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Laronia's revenge: A female interlocutor in Juvenal's *Satire 2*

In the course of the invective against hypocrisy in Satire *2, Laronia, the only female interlocutor in Juvenal's corpus to deliver a longer monologue, emerges to speak. In line with the overall theme of the satire, her 26-line speech targets hypocritical, effeminate men who conceal their true sexual identity. The role of these men in* Satire *2 parallels the portrayal of Roman women in* Satire *6, as in both cases the narrator focuses on them while presenting a central 'sin' (hypocrisy and infidelity, respectively), alongside other minor transgressions (e.g., distortion of religious rites, conduct unworthy of the Roman elite). However, this does not imply that they are the sole perpetrators of these transgressions, nor that they bear exclusive responsibility for such phenomena.*

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The accusation of homophobia, primarily grounded in Satires 2 and 9, repeatedly emerges in scholarly research concerning Juvenal's satires, his narrator, and the poet himself.[1] In this paper, I examine the former text, focusing on a seemingly minor character, Laronia, who delivers her speech between lines 37 and 63. In identifying the primary target of Satire 2's invective, two possible interpretations arise: on the one hand, the satire criticizes hypocrisy and moral inconsistency; on the other

[1] To cite just a few examples: Fone (2000: 54): 'All this derision of *pathici* and *cinaedi* foreshadows some darker chapters in human history…'; Braund (2004: 230): 'Juvenal's satiric persona is the same angry extremist, with the addition of misogyny to his homophobia, chauvinism, and other bigotries.'

hand, its central figures are men perceived as effeminate and engaging in same-sex relationships.[2] The invective tone towards these men is strikingly harsh, and at some points seems particularly homophobic to the modern reader, as the following passage demonstrates:

> castigas turpia, cum sis
> inter Socraticos notissima fossa cinaedos?
> hispida membra quidem et durae per bracchia saetae
> promittunt atrocem animum, sed podice leui
> caeduntur tumidae medico ridente mariscae.
> (Juv. 2, 9–13)[3]

In these opening lines, the satirical narrator expresses his desire to flee from Rome to the farthest corners of the world, frustrated by the hypocrites of the city who pretend to be protectors of morality despite being guilty of sexual immorality.[4] Starting from line 21, other (primarily historical) examples of hypocrisy are presented before Laronia takes the stage, delivering the longest speech by a female speaker in the Juvenalian Satires. The key motif of the next section is once again hypocrisy and inconsistency, centering on the effeminate Creticus orating in the court. Before presenting an inverted ritual of Bona Dea performed solely by men, the satirist draws a contrast between the civil war fought by the

[2] For the sake of simplicity, they will be referred to as homosexual men, while acknowledging the limitations of applying this concept in the context of ancient Rome. See e.g. Williams (2010: 4–6).

[3] 'You condemn shameful acts, yet yours is the most infamous hole of all the Socratic faggots! Hairy legs and stiff bristles all along your arms suggest a rugged spirit beneath, but then a doctor cuts swollen haemorrhoids from your smooth butthole with a smirk.'

[4] It should be noted that when addressing roles, thoughts, ideas, and behaviours, and referring to them as sin, crime, or guilt, no personal value judgment is intended; rather, the views presented are inferred from the utterances of the narrator and the interlocutor.

effeminate Emperor Otho and the antics he displayed on the battlefield.

From line 117, Juvenal introduces Gracchus, a former Salian priest who becomes the wife of a horn player in a ceremony featuring typical wedding elements. The narrator considers the story outrageous, but he focuses primarily on the male bride, referring to him as a wife and employing other terms of feminine grammatical gender to describe him. It is also worth noting that this story is not Gracchus' greatest 'crime' according to the narrator, as he continues his speech with the words *vicit et hoc monstrum* (143), meaning 'Gracchus surpassed even this monstrosity', before recounting how Gracchus presented himself as a gladiator, despite being a noble from an esteemed family. Both of Gracchus' actions that provoke the narrator's indignation share a common feature: in each case, Gracchus' role is incongruous with his birth. The role of a gladiator and noble ancestry, as well as the gladiatorial attire and the toga, are as incongruous with each other as the role of a bride is with being a man, or as a bridal gown is with the cultic attire of the Salian priests. This is what the narrator refers to as a 'great crime', a *nefas tantum* (127): a nobleman becoming a wife, and moreover, the wife of a man of lower status.

