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Introduction

Satire, as a literature of political speculation and counteraction, offers interpretations of power. It has been created, used, and endorsed by governments as well as by those who oppose them. Much of it, nonetheless, is oppositional. It is exceptionally difficult to generalise about a kind of literature that is by its very nature reactive and self-resetting. Indeed, this history of satire is (in some senses) written against the idea that atemporal definitions and cross-period generalisations can or should be committed to when it comes to assessing the history of such a highly developed written literature. However, some interpretative options and initial speculations can be set in motion in order to help shape the unusual territory that will be covered in this book.

Lots of satirists are primarily concerned with regime-level insecurity, illegitimacy, and underperformance, especially as those things come into conflict with official narratives of peace, security, and prosperity. It is also true that a lot of satire is motivated by the satirist's refusal to participate in a targeted regime's perception of itself, leading to derisive reconsiderations of the politics through which a particular regime's legitimacy has been claimed—in some cases with disruptive outcomes. While satire can be a literature of explicit statement-making and overt provocation, it can also be a notoriously indirect, oblique, suggestive, and covert kind of literature, made all the more complicated by the satirist's strategic election of anonymous or pseudonymous authorial personas. It can be (and often is) an aggressive, threatening, destructive, or hawkish literature. This is especially true when it is targeted at an individual as part of some Machiavellian action of strategic denunciation or as part of an interpersonal intrigue. However, it can also be a contemplative and reflective literature, stabilised (where it is not destabilised) by dextrous manipulations of technical disciplines and playful self-comprehensions of its own methods of procedure. Because it often contains a very closed system of references to transient political events and persons, it can be very difficult to contextualise in later periods or when a particular series of political conditions have fallen away. It can also be difficult to interpret because of its intricate chronological

provocations, some of which demand an extended apprehension of retrospective or predictive rearrangements of time. In some cases, satire's chaotic, disordering, and disruptive elements are counterbalanced by moral philosophy, but in some cases those elements remain completely unchecked. Indeed, some of the most effective satire can just be surreal, disgusting, or obscene. There are numerous examples of satirists who have simply offered aggressive articulations of rage, victimised other people in spates of targeted cruelty, or sustained prolonged public exercises in scatological nastiness. Over the course of its long history, this literature has facilitated all kinds of strangeness, cynicism, indecency, frustration, resentment, hate, heresy, profanity, sin, rage, unhappiness, malice, spleen, and ill humour, even if those things have notionally been tied into more cerebral kinds of political speculation and moral philosophy. Whatever form it takes, and however we might assess the character of the person who has created it (where that is a possibility), the various sanities and provocations offered by satire can be disturbing, excruciating, intrusive, humiliating, and funny, and as such it can be very difficult to countenance for those against whom it is operating. As the mordant and cold-blooded Jonathan Swift once suggested, in a statement that stands out as relatively straightforward within an unusual context of practical misdirection and rhetorical intricacy, satire can become a '*sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own*'.¹

Like the modern cities of Europe that have developed on top of the Roman sites at Londinium, Lugdunum, Turicum, Autricum, and Lutetia, English satire has Roman foundations and substructures. Roman politics and its attendant sphere of literary satire have been both instigative and determinative in satirical speculation on state affairs in English literature, and much of this book is (by necessity) dedicated to tracing the influence of Rome on satirists writing in English. Looking back to its pre-Roman history, there was a substantial quantity of political satire in Greek literature, notably in the writings of the fifth-century comedian Aristophanes (460/450–386 BCE). Aristophanes targeted the aggressive general and purported demagogue Cleon, who opposed the strategically cautious and peace-seeking Pericles during the Peloponnesian War. After the death of Pericles, Aristophanes's comedies shadowed later developments in the war. As well as Cleon, who he satirised with varying degrees of hostility on several occasions, Aristophanes also targeted the Athenian magistracy, the philosophical school of Socrates, and the tragedian Euripides. In *Babylonians* (426), he satirised the Athenian magistrates (for which he was attacked by Cleon). In the defiant anti-Cleon comedy *Acharnians* (425), he used satire to argue for a move towards peace with Sparta. He satirised Cleon once again in *Knights* (424) and attacked Socrates as a 'corrupt teacher of rhetoric' in *Clouds* (423). He continued to argue for a peace settlement and

agitate against Cleon in *Peace* (421), *Birds* (414), and *Lysistrata* (411). He targeted the playwright Euripides in a number of different plays, notably in *Acharnians*, *Thesmophoriazusae* (411), and *Frogs* (405).² In terms of the political position articulated in the comedies, Aristophanes was pro-Athenian and would have supported the causes of war. However, he was operating in the long shadow of Pericles and defining himself in opposition to Cleon, which meant that he was equally committed to the causes of peace, and he used dramatic Comedy to shape perceptions of how different periods of peace had been brought about and managed. The ‘Old’ or ‘Attic’ comedies of Aristophanes followed a relatively simple narrative structure of *parodos* (entry of the chorus), *agôn* (conflict or debate), and *parabasis* (exit and address to the audience), leaving space for improvisation. In the later Aristophanes plays there were developments of that core structure. Some elements of Aristophanic Comedy are likely to have derived from preexisting festive and sacral rites directed towards fertility gods. Some of those rites may have had very distant origins in the polytheistic societies of the pre-Homeric Greek tribes, giving Aristophanic Comedy a subtle dimension of *longue durée* indigenous self-comprehension. ‘New’ comedy composed by playwrights such as Menander (344/343–292/291 BCE) and Philemon (368/360–267/263 BCE), a large quantity of which seems to have emerged in Athens during the fragmentation of the Greek empire after the death of Alexander the Great, was comparatively schematic in its use of standardised masks and character types.

Invective poetry, as opposed to stage comedy, is widely thought to have predated Aristophanes. Archilochus, who can be imprecisely dated to the seventh century BCE, was imagined, throughout antiquity, to have been the original invective poet. His poetry was compared to ‘poison, wasp stings, and the barking of a dog.’³ The ‘iambic’ poets followed Archilochus. Despite the nomenclature, these iambic poets were not exclusively committed to iambic metres. The Greek word ‘iambos’ referred to a type of invective poetry rather than a particular unit of metrical stress. Few fragments survive of the earliest iambic poets (Aristoxenus of Selinus, for example). We have more evidence of Archilochus, Hipponax, and Semonides, who together comprise an imagined central canon of the Greek iambic poets.⁴ We know of other iambic poets of whose writings almost nothing survives (Ananias, Anacreon, Hermippus). We also know that later Hellenistic poets continued to compose Archilochian iambics, sometimes with formal and rhetorical variations. Some of them incorporated iambic invective into their stage comedies (Asechrión, Asclepiades, Callimachus, Herodas, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Cercidas). Different elements of Greek satire were transmitted into the very earliest Hellenistic literatures postdating the First Punic War.⁵ The assertively and self-consciously ‘Roman’ plays of Livius Andronicus (c. 284–205 BCE), himself partially

Greek and possibly a prisoner of war, took in elements of both ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Comedy. The Roman comedians Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE) and Terence (c. 195/185–159 BCE) imitated the ‘New’ comedians so closely, in some cases, that modern scholars have deemed Plautus (in particular) to have been simply reusing or adapting the Greek plays for contemporary purposes. Indeed, ‘Plautine adaptations’ are sometimes used to create a hypothetical reconstruction of the dramatic characteristics of the works of Philemon.⁶

Several complicated and mutually incompatible narratives were developed in Roman antiquity about the notional origins of what was sometimes perceived to be the native literary form of ‘Roman’ satire. Those narratives are highly unlikely to be objective or reliable. In a major work of Julio-Claudian state history called *Ab urbe condita*, ‘from the foundation of the city’, Livy stated that Roman satire could be traced back to festive rituals and jesting verses brought to Rome by Etruscan dancers who had entertained the population during the plague of 364 BCE, a year marked by the consulships of Gaius Sulpicius Peticus and Gaius Licinius Stolo. Those entertainers were brought in after a failed attempt to propitiate the gods with a *lectisternium* or sacral feast (*Ab urbe condita*, 7.2). Given that Rome was involved in an intense and sometimes violent rivalry with the Etruscans during the construction of their early warcraft polity, and given that the early Romans had actually incorporated elements of Etruscan society into their own (especially under the Tarquin monarchs, themselves Etruscans), such comments, however localised and apparently innocuous, are very likely to have been designed to merge into a carefully crafted interpretation of Roman political history. As such they are not to be taken literally or extracted from the holding narratives that were under construction in Livy’s text. We know that Livy’s intricate fiction about the ‘rise’ or ‘progress’ of Roman satire—from spontaneous aggressive verse to a consolidated form of dramatic literature—was relatively influential in antiquity. For instance, it was reiterated in a Tiberian anthology of exemplary words and deeds created by the rhetorician Valerius Maximus called *De factis dictisque memorabilibus* (2.4.4). Nonetheless, despite its longlasting influence, this narrative is likely to have been a highly artificial reworking of fragmentary and inconclusive pieces of evidence that were then carefully grafted onto the larger state narrative of *Ab urbe condita*. ‘As history’, it has been said, Livy’s account ‘does not bear examination’, because ‘it proposes a set of relationships which never existed.’⁷ It is also thought to have been taken from an old republican source and recomposed, which is an interesting possibility given Livy’s apparently paradoxical commitment to the memory of the republic within the context of the emerging Augustan principate.⁸ Livy’s account of early Roman satire can not be separated from his controlled and subtle commentary on the politics of his own (later) period, which involved projecting the political

consciousness of the emerging Augustan principate back into the history of Rome's early senatorial republic and pre-republican monarchs. Alternative narratives about the hypothetical origins of Roman satire can be found elsewhere in later imperial literature. For example, the fourth-century grammarian Diomedes suggested that the earliest Roman satire was poetic rather than dramatic.⁹ There were also nativist arguments put forward for the 'Roman' origins of satire itself, of which the most famous was offered by Quintilian: 'satura tota nostra est', 'satire is entirely ours' (*Inst. orat.* 10.1.93).¹⁰

