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EPIC MEALS: WHO SHOULD READ EPIC POETRY IN ROME?

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Abstract: In this paper, the presence of food and dinners in connection with epic poetry in three different Juvenalian poems is discussed. The first is *Satire 4* containing a mock-epic, the plot of which revolves around a giant turbot that is described with epic-style elements, and that is given to the emperor Domitian characterized by uncontrolled gluttony. The other two poems, *Satires 5* and *11*, both focusing on dinner parties, are in connection with the epic genre as well: while in the closing poem of *Book 1*, several epic connotations appear in the description of the gluttonous Virro's extravagant dinner, in *Satire 11*, the enjoyment of epic poetry is praised and compared to an almost pornographic dance performance in a luxurious feast. Reading the three poems together, it might be proved from another aspect that we have to make a distinction between the Juvenalian evaluation of topics described using epic-style elements and the epic poetry itself.

Keywords: Juvenal, satire, Silver Age, invective poetry, Martial, food

The vivid presence of the epic tradition in Juvenal's *Satires* makes the poet's attitude towards the genre an intriguing question that has been examined from various aspects in previous research. In this paper, I deal with the connection between the epic poetry and the topic of foods and feasts based on three different satires. Besides social criticism, immorality and sexuality, the latter subject is one of the most prominent elements of the Roman verse satire, the frequency of which is caused by its suitability for illustrating luxury and gluttony. The subject already appears in the fragments of Lucilius, the archetypal master of the genre,¹ while his successor, Horace devotes two full satires, the 4th and 8th poems of his *Book 2* of *Sermones*, to gastronomical topics. After Persius, who does not deal as much with the subject as Horace,² Juvenal returns to the topic of the Roman dinners in two full poems. *Satires 5* and *11* are both constructed around a contrast. We can read about luxurious dinners in both

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¹ See Shero 1923, 127-134.

² A comprehension on Persius' passages dealing with the topic is given by Gowers 1993, 180-188.

poems, but their counterparts are different: in *Satire 5*, it is the pitiable meal of a humiliated client who is invited to the feast of his patron Virro; while in *Satire 11*, the narrator invites the poem's addressee to a humble dinner depicted in an idealized manner. And moreover, in *Satire 4* containing a mock-epic on a giant turbot and Domitian, food – more precisely, seafood – has a central role as well.

The description of Virro's dinner in *Satire 5* focuses on the huge, even a bit exaggerated contrast between the meal served for the patron and his clients, which is one of the many common themes of Juvenal's *Satires* and Martial's *Epigrams*. The difference between the food and the service appears in Martial II 43 among others, while in III 82 he also presents the different wines and vessels that the rich and the poor can enjoy.³ The supposed motivation of the patron is disclosed by Juvenal in the closure of *Satire 5*: what could be more entertaining, even more than a mime or a comedy, than “a begging throat”, meaning that a client is left to starve?⁴ Thus, Virro's cruelty serves as the source of entertainment, at least according to the narrator. This brings us back to an earlier topic of Juvenal's *Book 1*: the interlocutor of *Satire 3*, Umbricius when speaking about the clothes of the poor man states that the cruellest feature of poverty is that it makes its “victim” ridiculous: *quid quod materiam praebebat causasque iocorum / omnibus hic idem, si foeda et scissa lacerna, / si toga sordidula est (...) nil habet infelix paupertas durius in se / quam quod ridiculos homines facit* (Juv. 3, 147-153).

In *Satire 5*, the poem's addressee, the client named Trebius becomes the subject of ridicule, while eating his dinner that consists of very different courses than that of his patron's. The Juvenalian indignation is intensified by the fact that this very invitation is Trebius' only reward for all of his services, from which Juvenal highlights the morning salutation: the client, who wakes up before sunset, does not even get properly dressed, rushes to his patron.⁵ This so-called race to the morning salutation is another stock element in Juvenal's and Martial's poetry describing the client's way of life: among others, it is also mentioned by Umbricius in *Satire 3* during the enumeration of the endless mis-

³ Mart. II 43, 11-14: *Inmodici tibi flava tegunt chrysendeta mulli: / Concolor in nostra, cammare, lance rubes. / Grex tuus Iliaco poterat certare cinaedo: / At mihi succurrit pro Ganymede manus*; III 82, 22-25: *Ligurumque nobis saxa cum ministrentur / Vel cocta fumis musta Massilitanis, / Opimianum morionibus nectar / Crystallinisque murrinisque propinat.*

