

Laronia Declamans

The scholarly reception of Juvenal Satire 2 and of the speech of Laronia has largely been dominated by interpretations advanced through gender theory. This approach has been fruitful since much of the Satire relates to sexual *mores* and the performance of masculinity in the Roman context, but in interpreting Laronia's speech, its full results have not yet been realized.

Susanna Braund's article on this episode and her commentary on Juvenal's first book have made some helpful observations, but her primary concern is about Laronia's 'realness': "Can Laronia... be described as a 'real' woman? Is she an autonomous woman given a free voice to defend womankind?" (Braund 1995:213). In short, her answer is 'no': "There is no woman in this text, only the construct of the speaker, himself a construct of the man-satirist" (Braund 1995:213). This analysis reduces Laronia to a mere mouthpiece and subsumes her voice into the inscrutable voice of the Satire's invisible narrator. Even as Juvenalian scholarship has moved on to other modes of analysis, Braund's hermeneutic continues to dominate the modern reading of this passage. For example, Gold asks the question, 'But is she a real woman?' and Uden is content to call the Laronia episode 'an extended impersonation' of one (Gold 2012:107; Uden 2015:72). Dismissing Laronia's voice as distinct however, is more limiting than helpful, and frankly surprising given the interpretative riches bestowed on classical literature from distinguishing speaking voices and focalizations. We should grant the author his fiction and accept Laronia as an autonomous woman. From this perspective a re-evaluation of the content and context of her performance shows that there are elements that have been overlooked or underemphasized. In particular, the speech's rhetorical strategy, legal awareness, diction, structure, and efficacy, set Laronia's voice apart from the meandering rants of the narrator, and collectively suggest that her character is meant to be largely defined by this oratorical ability.

This performance takes on added emphasis when it is contextualised within the litigious landscape of Domitianic Rome and physically situated in adultery courts at the heart of the Roman Forum. When properly understood, her speech act becomes, in and of itself, an act of gender transgression—for successful oratory and control of the forensic arena are the purview—and indeed, stamp—of Roman masculinity. Consequently, Laronia, who has just chided men for their transgressive behaviour and hypocrisy, does the very thing she decries and becomes equally guilty herself.

In conclusion this paper will discuss how the cycle of self-defeating hypocrisy in moralizing speech has further implications for the poem as a metapoetic comment about the satiric genre. It exposes the moral austerity in the satiric vision of Rome as illusory and unattainable.

Bibliography

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