In the conclusion of the satire, Juvenal asks the reader to imagine that the Underworld, the realm of Pluto, does indeed exist, and contrasts the spirits of the effeminate men of contemporary Rome with the shades of great Roman heroes. He concludes the satire with an unexpected twist: the narrator, who frequently expresses opinions that seem xenophobic, ends his speech with the bitter realization that the decayed morals of the Eternal City will corrupt even the young foreigners brought to Rome as hostages from the East.[5]

For the interpretation of the satire, Juvenal's most famous poem, the 700-line *Satire 6* on marital infidelity should be considered, as the two

[5] For a detailed discussion of the xenophobia of the Juvenalian narrator, see Gellérfi (2019) and the sources cited therein.

texts share several parallels.[6] Both satires focus on a specific group within society, which forms the basis of accusations of discrimination against Juvenal: the protagonists of *Satire 6* are Roman wives, while in *Satire 2*, the main characters are men engaged in same-sex relationships. However, in *Satire 6*, Roman women are not criticized solely on the basis of their sex, and strong arguments can be made against an interpretation that views the text and its speaker as clearly misogynistic.[7] Similarly, the primary reason for the attack on the men in *Satire 2* is not their sexual orientation, but their hypocrisy, just as the women in *Satire 6* are reproached for their infidelity. In addition to the presence of hypocrites in *Satire 6* and the theme of marriage in *Satire 2*, both texts explore what might be termed 'secondary themes' that are related to the central sin—hypocrisy and infidelity. Shared themes include the corruption of religious rituals,[8] the portrayal of individuals acting in ways unworthy of their ancestry or status,[9] and the spread of Rome's moral decadence to the more distant parts of the Empire.[10] While these are overarching characteristics of Juvenal's Rome, they are not presented from a general perspective in these satires; instead, the focus is placed on a specific group of people.

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[6] These two texts are often discussed together, as seen, for instance, in Blake's (2020: 3–37) introduction to Sulprizio's commentary and translation.

[7] I discussed the interpretation of *Satire 6* and the misogyny of its narrator in a previous study (Gellérfi [2022]), in which I argued that while *Satire 6* has strong misogynistic features, the Juvenalian narrator should not be considered a misogynistic character. In that study, I briefly explored the parallels between *Satires 6* and *2*, as well as the relationship between the satirical narrator and Laronia; therefore, some of the arguments presented there are revisited in this paper.

[8] For example, see the description of the 'reversed' Bona Dea rituals that exclude women (2, 83–90); and another reference to the Bona Dea rites and the scandal involving P. Clodius Pulcher (6, 314–345).

[9] For example, see the depiction of Gracchus parading as a gladiator (2, 143–148) and the portrayal of Messalina selling her body as a prostitute (6, 114–132).

[10] As mentioned above, according to the final lines of *Satire 2*, the city has a corrupting influence on young men arriving from the East, who, upon returning home, bring Roman morals with them (166–170). In a similar vein, in *Satire 6*, the Egyptians curse the immorality of the unfaithful Eppia (82–84).

Laronia's entrance onto the stage is also driven by the central theme of hypocrisy. Juvenal does not specify a dramaturgical framework for her speech; the most plausible interpretation is that she is mocking a man who invokes the *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendi*s—the Julian Law for the Repression of Adultery—to accuse her. The primary aim of her speech is to demonstrate that her accuser lacks the moral authority to pass judgment.

,felicia tempora, quae te
moribus opponunt. habeat iam Roma pudorem:
tertius e caelo cecidit Cato. sed tamen unde
haec emis, hirsuto spirant opobalsama collo
quae tibi? ne pudeat dominum monstrare tabernae.
quod si uexantur leges ac iura, citari
ante omnis debet Scantinia.[11] respice primum
et scrutare uiros, faciunt nam plura; sed illos
defendit numerus iunctaeque umbone phalanges.
magna inter molles concordia. non erit ullum
exemplum in nostro tam detestabile sexu.
Tedia non lambit Cluuiam nec Flora Catullam:
Hispo subit iuuenes et morbo pallet utroque.[12]
numquid nos agimus causas, ciuilia iura
nouimus aut ullo strepitu fora uestra mouemus?
luctantur paucae, comedunt coloephia paucae.
uos lanam trahitis calathisque peracta refertis