⁴ Juv. 5, 156-158: *forsitan inpensae Virronem parcere credas. / hoc agit, ut doleas; nam quae comoedia, mimus / quis melior plorante gula?*

⁵ Juv. 5, 12-21: *primo fige loco, quod tu discumbere iussus / mercedem solidam veterum capis officiorum (...) / habet Trebius propter quod rumpere somnum / debeat et ligulas dimittere, sollicitus ne / tota salutatrix iam turba peregerit orbem.*

eries that a poor man has to endure,⁶ and it occurs frequently in Martial's epigrams as well.⁷ Speaking about *Satire 5* and Martial, one peculiar passage of the Juvenalian poem is worth being highlighted. At the turn of 19th and 20th centuries, there was an intensive debate in research on the textual parallels between the two poets.⁸ In this discourse, Ludwig Friedländer, editor of both poets held an extreme view stating that there is only one direct allusion to Martial's poems in the whole satire collection of Juvenal, which can be found at the end of the description of Virro's dinner. Here Juvenal connects the death of Claudius with the expensive porcini mushrooms of the patron, who gives cheap mushrooms to his clients: *vilibus ancipites fungi ponentur amicis, / boletus domino, sed quales Claudius edit / ante illum uxoris, post quem nihil amplius edit* (Juv. 5, 146-148). These words recall an early poem of Martial, who speaking about the same topic as Juvenal in *Satire 5* condemns his addressee with these words: *Boletum qualem Claudius edit, edas* (Mart. I 20, 4).

The different types of mushrooms are mentioned by Juvenal at the closure of the dinner's description that begins after a brief introduction focusing on the morning salutation and the humiliation of the client in general. Throughout the dinner's description, Juvenal constantly emphasizes the contrast between the menu and the service that the clients and Virro (and his fellow patrons, or as Juvenal says, the other Virros) get. The enumeration starts with the drinks. Trebius and the other poor guests get cheap wine that is "too dry even for cotton-wool to absorb", while the lord drinks old wine of good quality from a cup with gemstones (Juv. 5, 24-31; 43-48). The ice-cold water that was boiled before being served is brought to Virro by the "flower of Asia", while the clients get simple water from the hands of African slaves with whom "you would not like to meet in the night" (Juv. 5, 49-59). Their bread is mouldy and hard to chew, and if they dare to reach for Virro's white bread, they get reprimanded: "Remember the colour of your bread!" (Juv. 5, 67-75) The seafood and the side-dishes are all different of course: Virro eats a lamprey from the sea, while Trebius an eel from the sewers (Juv. 5, 80-106). The next courses consist of goose liver, chicken and boar meat for Virro that the clients can only watch

⁶ Juv. 3, 126-130: *quod porro officium, ne nobis blandiar, aut quod / pauperis hic meritum, si curet nocte togatus / currere, cum praetor lictorem inpellat et ire / praecipitem iubeat dudum vigilantibus orbis, / ne prior Albinam et Modiam collega salutet?*

⁷ E. g. in *Epigram 18* of his *Book 2*, where Martial mentions the dinner invitation and the morning salutation to prove that he and his patron, Maximus are "*pares*", that is to say they are on the same level, since they both are subordinates of a patron in the *clientela*-system: *capto tuam, pudet heu, sed capto, Maxime, cenam, / tu captas aliam: iam sumus ergo pares. / mane salutatum venio, tu diceris isse / ante salutatum: iam sumus ergo pares* (Mart. II 18, 1-4).

⁸ See Nettleship 1888, 46-56; Friedländer 1895, I 46; Wilson 1898, 193-209; Duff 1900, xxi-xxiii.

(Juv. 5, 114-124) before they get mushrooms of dubious origin and a few scabby apples (Juv. 5, 146-155).