As recited poetry rather than drama per se, the miscellaneous satires of Quintus Ennius (c. 239–169 BCE) are often considered to be the earliest formal *saturae* to have survived from Roman antiquity.¹¹ The surviving fragments are few and ambiguous. Kirk Freudenburg, one of the most prominent modern authorities on Roman satire (who will be referred to throughout this book), says that the remains of Ennius 'are so slight that very little of real use can be adduced from them'.¹² Ennius was remembered by Romans for an epic chronicle in fifteen books of dactylic hexameter called the *Annales*, extending from the fall of Troy c. 1184 BCE up to Publius Valerius Cato the elder and his censorship in 184 BCE.¹³ It has been noted that 'the author of Rome's first great national epic' was probably also 'the creator of Roman *satura*', which is an interesting possibility given the vexed and intimate relationship that formal verse satire has always had with state epic, especially within the postmedieval canons of Italian, French, and English mock-epic verse (and their ancillary canons of burlesque).¹⁴

Republican satire after Ennius has not survived in large quantities. We have fragments of an equestrian satirist from the border town of Suessa Aurunca (between Campania and Latium) called Gaius Lucilius (c. 180–102 BCE), whose dates were suggested by Jerome in his continuation of the *Chronicon* (c. 380 CE). Those dates have since been contested.¹⁵ Lucilius's aggressive, rhetorically complicated *saturae* in dactylic hexameters were notorious in later Roman antiquity.¹⁶ It is believed that he was connected in some way to the power sphere of Scipio Aemilianus (b. 185/184 BCE), the adopted son of Cornelius Scipio who was himself a son of the legendary Scipio Africanus (236–183 BCE). Those in the Scipionic line of magnate veterans typically consolidated state power through notorious acts of public violence. The elder Scipio had acquired power following victories in the Punic Wars. He had taken Carthago Nova in 209 and defeated Hasdrubal both in 208 and 206. Aemilianus, adopted by the younger Scipio, continued the work of the elder warlord. Early on, he acquired military and diplomatic distinction in Spain and Africa, before recapturing Carthage in 146. He sacked the city, sold its people into slavery, and declared it void as a civilian territory. He submitted Numantia to the same fate between 134 and 132. According to the historian Polybius, to whom

Aemilianus was a literary patron, the Scipios were defenders of the existing Roman republic and had no ambitions to consolidate a principate, dictatorship, or autocracy (6.14.4–8), though they feared the potentially anarchistic elements of democracy (6.9.2). Despite being extremely hostile and consistently ruthless with enemies to Rome, Aemilianus was lauded by Cicero as an ideal statesman.

Lucilius, thought to have been a veteran who fought under Aemilianus at Numantia, composed approximately thirty books of satires. Some of the surviving fragments are comic in nature. Especially arresting are those that describe the physical features of a satirised person in exaggerated terms or express some kind of contempt for a particular target: ‘si nosti, non magnus homo est, nasutus macellus’, ‘if you know him, he’s not a big man, very thin; has a big nose’ (6.259); ‘scaberat ut porcus contritis arbore costis’, ‘he had scratched as a pig does by rubbing its ribs against a tree’ (9.356); ‘dissociata aeque omnia ac nefantia’, ‘all alike repugnant and unspeakable’ (29.886).¹⁷ Aemilianus defended Rome and its republic. He is likely to have been committed to conservative patrician concepts of civic virtue at a time of war. Lucilius’s satires look as if they were designed to enforce and rearticulate a similar kind of centralised philosophy of orthodox republican virtue: as an adherent to Aemilianus and in open imitation of the elected republican Censor. This is difficult to assess for certain on the basis of the fragments that have survived, so due caution should be exercised when trying to contextualise or gloss Lucilius. The office of Censor was established in 443 BCE within the civilian administration, ostensibly to keep a list of all the citizens who belonged to the Roman republic in a document called the *census*. By the second century BCE, the office of Censor had been fortified with new legislative and financial powers. The Censor was committed by the terms of this public office to ‘guide the behaviour of the people’ (*mores populi regunto*).¹⁸ The definition of the republican Censor offered in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (OCD) could function as a description of the literary satirist as found in the surviving fragments of Lucilius: ‘When the lists of citizens were drawn up the censors, if they agreed and stated the reason, might place a mark of censure (*nota*) against the name of a man whose conduct, public or private, they found reprehensible. The effect of this was to remove the man in question from his tribe (*tribus*) and usually from all the tribes, in which case he became an *aerarius*, obliged to pay tax but not entitled to vote.’¹⁹ What constellates in the surviving fragments associated with Lucilius are small-scale persecutions of targeted individuals and conferrals of censure marks on various enemies. What also constellates is an advocacy of proportion, reason, responsible participation, and the paying of debts, which is tied into a sharply focussed ethics of reciprocity, fungibility, and the honouring of agreements (following the exchange-

based political philosophies of a Roman republic at war): ‘virtus, Albine, est pretium persolvere verum / quis in versamur, quis vivimus rebus potesse, / virtus est homini scire id quod quaeque habeat res, / virtus scire homini rectum, utile quid sit, honestum, / quae bona, quae mala item, quid inutile, turpe, inhonestum’, ‘Virtue, Albinus, is the ability to pay what is actually due in our business dealings and in our social life. Virtue is knowledge of what each issue involves for each man. Virtue is the knowledge of what is right, advantageous, and honourable for a man, what is good and likewise what is bad, what is disadvantageous, wrong, and dishonourable’ (1196–1200).²⁰ As we might expect of a satirist associated with the circle of someone as politically transformative and powerful as Aemilianus, Lucilius’s legacy was subjected to concentrated political curation after his death. Vettius Philocomus and Laelius Archelaus read the satires, and it has been hypothesised that they may have lectured on them. Cato (the elder), Neoteric grammarian and poet, may have been in the audience. He certainly came into contact with the satires. The elder Cato ‘put his Lucilian studies to good use’ in a pamphlet called *Indignatio*, apparently an attack on his political enemies, and he was supposedly preparing an edition of Lucilius’s writings towards the end of his life.²¹

What has traditionally been seen as the core ‘canon’ of Roman satire has deep origins in the triumviral period that postdated the reign of the warlord Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix, ‘Sulla’ (138–78 BCE). The politics of this long and vitiated period, which roughly extends from the death of Sulla in 78 to the creation of the Augustan principate after the Battle of Actium in 31, were extremely complex, not least because there were two separate descents into state collapse and triumviral civil war—events that would exert a formative pressure on later Roman satire, which throughout antiquity reconstituted itself in response to public events and persons through soft recodifications and resetttings of the core metre of dactylic hexameter.

Sulla had reshaped the republic as a dictatorship. He had prosecuted the Jugurthine War (111–105 BCE), regained control over Greece and Roman Asia, and twice brought civil war to Rome in 88 and 83–82. Sulla’s men would rule the triumviral Rome that emerged in his political shadow. From Sulla onwards, there was an overconcentration of state power into individuals who were only ever bound to relatively weak agreements in terms of state-level administration and military forbearance. Both the younger Cato and Cicero opposed the emergence of an informal militarised triumvirate under the wealthy general Marcus Licinius Crassus (115–53 BCE); Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, ‘Pompey’ (106–48 BCE); and Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE). The creation of this triumvirate set in motion the possibility of an elite military coup against the senatorial infrastructure of the republic. Caesar, who was created and backed by the Sullan aristocracy (led by Crassus), would distinguish himself from the

brutal Sulla through conspicuous acts of military clemency. Pompey, who had joined Sulla's forces at Brundisium before the seizure of Rome in 83 BCE and supported Sulla's campaign to become dictator, would (like his leader) become notorious for acts of great violence. Caesar achieved permanency in the Senate through military distinction. He helped to secure Pompey's position as the leading Roman general and statesman by supporting the *lex Gabinia* (67 BCE) and *lex Manilia* (66 BCE), which granted Pompey control of the Mediterranean and oversight of the prosecution of the Mithridatic War against Mithridates VI Eupator (135–63 BCE). Caesar's own position, not forgotten, was consolidated through the acquisition of the offices of *pontifex maximus*, praetor (63 BCE), and consul (59 BCE). It was further consolidated through military campaigns in Hispania Ulterior and Gaul (leading to the defeat of the Gallic king Vercingetorix in 52 BCE). Caesar oversaw the expropriation and redistribution of the (mainly arable) lands that were to be given to Pompey's veterans in Italy. This was seen by Cato as a cynical act of factional manoeuvring, not as a prudent act of civil restructuring, social justice, or economic pragmatism. Pompey and Crassus looked to take control of Asia Minor and sought Caesar's influence as part of a reconciliation. Pompey recognised that Caesar had been amassing a major new military force elsewhere in Europe. It looked as if he might bring about another civil war. A 'conservative' (anti-Caesarean) republican cause emerged. It was led by Pompey and supported both by Cicero (after his period of exile) and Cato in the Senate. The Pompeian republicans were called *optimates*. After Crassus died in 53 BCE, a bifurcated militarised rivalry emerged between Pompey and Caesar, and the conditions for a civil war were set. It broke out in 49 BCE, with Caesar invading through southern Gaul. Pompey's Spanish provinces were attacked. With a high command stationed in the southern city of Brundisium (where he had originally merged with Sulla), Pompey successfully repelled the Caesarean forces at Dyrrachium. However, he was defeated at Pharsalus in 48. Pompey was assassinated (probably by Ptolemaic courtiers) in Alexandria, where Caesar brokered peace between the warring siblings Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII and Cleopatra VII. Caesar consolidated his control over Egypt with a defeat of the Ptolemaic forces at the Battle of the Nile in 47.