[11] The *Lex Scantinia de Venere nefanda* was enacted at some point during the Roman Republic and penalized sexual offenses committed against freeborn young men.
[12] The two 'diseases' mentioned here refer to his affection for performing fellatio and his tendency to adopt the passive role in a homoerotic relationship. His enjoyment of these 'unmanly' behaviours caused him to become pale, resembling a woman, as Roman women—particularly aristocratic matrons—were expected to spend much of their time indoors, which resulted in a lighter complexion. Cf. Sulprizo (2020: 53).

uellera, uos tenui praegnantem stamine fusum
Penelope melius, leuius torquetis Arachne,
horrida quale facit residens in codice paelex.[13]
notum est cur solo tabulas inpleuerit Hister
liberto, dederit uiuus cur multa puellae.
diues erit magno quae dormit tertia lecto.
tu nube atque tace: donant arcana cylindros.
de nobis post haec tristis sententia fertur?
dat ueniam coruis, uexat censura columbas.'
fugerunt trepidi uera ac manifesta canentem
Stoicidae; quid enim falsi Laronia?
(Juv. 2, 38–65)[14]

After Laronia's monologue, the satirical narrator takes the floor again and continues his invective, this time targeting an effeminate man named

[13] It is a matter of debate whether these words contain any mythological reference, cf. Green (1998: *ad loc.*); Courtney (2013: 109); Lorenz (2017: 405).

[14] '"Happy is the time in which you guard the morals! May Rome be ashamed of herself: the third Cato has fallen from the sky! But tell me, where did you get the balm that smells from your hairy neck? Do not blush; show me whose business it is. If you want to invoke law and justice, you should start with the *Lex Scantinia*! Examine the men first, and search among them, for they are more guilty; but there are many of them, and they hide behind shields and defend themselves in formation. There is great harmony among the gay men. But our sex shows no example of such a disgrace: Tedia does not lick Cluvia, nor Flora Catulla! Hispo, on the other hand, goes down on young men and is pale from both diseases at the same time. Do we give defence speeches? Do we learn civil law? Have we ever disturbed your forums with our noise? Few women wrestle, and few eat much meat. But you card wool, you carry the well-worked fleeces in baskets, and you spin the spindle with fine thread more easily than Penelope, more nimbly than Arachnae, just as the fuzzy mistress did while sitting on a stump! We know well why a freedman is Hister's only heir, and, while he lived, why he gave so much to his bride. Rich will be the woman who sleeps third in a great bed. Marry, and stay quiet, and you will receive jewels for your secrecy. And after all this, do they pronounce such a harsh judgement on us? The crows are forgiven by the verdict, and the doves are vexed!" Confused, the little Stoics scattered at hearing this clear and true revelation. After all, has Laronia lied about anything?'

Creticus. Both the content and delivery of Laronia's speech closely mirror those of the satirical narrator. Her speech is inspired by the indignation that Juvenal identifies as the central motivation in his programmatic poem. Her own indignation is provoked by the hypocrisy of her accuser and men like him, a sentiment reflected in the narrator's opening sentence:

> Vltra Sauromatas fugere hinc libet et glacialem
> Oceanum, quotiens aliquid de moribus audent
> qui Curios simulant et Bacchanalia uiuunt.
> (Juv. 2, 1–3)[15]

Both the narrator and Laronia emphasize the contrast between the principles proclaimed by the hypocrites they target and their actual character and behaviour, referencing prominent historical figures, namely Curius and the two Catos, who were regarded as embodiments of traditional Roman morality. In the physical description of homosexual men, who deny their true selves and present themselves as something they are not, both Laronia and the narrator highlight the hairiness that is intended to signify masculinity, yet it is accompanied by telltale signs: fragrance in Laronia's speech and the hairlessness of the buttocks in the narrator's introduction. Both men are ridiculed: the former by Laronia herself, and the latter by the doctor who treats him. Moreover, although both speakers repeatedly mention homosexual acts in their invective, the attack on these men is motivated not by their homosexuality but by their own violation of the strictest principles of sexual morality, while they attempt to pass judgment on the private lives of others through moral preaching and accusations.

