

BOOK REVIEW

Making Men Ridiculous: Juvenal and the Anxieties of the Individual. By CHRISTOPHER NAPPA. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 224. Hardback, \$75, ISBN: 978-0-472-13066-5.

Does Juvenal want to “Make Rome Great Again”? This anachronistic (and uncomfortable) question floats to the surface of Nappa’s study of the failure of masculinity in Juvenal’s satires. Whether we read them as the words of Juvenal or of a fictive *persona*, Nappa argues, his core anxiety is that “despite his inherited marks of privilege (Italian heritage, male sex, free birth) the rest of ‘us’ will begin to treat him like one of ‘them’” (12).

Nappa introduces the subject of his book as “identity, what constitutes it, and what undermines or threatens it” (2). He views the *Satires* as an examination of failed masculinity in Juvenal’s Rome. The perversions of poetry, patronage, marriage, wealth and other subjects of Juvenal’s satire are manifestations of this deeper “sense of exclusion and displacement” (31), which distinguishes Juvenal from the earlier satirists. Given Rome’s tradition based on *virtus* and male dominance, Nappa reads Juvenal’s satire as the expressions of a deep anxiety not simply about social performance or success, but about “a fundamental un-Romanness at the heart of Rome” (189).

The author provides an excellent introduction not just to his study but to a brief history and the challenges of scholarship on satire and Juvenal. He acknowledges that he is not pursuing, at least not directly, questions of *persona*, the “unity” or logical argument of particular poems or the generic matrix of Juvenal’s satire or satire in general. This allows him the freedom to focus his study on particular images and themes that recur and echo the anxiety of identity. These include the body, class, gender and wealth as increasingly unstable markers of masculinity, and each is the focus of an individual chapter. Except for the second chapter that offers a reading of the programmatic *Satire 1*, Nappa ranges across satires and collects evidence for the persistence of these themes and the anxieties from Juvenal’s entire corpus.

Nappa’s readings of those recurring themes and images of failed masculinity are persuasive. His structure, random like Juvenal’s, fits his thesis well. In Chapter

3 he traces the ways that the (usually Roman) male body is threatened by external forces with examples from *Satires* 1, 3, 8, 10, 15 and 16; in Chapter 4, he focuses on Juvenal's treatment of "those who have ... debased themselves willingly" (93) with examples from *Satires* 2, 5, 8 and 11; the threat of women is the subject of Chapter 5, focused almost exclusively on *Satire* 6 but with examples from 10; the role of wealth in defining and undermining "manhood" focuses on *Satires* 6 and 9 with glances at 12 and 13.

Nappa equivocates between the failure of Juvenal's *satire* and the failure of *Juvenal*, person or *persona*: "... all of the many concerns of Juvenal (person or persona) orbit a center that is a conception of normative masculinity as it fails" (23). Reading these satires as a *performance* of failure is an extremely literary way of reading them, and it clashes with the claim that these satires are motivated by the anxieties produced by such failures. Since we read similar anxieties of failure in the works of Statius, Martial, Tacitus and Pliny, why would we imagine that Juvenal is writing about them from a fictive place? To do so makes Juvenal more like us, when he seems not to be. What Nappa describes as the "chaos of class, race, and gender" in Juvenal's castigation of Lateranus in *Satire* 8 (99), most of Juvenal's contemporary readers would celebrate as diversity.

The author stops short of saying that the voice of the satires is Juvenal's own. In fact, he says that it does not matter, because we will always have no more than "a selective version of the writer," or a default *persona*, in the words of any first-person author (5). In practice, however, Nappa discards the idea of *persona* as a tool of the author; that, along with his proclaimed interest in "the chaotic, the irrational, the weird" and the "messy" (9) and his equivocation about the satires as the products of Juvenal's consciousness or intent leaves an interpretive gap that I wish he had filled. When he writes that "Juvenal's language compels us to confront the fact that there is "something underneath the surface" (15), I agree—but I still want him to articulate what that something is. As he rightly observes, Juvenal is describing—with exaggerations—"the world he sees" rather than his own personal experiences (6), and from our vantage point it is difficult to measure that described world against a supposed "reality" that balances or corrects Juvenal.

These are not criticisms of Nappa or of his argument. This is an essential book on Juvenal, and I found it cogent and persuasive. I hope that Nappa writes a second edition. I suspect that if he returns to his thesis in 2020 or later, he would find more ways to discuss these anxieties and rhetoric that are both heartfelt and

insincere; intended to persuade and immune to debate; truth-shaped and fundamentally false.

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