After the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE by Brutus (83–30 BCE) and the *liberatores*, a law was passed that laid out the terms on which there would be a 'reconstruction of the state' (often referred to in shorthand as the *lex titia*). This legitimised the creation of a second post-Pharsalian triumvirate comprised of the new *pontifex maximus* Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (89–13/12 BCE), Mark Antony (83–30 BCE), and Gaius Octavius, 'Octavian' (63 BCE–14 CE). All three were officially tasked with bringing Rome and its colonial spheres into a state of recovery. Antony and Octavian defeated the remaining

liberatores at Philippi in Macedonia, which was necessary because they had all left Italy and seized the eastern provinces. There was no agreement within the triumvirate about the terms of their shared power arrangement or how they would manage the three overlapping layers of the wider Roman polity: Rome itself, the greater territory of Roman Italy, and Rome's colonial sphere. The famous Treaty of Brundisium was signed in 40 BCE. Anthony was given the eastern empire. Octavian was given occupied Gaul, but he was also (crucially) allowed to remain in Italy—though it was notionally divided between the triumvirate. Each of the signatories operated through diplomatic intermediaries. Octavian operated through Gaius Cilnius Maecenas (c. 70–8 BCE), a wealthy diplomat who is thought to have been of Etruscan nobility.

Over time, the treaty proved to be illusory. The legal terms that defined the powers of the post-Pharsalian triumvirate elapsed in 38 and were only notionally renewed. Sextus Pompey, an external belligerent, continued to attack Octavian's forces, and Octavian was defeated in naval battle in 38—but an elite defection gave Octavian Pompey's Sardinia and Corsica. At Tarentum in 37, Octavian and Anthony agreed to remove Sextus Pompey as a rival power. The Treaty of Tarentum was, from Octavian's perspective, successful. Its results have been summarised as follows: Tarentum 'shut out Pompey, gave Octavian Spain and Gaul, and relegated Antony to the dangerous East' (where he would eventually be defeated at the Battle of Actium).²² Octavian later withheld promised military support for Antony. Antony's weakening rule in the east forced him into an uneasy (and ultimately unsuccessful) military coalition with Cleopatra VII. Antony was then himself defeated at the Battle of Actium in 31 and committed suicide in 30. Octavian took Alexandria. Octavian, as the notional heir to Caesar, emerged as a deified emperor named Augustus, presiding over a transformed senate infrastructure as *princeps civitatis* (first citizen). Various kings, including Herod I, pledged allegiance to the new principate and its empire. Those who did not, such as Alexander of Emesa and Adiatorix of Galatia, were executed (Cassius Dio, *History*, 51.2.2).

The outbreak of war between members of both triumvirates had set in motion a complex political transformation that ultimately led to the creation of a consolidated autocratic principate. If the core canon of Roman satire is to be brought into focus as a literature sensitised to and brought about by disruptive, violent, and transformative state affairs, then it has to be set against this long-term background of militarised factions, failed triumviral partnerships, and civil war.

Out of this complicated and vitiated period emerged Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 'Horace' (8 December 65–27 November 8 BCE). Horace was a deeply enigmatic moral satirist who reflected in highly ambiguous and indirect

ways on the long-term conditions of post-Sullan triumviral Rome and the underlying political transformations that had brought about the creation of the Augustan principate. Horace composed satires that were characterised by very high levels of self-suppression and subtle political obfuscation. However, these satires, though they were often contextually nonreferential and almost always suspended in conversational philosophical speculation, were fundamentally composed in response to an emerging Rome. Horatian satire was strategically codified and internally reorganised so as to counterbalance experiences of insecurity and unpredictability, which continued to circulate in collective Roman memory long after Actium. He turned inwards and made a strenuous discipline of self-inquisition within a larger philosophical infrastructure of nonassertive and nonsectarian moral orthodoxy. As Freudenburg has argued (very persuasively), the Horatian interior was not a subjectivist space or a secluded recess. The Horatian interior was an intensely metaphorical zone of political speculation. What emerges in Horatian satire is a sense that the postbellum satirist has comprehensively internalised state questions and is sustaining a long-term examination of the individual as a logical outcome of external political forces, even if those forces are not always made explicit or addressed in pragmatic and direct terms. Thinking through the individual's capacity for moral stabilisation and rationality is also a way of thinking through the capacity of Rome to stabilise itself as it makes sense of its own state transformations. Horace and his Rome were compacted into one other so as to facilitate reciprocal acts of political contemplation—all, it is thought, with a pro-Augustan emphasis.

Horace was born in the colonial town of Venusia (City of Venus), which Romans had captured from the Samnites in 292 BCE before extending *ius Latii* (Latin rights) to the local population. The republican Senate extended these rights to many in 'Magna Graecia', the name for the rural and coastal areas of southern Italy that had been colonised by the Greeks centuries before Horace.²³ Venusia itself was near Monte Vulture on the frontier between Lacania and Apulia. Horace playfully referred to himself as both Lacanian and Apulian (*Satires*, 2.1.32–35). Among other things, this was a subtle assertion that he had some kind of biographical affinity with the great republican satirist Lucilius, himself from a border town between Campania and Latium. Horace also described his father, probably a relatively rich freedman and farmer, as 'macro pauper agello', 'poor with a starveling farm' (*Satires*, 1.6.71).²⁴ Magna Graecia, once Pompey's territory, was full of the expropriated and redistributed land that had been given to veterans by Caesar during the period of the first triumvirate. Horace claimed to have seen the 'grand sons of grand centurions' as a young man in Venusia (*Satires*, 1.6.71–78). After studying in Athens, he joined Brutus's army as a military tribune. He is thought to have done this

only six months after the assassination of Caesar (at approximately twenty-one years old).²⁵ The poem that is often seen as Horace's earliest formal verse satire (*Satires*, 1.7) may have been composed between the assassination of Caesar in 44 and Brutus's suicide in 42. Relatedly, his sixteenth epode is also thought to have been composed during his military service under Brutus. *Satires* 1.7 begins with an anecdote about Brutus's high command in the eastern empire and ends with a strange and suggestive pun on regicide.

Horace later claimed to have dropped his shield and run away from the Battle of Philippi (*Odes*, 2.7.9–16), which may have been a strategically placed statement designed to separate himself from Brutus, the political legacy of the *liberatores*, and the assassination. This is one of many statements that simultaneously discloses and partially reconstructs an element of his notional biography. Such statements—with all their reconstructive or politically realigning properties—would have been very necessary when he became a *scriba quaestorius* (an administrative figure) in the state treasury under Octavian. After moving towards Octavian, Horace fell into the patronage sphere of the Brundisium diplomat Maecenas. He may have been recommended to Maecenas by Virgil and Varius. It has been noted that 'when . . . Maecenas offered him patronage he was quick to accept it'.²⁶ Maecenas would later give Horace the famous 'Sabine farm', an exurban retreat from the contestation and violence of Rome, around 35 BCE. Horace composed state odes for the regime, as well as a poem called the *Carmen saeculare*, or 'hymn to the new world', which described the need for stabilised moral philosophy in a world harrowed by memories of the brutality of civil war: 'iam Fides et Pax et Honos Pudorque / priscus et neglecta redire Virtus / audet, apparetque beata pleno', 'Now Good Faith, Peace, and Honour, along with old-fashioned Modesty and Virtue, who has been so long neglected, venture to return, and blessed Plenty with her full horn is seen by all' (*Carmen saeculare*, 57–60).

