted nature of Persius' description of Roman personages and politics may be considered evidence of the difficulty inherent, even for a man of means, in keeping one's distance from the court once the 21-year-old Nero had established his circle in AD 59. The authorial personae of Horace, Persius, and later Juvenal, thus appear to have been self-consciously fashioned as mourners of the Republic and of *libertas*, who looked to Lucilius' satires as the original and true craft (Freudenburg (1993) 86–102; Keane (2006) 9).

Such readings of individual satirists, though intriguing, can become circular in their logic, as it is impossible to test the veracity of each against the work of other satirists of the same period to see if the hypothesis holds true. What we know about the Roman world is so informed by Roman satire that to use this "world" as a means of understanding satire becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Freudenburg (2001) 125). Nevertheless, Persius, who provides unique insight into the early period of Nero's reign, when the emperor's toxic reputation of later years was yet unformed, remains a prized informant on Neronian literature and politics as much for what his satires evade as for what they express. Through an ineffable medley of allusions, ideas, styles, and tones, they provide a glimpse into the variety – cacophony, even – of cultural influences in Neronian Rome.

FURTHER READING

The prevailing Latin edition of Persius is Clausen (1956); the most detailed commentary is Kissel (1990) (in German). See Clausen and Zetzel (2004) on the *Commentum Cornuti*, a collection of early exegesis on Persius probably compiled in the ninth century, and Zetzel (2005) for additional scholia. Students looking for an English guide to the poems should consult Harvey (1981), or the translations and commentaries accompanying the Latin editions of Jenkinson (1980) and Barr and Lee (1987). See Morford (1984) 97–107 on the critical history and literary influence of the