

From Plume to Palate: A Feast for the Senses in Horace's *Satires* Book 2

It is well attested in scholarship that descriptions of food in Roman literature carry symbolic value (Bramble 1974; Gowers 1993; Stevens 2008; Bartsch 2015; Potter 2015). In a recurring culinary metaphor throughout the *Satires*, Horace's eponymous persona craves his "slender diet" (*victus tenuis*, *S.* 2.2.53, 70), a modest fare of beans and humble veggies at his rustic Sabine farm (*S.* 2.6.63) which represents the poet's own claim to humility and modest upbringing, idealization of Rome's rustic past, and adherence to simple poetic aesthetics. Following a growing body of scholarship on the senses in ancient literature (Butler and Purves 2013; Bradley 2014; Toner 2014), this paper observes the role of the senses in dining scenes and culinary imagery from the *Satires*, particularly Book 2 in which Horace amplifies the presence of food and the body organs involved in eating, consumption, and digestion.

Food and dining scenes are integral to Roman satire. The satiric genre tends to feature grotesque bodies from Mikhail Bakhtin's "lower bodily stratum" (1984: 23) and their associated sensations and functions: eating, hunger, digestion, defecation, and sex. Even the origin of the name "satire" can be traced back to the culinary metaphor *lanx satura*, a "stuffed dish" filled with a variety of foods (Gowers 1993: 110; Freudenburg 2001: 1-2; Bartsch 2015: 61). Despite the abundance of dining scenes in *Satires* 2, we find that Horace's characters are often prevented from using their sense of taste. Meals are frequently interrupted, as when the city and country mice are frightened mid-meal by barking dogs and retreat (2.6); or a call from Maecenas compels Horace to abandon his "carefree greens" to become his patron's "late ... dinner guest" (2.7.30-4); and when the guests abandon Nasidienus' feast at the abrupt appearance of the witch-hag Canidia, leaving the food untouched (2.8).

In lieu of tasting, Horace's culinary scenes emphasize the *other* senses involved in dining - sights, smells, and sounds - to create a feast for the readable senses, coined literary "synesthesia." When it comes to consuming food, noses and eyes are just as important as mouths and tongues. The smell of food, its taste, reputation, and the visual appeal of its presentation work in concert to enhance the dining experience for the dinner guest and the reading audience. In *S. 2.2*, Horace critiques how visual aesthetics impact one's gustatory experience, as evident when a host serves peacock instead of common chicken (23-30). The peacock's vibrant plume (*picta ... cauda*, 26) is its initial attraction as an exotic entrée. As Horace succinctly relates, "I see it's the visual appeal that draws you in" (35). However a cooked peacock's feathers – the bird's most iconic feature – are not even consumed; the guests crave the bird's visual presentation, not its meat. The peacock, then, only *seems* to taste better than chicken because of this visual appeal. The emphatic alliteration of the letter "p" throughout this scene (*picta pandat spectacula cauda*, 26) mimics the bird's onomatopoeic clucking, and also blurs the distinction between peacock (*pavone*, 23), its plume (*pluma*, 28), and one's palate (*palatum*, 24). Horace's description minimizes eating peacock meat to "wiping the tongue" (24) with food, underscoring the triviality of luxury dining. Even the pattern on the peacock's tail that mimics eyes ironically casts the bird as a visual object of desire, even when it appears to be "staring back" in judgment at the guests. For Horace, it is an empty extravagance when a feast is prepared solely for the eyes, rather than the mouth and tongue. By engaging the readers' eyes, noses, and tongues with vivid language, Horace paints a dining experience that is simultaneously sumptuous yet empty. On the other hand, Horace's idealized *victus tenuis* is defined by boundaries and curtails the impact of the bodily senses, as well as manifesting the brevity, boundaries, and satiety evident throughout his poetic style.

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