Horace's first book of satires is thought to have been published in 36/35 BCE, around the time at which the Treaty of Tarentum was signed. *Satires* 1 is a collection of ten independent and ambiguously related hexameter poems. The metre would have signalled some kind of commitment to formal verse satire because, of course, Lucilius had also composed satire in hexameters. However, Horace referred to his satires both as *saturae* and *sermones*, 'conversations', keeping himself at an ambiguous remove from his republican predecessor. Horace's simultaneous commitment to the expected metre of satire and strategic weakening of the literature's aggression has meant that the *Epistles*, also written in hexameters, are sometimes considered to represent a related sphere of Horatian satire. Hence, it is common to refer to the Horatian 'hexameter corpus' as an aggregate cohort of texts. Given the date at which it is thought to have been published, *Satires* 1 is remarkable for what it does not

mention. Freudenburg notes that ‘The cruel hypocrisies and vainglory of Rome’s recent, and ever forthcoming wars, like scenes of bloody dismemberment in a Greek tragedy, are kept decorously out of sight.’²⁷ Horace refuses to contextualise himself in secure or conclusive ways, investing instead in a perpetual contestation of virtue and its notional characteristics. Another of Horace’s most prominent modern editors notes that ‘Horace characterises his satirical activity alternately as meaningless doodles, metrical prose, pious self-improvement, a child’s moral ABC learned at the knee of a stern father’, and as ‘a kind of perfectionist self-laceration.’²⁸

In *Satires* 1.1, 1.4, and 1.10, Horace refined down and articulated a notional procedure for posttriumviral literary satire as a morally stabilised and decontextualised exercise in speculative self-enquiry.²⁹ The extent to which this was actually then followed in the other satires is a very complex and open-ended question that has attracted centuries of commentary and interpretation. These satires may have been read aloud to Maecenas and some small audiences at Octavian’s court, but it is very difficult to confirm that possibility. Horace simultaneously disclosed and concealed his proximity to power. In *Satires* 1.5, a poem that has attracted a lot of very speculative and inconclusive commentary, Horace tells the story of a diplomatic journey from Rome to a town in Magna Graecia: it may have been Brundisium or Tarentum, though it is strongly implied that Brundisium was the ultimate destination. Horace, now well within the patronage network of Octavian, seems to have accompanied a Maecenean embassy to the south, just possibly to deal with Sextus Pompey (if, in fact, the Tarentum negotiations were being referred to).³⁰ Details of the embassy are likely to have been a state secret. In terms of its narrative structure, Horace’s poem follows the Maecenean embassy down the *Via Appia* or ‘Ap-pian Road’, a major strategic road that once ran down the centre of Roman Italy, without mentioning the purpose of that journey. To begin with, this is an intensely suggestive narrative structure. It simultaneously plots out the route of the diplomatic mission, follows a Lucilian satire called the *Iter Siculum* or ‘Route to Sicily’ (a much longer poem that Horace refines down in the unusual and efficient style of Callimachus), and reverses the arc of Horace’s own biographical journey from Venusia up to Rome. Horace said that he was travelling with Maecenas, Virgil, and Varius but did not specify why. It has been conjectured that Horace may have been there to carry out secretarial duties for Maecenas.³¹ It has also been noticed that the ‘vital meetings with Maecenas and Virgil and Varius are also in reverse order’, which means that they blend into the structure of the poem and do not raise any kind of alarm.³² The ‘official purpose of the journey’ is ‘somewhere just out of view’: detectable but impossible to bring into focus.³³ Horace dwells repeatedly on the comic inconvenience and discomfort of travelling through territories as inhospitable

but also as politically charged as the Pontine Marshes. In a highly suspicious move, Horace claims to be suffering from conjunctivitis, and rubs ointment into his eyes to cure it: ‘hic oculis ego nigra meis collyria lippus / illinere’, ‘here I put black ointment on my sore eyes’ (1.5.30–31). This has been read as some kind of signal that Horace really was handling matters of state secrecy but could not disclose that in public. The line ‘can be read symbolically in relation to his tactful refusal to see (or report) political matters that he is not supposed to see.’³⁴ Various readers have picked up on the political signals that come out of this highly suggestive line. Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), the eighteenth-century historian who charted the final collapse of late imperial Rome in dark intellectual counterpoint to the collapse of the Atlantic sphere of the British empire, completely recognised that Horace was trying to ‘convince his enemies that his thoughts and occupations on the road were far from being of a serious or political nature.’³⁵ Interestingly, others have not picked up on the subtle political intrigue of this line at all.³⁶

Horace reconstructed the Roman satirist as a politically nondescript, peripheral figure engaged in a process of unresolved self-inquisition. Accordingly, he reconstructed satire itself as a loose and provisional aggregation of secondary literatures (a *lanx satura*, or ‘mixed dish’) that could not quite be aligned with the writings of Lucilius or the Greek comedians and iambic poets. Other kinds of satire in this period exhibit a very different but equally conspicuous kind of formal and generic hybridity. We have fragments of prosimetric satires composed by Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE)—almost six hundred of them, some of which appear to have been written for the stage.³⁷ Varro was an equestrian born in Reate (modern Rieti) in the last years of the republic. He was a follower of Pompey and later forgiven by Caesar. In 47 BCE, he was appointed to watch the public library of Rome. That privilege was later taken away by Mark Antony. He was remembered in antiquity as ‘vir Romanorum eruditissimus’, ‘the most learned man of all the Romans’ (Quintilian, *Inst. orat.* 10.1.97), and is said to have composed 150 books of ‘Menippean’ satires, which by convention would have included pieces of verse in different metres (and languages) integrated into a continuous prose narrative. In John Dryden’s words, ‘This sort of [Menippean] Satire was not only composed of several sorts of verse, like those of Ennius, but was also mixed with prose; and Greek was sprinkled amongst the Latin.’³⁸

In *Epistles* 2.1, Horace framed the transmission of Greek literature into the literature of Latium as an inverted colonial irony (‘Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis / intulit agresti Latio’, ‘Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium’, 2.1.156–157). He also suggested that Latin literature as a whole was simply the result of Rome’s delayed engagement with Greek literature: ‘serus enim Graecis admovit acumina

chartis', 'it was late when the Roman applied his brains to Greek writing' (2.1.161). Such statements were surely conditioned by the satirist's own origins in the Greek colonial region of Roman Italy (Magna Graecia). Horace is likely to have encountered the *iambus* tradition while he was studying in Athens (and may well have read Archilochus, Semonides, and Hipponax), in response to which he composed the *Epodes*—an early collection of quite aggressive poems that are ambiguously related to the later *Satires*. In these earlier and more aggressive poems, he presented himself as someone who had successfully introduced Greek iambics to Rome. That was a studied allusion to Sappho and Alcaeus (as Horace says himself), who had supposedly brought iambics to their own people (*Epistles*, 1.19.23–34). Horace also engaged in ambiguous and inconsistent ways with dramatic comedy, especially with Aristophanes. He noted the relative licentiousness and freedom of 'Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae / atque alii, quorum comoedia prisca viro- rum est', 'the poets Cratinus, Eúpolis, and Aristophanes, / And the other men who go to make up the Old Comedy' (*Satires*, 1.4.1–5).³⁹ It has been suggested that Horace's incomplete and relatively insubstantial assimilation of Old Comedy into *Epistles* 2.1 (and the hexameter corpus as a whole) was designed to contribute to the 'strained ideology' of nonaggressive and noninterventionist satirical civility articulated throughout the whole collection of *Satires* 1.⁴⁰ As part of that 'strained ideology', Horace continued to stress his separation from Lucilius and the native Roman satirists who had engaged in a more forthright kind of satirical aggression. He stated that Lucilius had relied too much on the 'Old' comedians: 'hinc omnis pendet Lucilius, hosce secutus / mutatis tantum pedibus numerisque', 'it is on this [Old Comedy] that Lucilius hangs, following them and only changing the rhythm and metre' (*Satires*, 1.4.6–7).⁴¹ Horace sustained a (possibly fictional) narrative that he was actually relatively unfamiliar with Roman satire. He does not mention Pacuvius or Varro. A couple of failed satirists are referred to in *Satires* 1.10, and in this poem he mentions Ennius (but only as the poet of the *Annales*).

As a notional and imprecisely defined Epicurean, Horace committed himself to an insecure and inconsistently maintained narrative of geographical and philosophical detachment—a narrative designed to extricate him, in conjunction with the framing mechanisms of the hexameter corpus, from the baleful, pressurised world of Roman politics.⁴² This move towards Epicurean self-definition was refracted through the geographical location of the Sabine farm, which had been granted to him by Maecenas. The farm notionally allowed him to exit the political arena of Rome. Otherwise, he satirised philosophical schools. He satirised Stoicism as a school of cant and jargon. He targeted a man called Chrysippus, a Stoic philosopher famous in antiquity for dying of his own laughter (*Satires*, 1.3.125ff and 2.3.40ff). Horace repeatedly referred to his

forebears as *loquax*, ‘wordy’, and traced that loquaciousness back to Stoicism and its tedious preaching. As early as *Satires* 1.1, he picked on a man called Fabius. Fabius is a notorious Stoic bore. He is flagged up as an example of everything that Horace is not. Lucilius is also described as excessively loquacious: ‘cum flueret lutulentus, erat quod tollere velles; / garrulus atque piger scribendi ferre laborem, / scribendi recte’, ‘as he flowed muddily on, there were things you’d want to remove. / A man of many words, he disliked the effort of writing — / writing properly, that is.’⁴³ The whole issue of undisciplined or overly assertive loquaciousness was acutely political in nature, because it tied in with early Augustan perceptions of toleration under the old republic. Horace claimed that if Lucilius had lived in the age of Octavian he would also have cut himself short (*Satires*, 1.10.67–71).