[15] 'I would be willing to run over the land of the Sarmatians and even the frosty ocean whenever a word about morality is uttered by anyone who pretends to be a Curius but lives in a Bacchic orgy!'

Laronia's speech should be read not only in conjunction with the narrator's invective statements in *Satire 2* but also in relation to those in *Satire 6*. In this satire, when discussing the sins of Roman wives, Juvenal repeatedly refers to the transgression of gender boundaries: these women engage in activities that the narrator deems unseemly for them, intruding on men's domain. This is why the invective targets women who express opinions in male company, discuss topics considered appropriate for men, participate in intellectual discourse after dinner, claim the right to take a lover, or practise gladiatorial skills. In other words, they are guilty of the very transgression that the narrator and Laronia condemn in men in *Satire 2*.

If we interpret these texts within a modern conceptual framework, the arguments of the narrator and Laronia are permeated by sexism, a concept which, for example, the European Institute for Gender Equality connects with 'beliefs around the fundamental nature of women and men and the roles they should play in society'. In her monograph on misogyny, Kate Manne differentiates between sexism and misogyny as follows: 'sexist ideology will tend to discriminate *between* men and women, typically by alleging sex differences beyond what is known or could be known, and sometimes counter to our best current scientific evidence. Misogyny will typically differentiate between good women and *bad* ones, and punishes the latter.'[16]

The male figures in *Satire 2* and the female figures in *Satire 6* transgress the boundaries between men and women, boundaries that the Juvenalian narrator believes to have been delineated by the rules and norms of the 'good old days,' characterised by true Romanity. The satires seldom directly depict what the narrator considers to be the essence of 'true Romanity' or what these nostalgically viewed, over-idealised, and oversimplified 'good old days' were like. Instead, they are almost

[16] Manne (2018: 79–80).

exclusively understood through contemporary negative counterparts.[17] Nevertheless, this idealised age is undeniably present, and the reader is not allowed to forget it, not only through fleeting glimpses of the past but also through time markers that consistently highlight the contrast between the present and the past.

The gender roles of the old Roman society, regarded by the narrator as the norm, are transgressed by many characters of his satires. To give one example, in the very first sentence following the prologue of the programmatic poem, that is in the first invective sentence of the entire collection, such a transgressor appears in the figure of a woman who hunts wild boars.[18] However, this theme is most prominent in Satires 2 and 6.

Both Laronia and the satirical narrator criticise contemporary Romans who fail to conform to the rigid gender roles of the society of the 'good old days'. Besides sharing the same ideological background, other common characteristics include their satirical tone, the fact that, although both mention sexual acts, sexuality is not the central focus of the invective, and the presence of elements of mock didacticism.[19] Moreover, like the narrator, Laronia does not shy away from satirical exaggeration and the distortion of reality. She claims that women do not engage in homosexual relationships and do not litigate, whereas in

[17] Cf. Gold (1998: 371) regarding the lack of the depiction of the perfect human body: 'In his *Satires,* Juvenal seems constantly to be alluding to an ideal that is always missing but nonetheless present in the satirist's very obsession with its negative counterpoints.'

[18] Juv. 1, 21–22, 30*: cum tener uxorem ducat spado, Meuia Tuscum / figat aprum et nuda teneat uenabula mamma* […] / *difficile est saturam non scribere*. 'While a soft eunuch can marry, and Mevia can hunt down an Etruscan boar […] it's hard not to write satire!'

[19] In *Satire 6,* the narrator, in addition to attempting to dissuade the addressee, Postumus, from marrying, also offers mock didactic advice to men who have already made this mistake, while Laronia urges women married to men with same-sex inclinations to keep their husbands' secrets, as it may prove financially beneficial to them.

Satire 6, the narrator provides examples of both;[20] thus, at least within the world constructed by the satires, Laronia proves to be an unreliable speaker.