The contrast between Virro and his humiliated clients is intensified by mythological references that recall a few prominent epic poems. The gemstones on Virro's cup are similar to the ones that decorated the scabbard of Aeneas (who is referred to by an epic-style periphrasis), and later Charybdis is mentioned in connection with his lamprey; the boar that he eats is worthy of Menelaus, while his apples recall the land of the Phaeacians and the garden of the Hesperides.⁹ In the meantime, Trebius gets a cracked cup named after a cobbler of Beneventum, an eel raised in a sewer, a scabby apple worthy of a monkey, while the boar and its slicer can be only watched by him.¹⁰ The lines describing his meal and himself have only one element with mythological reference: in an epic-style simile the narrator warns him that he will be thrown out from the dinner as Cacus who was knocked down by Hercules if he dares to open his mouth while to lord's meat is being sliced.¹¹

In his *Satires*, Juvenal often wanders to the realm of epic poetry, and these elements usually have a well-definable function in a given poem. In *Satire 5*, these elements appear in connection with the figure of Virro humiliating his clients. The patron is a condemnable figure according to the poet's judgement without doubt, which is also confirmed by his appearance in a later satire.¹² Thus, in *Satire 5*, the epic meal loads the plates of a character who is attacked by the poet. The same is true of the book's previous poem, *Satire 4* that presents a long mock-epic on a giant turbot, which is offered to emperor Domitian

⁹ Juv. 5, 43-45: *nam Virro, ut multi, gemmas ad pocula transfert / a digitis, quas in vaginae fronte solebat / ponere zelotypo iuvenis praelatus larbae*; 99-102: *Virroni muraena datur, quae maxima venit / gurgite de Siculo; nam dum se continet Auster, / dum sedet et siccat madidas in carcere pinnas, / contemnunt mediam temeraria lina Charybdim*; 114-116: *anseris ante ipsum magni iecur, anseribus par / altilis, et flavi dignus ferro Meleagri / spumat aper*; 149-152: *Virro sibi et reliquis Virronibus illa iubebit / poma dari, quorum solo pascaris odore, / qualia perpetuus Phaeacum autumnus habebat, / credere quae possis subrepta sororibus Afris*.

¹⁰ Juv. 5, 46-48: *tu Beneventani sutoris nomen habentem / siccabis calicem nasorum quattuor ac iam / quassatum et rupto poscentem sulphura vitro*; 5, 103-106: *vos anguilla manet longae cognata colubrae / aut †glacie aspersione† maculis Tiberinus et ipse / vernula riparum, pinguis torrente cloaca / et solitus mediae cryptam penetrare Suburae*; 5, 153-155: *tu scabie frueris mali, quod in aggere rodit / qui tegitur parma et galea metuensque flagelli / discit ab hirsuta iaculum torquere capella*.

¹¹ Juv. 5, 125-127: *duceris planta velut ictus ab Hercule Cacus / et ponere foris, si quid temptaveris unquam / hiscere tamquam habeas tria nomina*.

¹² Virro is one of the recurring characters in Juvenal's poetry, the two Virros in *Satires 5* and *9* can be identified with each other on the grounds of the features that are common: both patrons are presented by Juvenal in a humiliating and morally condemnable relation with their clients. To the question, see Hopman 2003, 570-572.

by a fisherman. The fish itself is described in the opening of the mock-epic, which begins with the invocation of the Muse and a time-setting, followed by the statement of the theme that can also be considered as an *in medias res*-beginning, while an epic periphrasis expresses the size of the turbot who is described by an elaborated simile in lines 41-44.¹³ Therefore, we can rightly name the giant turbot as an epic meal, and the man who will eat it gets a crushing judgment from Juvenal similarly to Virro.¹⁴

Both of *Satires 4* and *5* make use of epic-style elements to describe the meals of figures who are attacked by the narrator, the explanation of which is given by the typical features of the Juvenalian use of the grand style, the epic allusions, and characters belonging to the world of mythological epic. In most of the cases, epic poetry appears in a contrastive role in his poems. The grand style is typically incongruous with the topic, e.g. in *Satire 12*, the story of the merchant risking his life for the profit, and arriving back to Rome to be encircled by legacy hunters lacks any sublimeness that would call for this style. Epic allusions most prominently highlight the moral difference between the Juvenalian and the original context,¹⁵ while mythological heroes are often identified with, or at least their names are applied to unworthy contemporaries of the poet.¹⁶

The style of expression recalling epic poetry serves for the same purpose in the description of extravagant meals in *Satires 4* and *5*. These splendid courses load the plates of unworthy people, and the epic style is intended to underline the difference between the quality of the food and its devourer. Epic poetry is valued highly by Juvenal, which is made obvious in his programmatic poem and later as well, among others in *Satire 11* that is a contrastive poem dealing with dinners as well. However, in this poem Juvenal does not write about two