Freudenburg says that this highly complex and strategically dissimulative analysis of Rome itself, though it was projected into safe or nonassertive territories of moral self-enquiry, was still very much an endangering activity because Horace was ultimately discussing Rome (albeit indirectly). It is also true that there were some more obviously dangerous moments in Horace, who could be bluntly derisive about his targets and offered a whole range of critical moral aphorisms even within the context of the *sermo*: ‘since you put money before all else small wonder that no one / offers you any affection. What do you do to earn it?’; ‘in avoiding *one* sort of fault fools rush into its opposite’; ‘the sight of a certain aristocrat leaving a brothel drew / a famous remark from Cato: ‘Keep up the good work!’ he said’; ‘pick anyone you like / from a crowd: he’s plagued with greed or else the curse of ambition.’⁴⁴ Horace also engaged quite explicitly with some of the more disturbing and disruptive elements in the Roman political imagination. *Satires* 1.8, for example, is about a mass grave near the Esquiline Hill where the poor of the city and the corpses of the civil wars were buried. Octavian commissioned a new building to cover up the grave. Horace redeployed this as a metaphor for the wider attempt to build a political edifice over Rome’s experiences of civil conflict, assassination, and near misses of state collapse: ‘nunc licet Esquiliis habitare salubribus atque / Aggere in aprico spatium, quo modo tristes / albis informem spectabant ossibus agrum’, ‘now, one may live on a wholesome Esquiline, and stroll on the sunny Rampart where of late one sadly looked out on ground ghastly with bleaching bones’. Maecenas planned to cover over this pit of corpses with a *noui horti* (new garden), ‘a sunny terrace’ allowing ‘citizens to breathe wholesome air and promenade in peace.’⁴⁵ Octavian famously built a whole series of ‘arches, baths, gardens, granaries, warehouses, docks’ (and a ‘mausoleum’) to give the Roman people a sense of restored civilisational security.⁴⁶ The controversial erotic poet Publius Ovidius Naso, ‘Ovid’ (43 BCE–17/18 CE), set his obscene *Amores* (love poems) among Octavian’s new porticoes

and marble columns. Ovid was exiled, for reasons that remain (notoriously) unclear.⁴⁷ What makes Horace's *Satires* 1.8 satirical is that it is spoken by a wooden statue of Priapus, 'a minor and disreputable god' associated with fertility who was often merged with Pan and Hermes in Roman mythology. Priapus was typically portrayed with a conspicuously large red phallus (a *magna mentula*).⁴⁸ *Priapeia*, poems concerned with Priapus that sometimes adopted his voice, were composed throughout the ancient world. In Roman hands, the 'priapic poem' was 'enriched and developed' so that it became highly aggressive and void of 'any discernible religious sentiment'.⁴⁹ Interestingly, a large and mysterious collection of (what appear to be) Augustan and post-Augustan verses called the *Carmina Priapeia* was collated by Romans in the first century CE. A few priapic poems have even been attributed to Virgil, perhaps erroneously. Horace's Priapus was, quite predictably, reconstructed as a symbol of conservative restraint. The wooden statue of Priapus has been placed in Maecenas's new garden as a scarecrow: 'deus inde ego, furum aviumque / maxima formido; nam fures dextra coercet / obscenoque ruber porrectus ab inguine palus; / ast importunas volucres in vertice harundo / terret fixa vetatque novis considerare in hortis'; 'A god, then, I became, causing complete terror in thieves and birds; for thieves are kept in check by my right hand and by the red stake that protrudes indecently from my crotch; as for annoying birds, the reed attached to my head gives them a fright and keeps them from landing in the new gardens'.⁵⁰ The statue scares off local witches with a large fart: 'at illae currere in urbe', 'away they ran into town'.⁵¹ This has been read as a metaphorical action. The statue has been described as scaring away the Lucilian model of aggressive hexameter satire, for example. Of course, the wooden statue of the intensely territorial Priapus, who actually maintains civic order, can be interpreted as a fictional projection of Horace himself. The Horatian Priapus wards away the disruptive forces that might otherwise undermine Octavian's postbellum state restoration, or enemies trying to enter the inner circle of Maecenas. Notably, *Satires* 1.8 is followed by a poem about a sycophant who is trying to enter the circle of Maecenean patronage. It is strangely and suggestively ironic that Horace himself was actually buried next to Maecenas on the Esquiline Hill.

Satires 2 is thought to have been published around 30 BCE. By this time, Octavian was starting to bring together the imperial principate having defeated Antony at the Battle of Actium.⁵² In this second book, Horace described himself as a 'cupido pacis', a 'lover of peace' (*Satires*, 2.1.43–44). Once again, Horace seemed to be self-consciously 'not writing about politics'.⁵³ Nonetheless, these poems were evidently conditioned by the emergent principate environment in which they were created and published. These satires were complexly involved in rational assessments of the shifts, redistributions, and alterations in Roman politics brought about by the defeat of Antony and

emergence of Octavian as a viable princeps. As part of that concentration on state-level political reorganisation, Horace reached for characters and speakers who were themselves involved in reorganisations of Rome. *Satires* 2.2, for example, is spoken by a character called Ofellus, a humble farmer implicated in redistributions of land of the sort that had been carried out after periods of civil war in order to settle veterans (especially after Philippi).⁵⁴

Freudenburg has referred to the pervasive sense of a ‘totalitarian squeeze’ in *Satires* 2, which was written, even more so than *Satires* 1, in response to a ‘shaken and nervous age’.⁵⁵ In the first satire, Horace is nervously preoccupied with the rules and regulations of satire as they stand in the context of the emerging principate, which was not yet settled and put even the pro-Augustan Roman satirist in a position of acute legal and political ambiguity. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between Horace and a real lawyer called C. Trebatius Testa (Trebatius), who had worked for Julius Caesar on the recommendation of Cicero and was admired by Augustus.⁵⁶ Trebatius says ‘quiescas’, ‘take a rest’. ‘Ne faciam, inquis, omnino versus?’, Horace replies: ‘Not write verses at all, you mean?’. ‘Aio’, Trebatius replies: ‘Yes’. Trebatius continues: ‘O puer, ut sis / vitalis metuo, et maiorum ne quis amicus / frigore te feriat’, ‘My lad, I’m afraid / You may not be long for this world. One of your powerful friends / May freeze you stiff’.⁵⁷ Horace’s response is to ‘sheath his sword’ and put away the aggression of satire: ‘sed hic stilus haud petet ultro / quemquam animantem et me veluti custodiet ensis / vagina tectus’, ‘but this steely point / Will never attack a living soul, unless provoked. / I’ll carry it for self-defence, like a sword in its scabbard’. Horace defers to an unstable background of law in a world where ‘the old safety rules no longer apply’.⁵⁸ The loss of the fourth book of Cicero’s *De re publica* is unhelpful, in the context of Horace’s *Satires* 2, because it is thought to have been concerned with the subject of poetic rights and liberty.⁵⁹ Suggestively, most of the poems in *Satires* 2 are written in a voice that does not belong to Horace at all. Whereas in the first book Horace speaks to his real interlocutors directly, the second book is more like a paranoid echo chamber of conversations between Horace and figures living under the pressurised conditions of a nascent Rome. Often (especially in the first poem) ‘the satirist is not speaking directly to his readers, as he had done so often in the first book, but to a character inside the poem’.⁶⁰ If the subterranean system of literary allusion in *Satires* 2 is inspected for dangerous references and compromising information, it often reciprocates with eerily well-selected reassurances. Two of the most significant sources reworked in *Satires* 2.1 are Lucilius W. 713–714 and Virgil’s *Georgics* 3, compositions that advocate the writing of propaganda.⁶¹

In summary, the Horace of the hexameter corpus was a Venusian figure strategically positioned on highly ambiguous and deniable frontiers:

geographically, on the frontier between Lacania and Apulia, or between Rome and the Sabine farm; philosophically, somewhere between the philosophical schools and the teachings of Bion, Stoicism, and Epicureanism; formally, between satires and epistles; and satirically, between Greek comedy and native Roman verse satire. The serious reception of Horace in English literature falls into two related strands. The first includes those who respond to the secrecy, proximity to *arcana imperii*, and self-obfuscating rhetorical misdirection of the hexameter corpus. The 'secretive' or ambiguous Horace, who is variously reconstructed as a satirist living in the shadow of an uncongenial new tyranny or as a pro-Augustan satirist advocating moral orthodoxy in conformity to the new regime, has been of particular interest to satirists preoccupied with their own survival under severe legal strictures or threats of incrimination, as well as intelligencers, spies, and informers who cannot bring themselves into full disclosure as handlers of *arcana imperii* in their own time. These satirists have always looked to the self-denying and legally cautious *Satires* 2.1 (a poem that will come up repeatedly as a point of reference throughout this book). This Horace can be found, for example, in the writings of the Tudor intelligencer and ambassador Sir Thomas Wyatt, as well as in the writings of the controversial and baleful metropolitan satirist Ben Jonson, whose status as a Catholic convert, interest in the Essex faction, and acquaintance with the Gunpowder Plot conspirators endangered him. Jonson presented himself as a modern Horace surviving at the legalistic and spy-ridden court of a new Augustus in a tricky dramatic satire called *Poetaster* (1601), which (very suggestively) contained a direct translation of *Satires* 2.1 that was spoken on the stage. Reading Jonson's satires and comedies for their political information can be so difficult, in some cases, that virtuosic professional close-reading is required to bring that kind of information into focus, as has been offered in one particularly impressive political study of an unusual metropolitan comedy called *The Alchemist* (1610).⁶² As will be discussed at various moments throughout this book, satire is actually quite well suited to figures involved in political and military intelligence. This might be because satirists are often required to project different versions of themselves into false-speaking personas in pressurised or legally compromising circumstances, contemplate various kinds of strategic aggression, and reflect in concentrated and rational ways on challenges facing modern societies at times of acute uncertainty and strain. The second strand of the reception of Horace in English literature involves satirists who have been sent into exile, retreated from the baleful pressures of the inner circles of government, or been excluded from state questions by their religion or previous political associations. For these people, the Maecenean endowment of the Sabine farm and the 'retreat' from Rome to an exurban zone of speculative counteraction has provided powerful fantasies of liberty, independence, and situational compensation for curtailed

access to public life. The Sabine farm was of particular interest to figures like the Catholic poet Alexander Pope, for example, whose long-term engagement with the exurban Horace will be discussed later in this book.