However, this is far from being Laronia's primary fault, as she herself commits the very crime she condemns, falling into the sin of hypocrisy. She responds to the attack against her with a well-constructed forensic defence speech,[21] which proves effective, as the hypocrites listening to her words flee. If we were to characterise Laronia based on *Satire 2*, her most prominent feature would be her rhetorical skills, combined with her legal knowledge. However, this also means that she transgresses gender boundaries just as much as the men she criticises, even though her speech demonstrates that these boundaries exist not only in the narrator's mind but also in her own perception of men and women. This, in turn, makes her guilty of the central sin of Satire 2, namely hypocrisy, further reinforcing the significance of this motif in the text.[22] This does not, of course, render Laronia's words contradictory to the narrator's opinion, as he also professes belief in the interlocutor's truth. However, just like no other figure in the satire collection, Laronia cannot become a purely positive character. In the same way that Umbricius in *Satire 3* presents some of Rome's sins through his words and others through his character, Laronia conveys the transgression of gender boundaries and hypocrisy both in her speech and in her character.

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[20] See Juv. 6, 309–311: *noctibus hic ponunt lecticas, micturiunt hic / effigiemque deae longis siphonibus implent / inque uices equitant ac Luna teste mouentur…* 'At night, they stop their litters here, piss here, and cover the statue of the goddess with a long stream, then ride each other, with the moon bearing witness to their writhing…'; 241–245: *nulla fere causa est in qua non femina litem / mouerit. accusat Manilia, si rea non est. / conponunt ipsae per se formantque libellos, / principium atque locos Celso dictare paratae.* 'There's hardly a trial where a woman doesn't stir the strife. Manilia accuses, if she's not the accused herself. They draft and script the indictment themselves, ready to dictate to Celsus the introduction and key points of the speech.'

[21] See Watson (2018: 61–66).

[22] Cf. Watson (2018: 69–71).

Both Umbricius and Laronia, as well as the sexually exploited Naevolus of *Satire 9*, are sketch-like figures, depicted with only a few brushstrokes. Their qualities and characters are revealed almost exclusively through their words, yet we learn more about all three of them than about the satirical narrator. These details create a distance between them and the narrator, and in each case, they are essential for the interpretation. The character of Laronia helps maintain a certain balance. Just as in *Satire 6*, the narrator repeatedly suggests that women are not solely responsible for, nor the only ones to blame for, the ultimate downfall of the institution of marriage,[23] in *Satire 2*, Laronia reminds us that the transgression of gender roles and hypocrisy are not characteristics unique to homosexual men or, more generally, to men. While selecting his targets (especially when considering individual satires in isolation rather than within the context of his entire œuvre), Juvenal does not strive for fairness or proportionality. To use an anachronistic term, he does not aim for political correctness, which, of course, we could hardly expect from him. Nevertheless, he does not differentiate between groups in terms of their culpability or the extent of their responsibility for the moral and social decay he portrays. The poor and the rich, Romans and foreigners, homosexuals and heterosexuals, and men and women alike, essentially everyone except for himself, are responsible for the conditions in which the satirical narrator is compelled to live.

Laronia's own faults do not diminish the effectiveness of her speech, as she accomplishes her goal by driving away the hypocritical 'little Stoics'. This, in turn, aligns with the desires of the narrator, who, as I have previously quoted, would flee to the ends of the earth upon encountering the figures attacked in the satire. However, the narrator does not wish to escape Rome; rather, he seeks to rid himself of the sinners around him in order to reclaim the idealised 'true Rome'. Or, as W. R.

[23] Gellérfi (2022: 63–64).

Johnson expressed: 'He longs (a reliable token of patriarchal *Unbehagen*) for the good old days, for a space-time long since vanished. He yearns for Rome when it was Rome still, when it was his Rome. He wants back into the world (that womb with a view) from which he was (he feels) ejected, a world where slaves were slaves and women were women and men were... men.'[24]

The outcome of Laronia's speech, the chasing away of sinners, is a manifestation of this desire. By portraying the escape of the hypocrites, the narrator assigns purpose and meaning to his own struggle, which leads him to remain in Rome, unlike Umbricius, who abandons the sinful city in *Satire 3*. However, Laronia's own faults serve as a bitter reminder to both the reader and the narrator that no blameless figure exists in the Rome of the *Satires*. Thus, it makes little difference whether the narrator flees to the ends of the earth or the sinners disperse upon hearing his satirical declamation; in the end, he will inevitably be left alone.

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