¹³ Juv. 4, 37-44: *cum iam semianimum laceraret Flavius orbem / ultimus et calvo serviret Roma Neroni, / incidit Hadriaci spatium admirabile rhombi / ante domum Veneris, quam Dorica sustinet Ancon, / implevitque sinus; neque enim minor haeserat illis / quos operit glacies Maeotica ruptaque tandem / solibus effundit torrentis ad ostia Ponti / desidia tardos et longo frigore pingues.*

¹⁴ On *Satire 4*, see Gellérfi 2016, 399-407.

¹⁵ For a typical Juvenalian epic allusion, we can turn back to *Satire 5* which also has a passage on legacy hunters. The narrator here reminds Trebius that although wealth can be enough for a certain level of respect, if he wants to be held in really high esteem, he has to be childless as well: *o nummi, vobis hunc praestat honorem, / vos estis frater. dominus tamen et domini rex / si vis tunc fieri, nullus tibi parvulus aula / luserit Aeneas nec filia dulcior illo* (Juv. 5, 136-139). Juvenal here recalls the *Aeneid*'s Book IV, where Dido utters emotional words while longing for a child: *si quis mihi parvulus aula / luderet Aeneas...* (Verg., *A.* 4, 329-330) Cf. Lelièvre 1958, 22.

¹⁶ E.g. in a passage of *Satire 1* Juvenal names a young man wasting his family wealth on horses as Automedon: *qui bona donavit praesepibus et caret omni / maiorum censu, dum pervolat axe citato / Flaminiam puer Automedon?* (Juv. 1, 59-61)

different menus of the same feast, but he compares two different feasts. The narrator begins the poem with an invective against the immoderate spending of gourmands and the excessive wasting of Roman feasts; then he invites his addressee, Persicus to a simple and humble dinner. Epic poetry appears among the final elements of this contrastive description. In the luxurious feast, dancers entertain the guests with an almost pornographic performance, while the narrator suggests that Persicus should read and listen to the epic poems of Homer and Virgil at his own dinner: *conditor Iliados cantabitur atque Maronis / altisoni dubiam facientia carmina palmam* (11, 180-181).

In the simple dinner of *Satire 11*, the entertainment is guaranteed by the enjoyment of poetry, while in *Satire 5*, the narrator states that the humiliation of Trebius and his fellow clients serves the purposes of entertainment. Thus, the epic poetry at the idealized humble dinner is an alternative not only for an erotic dance show but also for mocking other people's misery. Or, at a more general level: literature is opposed with lust and cruelty, the cultured mind is opposed with bodily pleasures and wicked morals. Nevertheless, that does not mean that in every dinner epic poems should be read according to the poetical judgment. In *Satire 6*, epic poetry appears in a similar context as in *Satire 11*, representing value as opposed to the invective's targets. Elaborating the endless crimes, faults and sins of Roman women, Juvenal states that although it is repulsive enough when women get drunk, it is even worse when they deal with epic poetry at feasts: *illa tamen gravior, quae cum discumbere coepit / laudat Vergilium, periturae ignoscit Elissae, / committit vates et comparat, inde Maronem / atque alia parte in trutina suspendit Homerum* (Juv. 6, 434-437).

The feasts depicted in *Satire 5*, *6* and *11* perfectly mirror the Juvenalian attitude towards epic poetry that is pronounced in his programmatic poem and the mock-epic of *Satire 4*. In the former, he explains his refusal of writing mythological works, and more precisely mythological epic with the nature of his age that is the worst age in human history according to him. This age requires a genre that is suitable for the direct representation of the Roman reality, the themes given by the streets of the city – and mythological epic is definitely not such a genre. Juvenal's judgment on contemporary historical epic is enlightened by the mock-epic of *Satire 4*: the genre became corrupted by the flattering court poetry, and the epic Muse, Calliope is now a servant of the emperor. Therefore, this age is unworthy of the epic poetry that is highly esteemed by Juvenal, and most of the Romans are not even worthy of reading, listening to or talking about the works of the greatest poets. So should everyone read epic? No. And those whose plates are filled with epic meals should definitely not.

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