Records suggest that there was an absence of satire between the death of Augustus in 14 and what has sometimes been referred to as the Neronian ‘Renaissance’ after 54. Quintilian, for example, does not mention any satirists who lived under Tiberius, Caligula, or Claudius, though we have evidence of historians, grammarians, and poets (epic, pastoral, and lyric) from this period.⁶³ The basic argument that has been offered in the secondary literature is that ‘Horace the satirist had no known successor until the time of Nero, the better part of a century later’, and this remains difficult to challenge.⁶⁴ There are fragmentary pieces of evidence that attest to the workings of a repressive state apparatus under the post-Augustan Julio-Claudians. The poet Clutorius Priscus was put to death in very strange circumstances in 21, apparently for composing a controversial panegyric on Drusus, the Emperor Tiberius’s son; a writer of fables was exiled for dangerous allusions to Sejanus; and Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus committed suicide (and was likely forced to do so) over lines in one of his tragedies.

Satire reemerged under the Emperor Nero, which might seem improbable. ‘Satire under Nero?’, Freudenburg asks: ‘Who could ever have come up with such a warped ambition, and what would that “satire” look like?’⁶⁵ What we are probably looking at in Neronian satire, certainly in the case of the earlier texts, is a literature that was designed to offer (and so ought to be compared with) anti-Claudian public speech acts. One such public speech act would be Seneca’s *De Ira*, a treatise on anger full of submerged political *ressentiment* composed during Seneca’s period of exile on Corsica under the Emperor Claudius (at once looking at the Claudian emperorship and the reign of the preceding Caligula). Later Neronian satire, by contrast, looks more like the charred remains of a Stoic court elite contending with the unpredictable and decadent phases of the later reign. The Emperor Claudius (10 BCE–54 CE), who was known to have been ‘hampered by a limp, trembling, and a speech defect’, possibly due to ‘cerebral palsy’ (and other ‘continual illnesses’), was pronounced dead on 13 October 54.⁶⁶ He was likely poisoned by his wife, Agrippina. A clear line of succession had not been constructed for Britannicus, the legitimate heir. The Senate split into factions over the succession. Claudius’s will was supposedly suppressed, his death was revealed at an astrologically opportune moment, and Agrippina manoeuvred her son Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (37–68 CE), soon to become the emperor Nero (r. 54–68 CE), into the space that had been opened up. Nero was hailed as the new emperor.⁶⁷ Seneca, who had been brought back from exile to become a tutor to the young Nero, helped to codify the first Senate speeches in which the memories of

Claudius were condemned and Nero was presented as the new Augustus. The early years (in which rule was divided, to an ambiguous degree, between Nero and Agrippina) were famously prosperous and successful, as noted in later years by the Emperor Trajan. As both emperor of Rome and pharaoh of Egypt, Nero later ruled as a neo-Hellenistic *artifex*, sponsoring what has been described as a 'Neronian Renaissance'. Nero's most authoritative modern biographer, who explores this 'Renaissance' in considerable detail, notes that there is 'direct testimony from writers not only to his [Nero's] personal support but to the patronage of members of the senatorial class in favour with the Emperor', and 'their role is commonly compared to that of Maecenas'.⁶⁸

Just after Nero took power in 54, a satire condemning the memory of the dead Claudius appeared called the *Apocolocyntosis*. This must have been a deeply provocative satire because the sacral rites of the state religion were appropriated and redirected so as to condemn the Claudian emperorship—a complex act of formal and rhetorical derision that was designed to signal an allegiance with Nero himself but also with the regime's concentrated attempt to construct an anti-Claudian future for the Julio-Claudians. A couple of medieval manuscripts refer to the *Apocolocyntosis* as *Ludus de morte Claudii*, 'a play on the death of Claudius', which provides a useful summary of what the composition was for even though this is highly unlikely to have been the original title.⁶⁹ The *Apocolocyntosis* is a surreal prosimetric composition about the long, drawn-out death of the bumbling Emperor Claudius, as well as his postmortem judgement in front of a *concilium deorum* (council of the gods). The emperor's corpse is ferried to the underworld by Mercury, who is a bored and frustrated messenger. Seneca makes very clear that Claudius deserves to be punished because, in life, he degenerated and became a ruthless tyrant like Caligula. It has been noted that the real Claudius had 'won enmity through a reputation for cruelty and a failure to keep distinct affairs of the palace from those of the empire', which is why he is sent down by the fictional *concilium* in heaven, which 'turns out to be closely modelled on the Roman senate'.⁷⁰ The ghost of the great Augustus condemns him to eternal suffering.

The *Apocolocyntosis* would have been grotesque and frightening to its first audiences in Rome, perhaps especially for those who genuinely lamented the death of the emperor. The historian Cassius Dio says that the dead Claudius was humiliated and made to look like the corpse of an executed prisoner dragged through the forum on a large hook (a statement referring to the words of Gallio): 'As the public executioners used to drag the bodies of those executed in prison to the Forum with large hooks and hauled them from there to the river, he commented that Claudius had been hauled into heaven on a hook.'⁷¹ We are not entirely sure who wrote this horrible satire, what kind of audience it was written for, or who preserved it. It remains one of the most

challenging and obdurately unaccountable compositions to have survived from Roman antiquity. It is usually attributed to Seneca (Cassius Dio, 60.35), which is a rational attribution because, as discussed, Seneca was a key figure when it came to shaping anti-Claudian narratives for the new regime. Interestingly, Tacitus says that Seneca composed the real *laudatio funebris* (funeral oration) for the dead Claudius, raising questions once again about the vexed and ever-revolving relationship that has always existed between satire and sanctioned state literature ('sanctioned' in either of its opposing senses).⁷² The case for the attribution to Seneca is strong enough for most editors to refer to Seneca as 'the author' of this composition, but it is important to concede that there is a degree of uncertainty here.⁷³ Some modern editions of the *Apocolocyntosis* even have sections of commentary dedicated to justifying 'the place of the work in Seneca's writings', such is the perceived difficulty of aligning the *Apocolocyntosis* with the author of the moral epistles, essays, and extant tragedies.⁷⁴ If this satire was by Seneca, it is clear that it would have been personally as well as politically motivated. In 41 CE, the satirised Claudius had exiled Seneca to the island of Corsica.⁷⁵ It is still not clear why Seneca was exiled. He is thought to have been critical of that most troubled of emperors.⁷⁶ If it was by Seneca, then it is perhaps unsurprising that the *Apocolocyntosis* appeared just after the Neronian takeover of power.⁷⁷

As Cassius Dio suggests, the word *Apocolocyntosis* combines the Greek words *apotheosis*, meaning 'deification', with *kolokynt(h)e*, meaning 'pumpkin' or 'gourd' (Cassius Dio, 60.35). The Latin title *Concucurbitatio* is similarly eccentric. Both are a blatant mockery of Claudius's famous stutter, and the Latin title is a pun on soiling oneself.⁷⁸ The title can be translated into English as 'The Gourdification' or 'The Deification of a Gourd'.⁷⁹ Claudius had been deified by Nero according to the usual customs in 54 CE. However, Nero was apparently delighted by the death of his predecessor, for whom he pretended to grieve (Cassius Dio, 60.35.2ff). While the real rights of deification were being conferred on the cooling body of Claudius, someone at the Neronian court—possibly Seneca—was composing a ludicrous satire about the deification of a vegetable. In terms of its form, the *Apocolocyntosis* was a (prosimetric) Menippean satire. The source may not have been Menippus himself but rather the Menippean satires of Varro. Some think that the *Apocolocyntosis* was put on as a dramatic performance during the Saturnalia festival in December 54 CE. Whether Nero would actually have seen the *Apocolocyntosis* performed in that particular context is not entirely clear.⁸⁰ We know that Nero attended the theatre throughout his reign and that 'sometimes he remained concealed': performers never quite knew if the emperor or his authorities were watching.⁸¹ Some have speculated that the *Apocolocyntosis* was performed directly to the emperor and his court, much like a Sullan mime or Jacobean

masque.⁸² Another particularly compelling theory, nondramatic in nature, is that it circulated anonymously at the Neronian court.⁸³

The dead Claudius is mocked and his condemnation is made inevitable. He gasps for his last breath: 'Claudius animam agere coepit nec invenire exitum poterat', 'Claudius began to gasp his last, and could not find any way to go'. An impatient Mercury quotes from Virgil: 'dede neci, melior vacua sine regnet in aula', 'Give him over to slaughter, let his better reign in the vacated court'. This is a statement of impatient contempt. However, it is also a quotation from Virgil's *Georgics* 4.90. In the Virgilian text, a beekeeper is instructed (in mock-heroic terms) to dispense with a king bee who has lost a battle for leadership of the hive. The suggestion is that Claudius should be deposed so that Nero can claim the imperial throne. By the time the *Apocolocyntosis* comes to an end, Claudius has been made the slave of that baleful dictator Julius Caesar. Claudius is an irrelevant corpse doomed to an eternity of subordination, handling petitions in an eternal maze of administration. The composition closes with an image of Claudius playing with a dice box with a hole in the bottom, gambling into eternity and losing every time: 'refugit digitosque per ipsos / fallax adsiduo dilabitur alea furto', 'with continual stealth the die recoiled and slipped deceptively through his very fingers' (15.1.5–6).⁸⁴

Another prosimetric satire of the Neronian period was composed by Gaius Petronius Arbiter, 'Petronius' (suicide 66 CE), probably but not certainly the sadistic figure at Nero's court identified by Tacitus (*Annales*, 16.17–20). As well as attaining the rank of consul, Petronius is widely thought to have acquired some kind of court position as Nero's *arbiter elegantiae* (arbiter of taste). His notoriously obscene and lurid *Satyricon* (sometimes *Satyrica*) has been described with disconcerting blandness as 'a recital of lecherous happenings'.⁸⁵ He offered a nasty record of the nihilistic sexual depravity and absurd, luxurious decadence of the Neronian elite after the accession and the creation of an *artifex* underworld at the Neronian court. Trimalchio, the most famous figure from the *Satyricon*, keeps a water clock and a trumpet boy in his dining room to mark the hours lost to debauchery: at his feast, the famous *Cena Trimalchionis*, olives and other delicacies are carried to the guests on a donkey made of Corinthian bronze, a silver skeleton is kept in full view, and the guests are incarcerated. As an account of Neronian depravity, the *Satyricon* is one of the most sinister and lurid satires to have survived from antiquity. After falling out with Tigellinus, an informer at the Neronian court, Petronius was ordered to end his own life in 66 (like Seneca and Lucan), which may have been the year in which he composed his famous *Satyricon*.⁸⁶ Like the *Apocolocyntosis*, the *Satyricon* was a 'Menippean' satire, although it has been observed that there is very little direct contact between Petronius and the surviving Menippean satires of Varro and Seneca.⁸⁷ Petronius can look strangely isolated in the canon

of Roman satire, and his lurid text has always exerted an unusual influence on satire in English literature.

The most challenging of the Neronian satirists, whose reception in English literature has always been very inconsistent and discontinuous, is Aulus Persius Flaccus, 'Persius' (4 December 34–24 November 62 CE). Persius composed six formal verse satires. The satirist who emerges in these texts seems to have been an ardent Stoic moralist, keeping alive a dualistic or split inner consciousness, oscillating between a self-suppressing court sensibility and a vividly expansive, lurid imagination. Persius was born in Volaterrae (modern Volterra) during the reign of Tiberius. Volaterrae, a very old proto-Villanovan settlement, was one of twelve cities that belonged to the great Etruscan League, and as such it had a deep and ancient place in the psyche of the pre-Roman world. Cautious, it is often said, about Nero's authorities and the limits of poetic liberty, Persius spoke in an extremely complicated linguistic code that few have been able to decipher. Indeed, Jerome reportedly cast these sometimes unintelligible poems into the flames, perhaps owing to their obdurately difficult Latin (although there is room for speculation here).

We do not know enough about Persius's life to make complete sense of his poetry, and vice versa.⁸⁸ Some information can be found in a suspicious biographical document called the *Vita Persi*, which, like the poetry itself, has attracted a bewildering variety of scholarly responses.⁸⁹ It may have been composed by Marcus Valerius Probus, a Neronian grammarian, but some have attributed this biography to Suetonius. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, 'Suetonius' (c. 69–122 CE), composed biographies of famous poets (*De poetis*) and emperors (*De vita Caesarum*) while moving between official positions at the centre of the Antonine administration (at one time working as an overseer of the imperial archives). Suetonius's history is an Antonine condemnation of the Julio-Claudian tyrants. Indeed, Nero is depicted as a hell-visiting and decadent sadist in *De vita Caesarum*.⁹⁰ The presentation of Persius in the *Vita Persi* is saintly, and Persius's status as a moral authority in Western Christianity owes something to this document: 'Fuit frugi, pudicus', 'he was good and pure'.⁹¹ The documentation says that he was a highly orthodox Stoic devoted to his mother, Fulvia Sisennia, and his teacher Cornutus, to whom the fifth satire is dedicated. He has sometimes been read as someone who carefully distanced himself from Neronian 'society', or from the courts and their spheres of influence.⁹² He may have aligned himself with the Stoic opposition to Nero among the patrician senatorial elite. The *Satires* have been described as Stoic preaching in poetic form—as aggressive Stoic documents produced as part of an ongoing counteraction against contemporary depravities and evil. The *Vita Persi* says that Persius 'sanguine et affinitate primi ordinis viris coniunctus', 'was connected by blood and by marriage [to] men of the senatorial order',

and that he always mixed with philosophers and poets. He associated with Stoic senators such as Thrasea Paetus, who had ‘difficult relations’ with Nero, and he does not seem to have admired Seneca.⁹³

It has long been believed that Persius wrote his satires in some kind of secluded haven away from the Neronian courts (the insularity of the Etruscan Volaterrae possibly coming into play here, even in an indirect or submerged way).⁹⁴ However, in his calculated political silence, Persius does seem to be registering something about the anxious position of the Stoic satirist at the Neronian court—though his satires, as Freudenburg says, are quite paradoxical, insofar as they themselves ‘play a role in making Neronian culture look the way it looks’ and are ‘constructive of culture rather than, simply, the result of it’ from our perspective.⁹⁵ Posthumously, Persius’s satires were published with a difficult and strange prologue in choliambics (short, rough lines). This complicated and deceptive text, which is exceptionally difficult to translate, was probably a decoy designed to keep Persius anonymous or to suspend him in a state of biographical ambiguity, because it presents him as a lowborn and starving writer. In Dryden’s assessment, ‘the Design of the Authour was to conceal his Name and Quality. He liv’d in the dangerous Times of the Tyrant NERO; and aims particularly at him in most of his Satyrs. For which Reason, though he was a Roman Knight, and of plentiful Fortune, he wou’d appear in this Prologue, but a Beggary Poet, who writes for Bread.’⁹⁶ For reasons that will be addressed later in this book, Dryden was one of the most astute and compelling readers of Persius in the seventeenth century, and Persius’s later reception in English literature was shaped in large part by Dryden’s frightening baroque translations. Most believe that the strange choliambic prologue is some kind of prefatory statement, although there is some dispute about that too.⁹⁷ Persius’s unusual choice of metre is important because it invokes Hipponax, the ancient invective poet who also wrote in choliambics. The metrical allusion to Hipponax was probably designed to invoke a very specific vision of Hipponax in Callimachus’s *iambi*, ‘where the ghost of Hipponax comes back from the dead to address his audience in limping iambs, his characteristic metre.’⁹⁸ The evasive, deceptive prologue is all the more treacherous and wrongfooting, in other words, because it is rigged with an internal trip wire of harsh Greek invective.

The majority of the scholarship on Persius refers to him as unusually difficult, intensely obscure, and almost ‘untranslatable.’ His translators and imitators have always been troubled by his ‘unusually concentrated manner of expression,’ his ‘obscurity,’ and his ‘unannounced transitions,’ which are difficult to gloss with certainty and demand unusual kinds of critical and editorial attention.⁹⁹ There is a very complicated and partially submerged link, in Persius’s case, between the selection of this particular satirical poetics and the political circumstances within which the poems are likely to have been composed. Swift

described Persius as ‘a very dark Author,’ likely using the word ‘dark’ here to mean ‘difficult to understand’ (*OED* 6a) but perhaps also ‘secretive’ (*OED* 7b) and ominous (*OED* 13).¹⁰⁰ Persius’s obscurity in Latin has sometimes been read as a deliberate and strategic evasion of the regime’s watchful eyes.¹⁰¹ The satires are also densely allusive, probably referring to a whole range of texts that have not survived from antiquity and cannot, therefore, be referred to in our modern commentaries. Lucilius and Horace are alluded to in very strange ways: usually in very small fragments, shards, and broken pieces. In an ingenious and incisive analysis of the allusive practices of this most ‘dark’ of Roman satirists, Freudenburg has argued that the allusive strategy must have been essentially political, insofar as it was probably designed to suggest that the glare of the Emperor Nero has become such a corrosive and oppressive force that even the old satirists of the republic and Augustan principate have withered into epigrams and half-remembered lines of verse: the dismal light of Neronian power destroys and corrodes Roman memory and visions of preceding regimes.¹⁰² The dangers of writing satire under Nero seem to be addressed in a famous passage of the first satire. Persius says that someone (by whom he seems to mean Nero) has the ears of an ass: ‘At least, I’ll dig a hole within the Ground, / And to the trusty Earth commit the Sound: / The Reeds shall tell you what the Poet hears, / *King Midas has a Snout, and Asses Ears.*’¹⁰³ Persius refers to the story of Midas, the king of Phrygia who turned everything he touched to gold (as recorded in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11.172ff). The suggestion is that Nero is a monstrous new Midas. The author of the *Vita Persi* says that this passage was altered by Persius’s tutor Cornutus so that it would not offend the emperor. Instead of saying that Nero has donkey’s ears, the (supposedly) revised poem says that everybody does: ‘auriculas asini quis non habet?’, ‘Is there anyone who does not have donkey’s ears?’ (*Satires*, 1.121).¹⁰⁴ The target of the satire is so ambiguous that readers still disagree as to whether Persius was targeting Nero or not (and as to whether or not Cornutus really did intervene). The rational and unanswerable question that has been asked in the secondary literature runs as follows: ‘If Cornutus thought it necessary to make one change, why did he leave all the other supposed insults [in Persius] standing in the text?’¹⁰⁵ What, in other words, was so compromising about these particular lines, and what did they challenge with regard to Neronian self-perception?

Self-perpetuating fantasies of drowning and submersion recur in Persius’s satires.¹⁰⁶ The threat of punishment hangs over the Neronian satirist like the proverbial sword of Damocles, an image to which Persius was—very suggestively—drawn (*Satires*, 3.40–43). In the third satire (23–24), Persius describes a piece of clay that is ready to be moulded into a new shape in the hands of a dextrous agent, which speaks in indirect but suggestive ways to Persius’s sensitivity to the compromised inner integrity of the Neronian satirist

and the need to shape oneself, and one's satire, to external realities: 'udum et molle lutum es, nunc nunc properandus et acri / fingendus sine fine rota', 'you're mud, both wet and soft—need turning now, and continual / Shaping on the eager wheel'.¹⁰⁷ This does not mean that Persius's satires are all cautious studies in unobtrusive civility. On the contrary, lots of Persius's satires are surprisingly horrible, whether that is because they contain intensely scatological elements or because they contain heavy articulations of Stoic rage. The description of a wealthy Roman of the Neronian period dying of mysterious internal events—producing yellow skin, bad breath, a sulphurous throat, and chattering teeth—is particularly nasty, not least because it ends with a vision of this person being taken away rigid on his deathbed with his feet pointing towards the door without the illness ever being explained (*Satires*, 3.88–106).

What 'can and cannot be said', nonetheless, is a constant preoccupation.¹⁰⁸ The fifth satire is a statement about *libertas* in speech and writing. Indeed, it has been described as a poem about 'modes of disclosure'.¹⁰⁹ Once again, Persius combines the strident voice of a moralising Stoic with interjections from a sceptical, cautious interlocutor, in what appears to be a direct imitation of Horace, *Satires* 2.1—that legally cautious and retracting satire in which Horace sheathes his satirical dagger. 'Libertate opus est', 'liberty is the subject' (5.73), Persius claims, but 'secrete loquimur', 'we are talking in private' (5.21), he says ominously. This secretive fifth satire is split into two sections.¹¹⁰ The first is a personal address to Cornutus, in which the code-maker satirist nominates his teacher as his ideal code breaker: 'knock on my Heart', he says, and see through the 'veil of words' to view my 'naked Mind'. This is a strange request, because man's interior is described as a stinking smoke and an inconstant gas in the fourth satire. Persius argues that our inner selves do not bear examination of the sort demanded by the Delphic Oracle, leaving us all as ambiguous holding vessels for failed and inconclusive self-inquisition, broken and evaporated by the Neronian world.¹¹¹ Interestingly, this particular request for inner contemplation and understanding is itself made up of an intricate tissue of allusions to confessional passages in Horace's satires, odes, and epistles.¹¹² For example, those last lines about knocking on the heart to see what truths it contains are taken from Horace, *Satires* 1.6.51, a very similar poem that enquires into the relationship between the poet (Horace) and his mentor (Maecenas).¹¹³ In the original poem, Horace praises Maecenas for his judicious selection of friends and acquaintances: 'praesertim cautum dignos adsumere, prava / ambitione procul', 'you are cautious to choose as friends only the worthy, who stand aloof from base self-seeking'. There are complex, self-comprehending resonances to this judicious selection of literary allusions. If the reader knocks on Persius's line (or tries to see through its 'veil of words'), they find that it does not belong to Persius at all. A very slippery and politicised poet–client relationship has

been internalised as the model for self-relation, which is itself a dark comment about the need for satirical allies in the Neronian world, as well as the fact that the satirist's interior has doubled back to a Horatian past in which satirical activity was in some senses protected within the pale of Maecenean patronage. This allusion comprehends the nature of allusion itself as a temporary alliance or conversation between texts and satirists, but in this case it also involves a dangerous kind of intellectual traffic between poets in states of duress or fearful anticipation, one protected under Maecenas and one not.¹¹⁴

Persius's six satires and their choliambic prologue articulate an acute fear of ever-diminishing circles, of being watched, and of putting a foot wrong. The mind can incriminate itself in enclosed and fearful circumstances of this kind. Seneca referred to the Neronian world as 'tam insana hominum ambitione tot calumniatoribus in deterius recta torquentibus', 'this mad world of ambition where deviousness so frequently contorts right into wrong'.¹¹⁵ In *De tranquillitate animi* (*On Tranquillity of Mind*), Seneca says, 'torquet enim adsidua observatio sui et deprendi aliter ac solet metuit', 'it is torturous to be constantly watching oneself and be fearful of being caught out of our usual role', and 'non tamen iucunda vita aut segura est semper sub persona viventium', 'the life of those who live under a mask cannot be happy and without anxiety' (17.1–2).¹¹⁶ Though he is thought to have been anti-Senecan in terms of his politics, Persius might have found the edge of the Neronian satirist's fears in Seneca's words: 'mirer ad me aliquando pericula accessisse, quae circa me semper erraverint?', 'Should I be surprised if the dangers that always have wandered about me should at some time reach me?'¹¹⁷ As discussed throughout this book, the experience (or perceived experience) of restriction under tyranny has always provoked satirists in English literature to reconnect with the canon of Roman satire. They have sometimes returned to Persius: either to the deliberately evasive and strange choliambic prologue or to some of the more extended articulations of Stoic aggression (compacted within states of acute psychological duress) that are offered in the satires themselves.

Nero's suicide in 68 precipitated a complex succession crisis that led to the famous 'Year of the Four Emperors'. Titus Flavius Vespasianus, 'Vespasian' (9–79 CE), a military commander who had once been rejected by Agrippina and Nero, was declared emperor by his legions in Egypt (and then by the Senate) in 69. Under Nero, Vespasian and the II Augusta legion had secured imperial control of the south coast of Britannia. Vespasian had also suppressed the revolt of Judea at the beginning of what came to be known as the Jewish–Roman War of 66–73 CE. The Flavian dynasty, concentrated in a father and two sons, had been brought to power by legions in the imperial provinces who supported the Flavian claim against both the Julio-Claudians and the emperors who had come to power so briefly in 69 (especially Otho and Vitellius).

The Flavians redirected state resources towards the rebuilding of Rome after this civil war, decisively separating themselves from models of imperial statecraft that could be identified as overtly Julio-Claudian.¹¹⁸ The aforementioned anecdotal historian Suetonius, who was born under the Flavians and survived to see the arrival of the Nerva-Antonines, condemned the Julio-Claudian ‘tyrants’ in terms that are now understood to have been politically inflected and predictably exaggerated. The Emperor Titus Caesar Vespasianus, ‘Titus’ (39–81 CE), famous for the creation of magisterial state buildings and architectural wonders (including the Colosseum at Rome), was succeeded by Titus Flavius Domitianus, ‘Domitian’ (51–96 CE), the notoriously severe emperor who, among other colonial expansions, pushed the borders of imperial rule in Britannia (with Agricola) right up to Caledonia. Because the Flavians had been brought to the imperial throne by a kinetic transfer of power to personal armies in the imperial provinces, the reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian saw the consolidation of a principate that would no longer uphold the senatorial infrastructure and depended, almost entirely, on different kinds of elite military patronage. The state that had defined itself until now as a principate was starting to move towards something that is now more often described as a dominate. The Flavians stabilised the Roman economy through recoinage and extended taxation, resetting the currency standard to that which had been instated under Augustus. Despite these outward-facing displays of stability, order, and recovery, the Flavians at the elite level had to contend with an extraordinary number of assassination plots and plans to topple the leadership. What is sometimes referred to as Domitian’s ‘reign of terror’ was a late period of sanctioned executions and paranoid control of the inner circles. Domitian’s successors—Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian—all came to the emperors as rulers within a dominate structure rather than as an Augustan princeps or ‘first citizen’ at the centre of the executive apparatus of a principate.

Decimus Junius Juvenalis, ‘Juvenal’ (b. 55 CE), was a raging rhetorician-satirist of the early Nerva–Antonine period. In his foul and aggressive satires, which in their own way attest to the development of an acute endurance consciousness among the vulnerable elite that had seen out the preceding dynasty, Juvenal provided a provocative, funny, and grotesque account of Rome under the Flavian tyrants. Particularly in the later satires, Juvenal deployed a highly trained elite poetics conditioned by institutional training in the *ars rhetorica* and the writings of the canonical grammarians. As both a post-Flavian and anti-Flavian satirist, he presented himself as a member of a native (and nativist) patrician elite. He also presented himself as someone standing on a street corner contemplating the smoking, ruined, and chaotic Rome that had been brutalised, suppressed, and then left to its ruin by the Flavians. He paid particularly close attention to the disgusting, vice-ridden, and illegitimate new

moneyed men who had been created by the imperial excesses and societal reorganisations of Flavian modernity: the barber now in possession of ‘millions’, the slave who now covers his shoulders with the ‘Tyrian purple’ of public office and wears a gold ring, those who ‘applaud / when a friend burps loudly’ or piss on golden basins to make the sound of a drum, and those who consume disgusting and grim delicacies like river pikes ‘bred in the Tiber’ that are actually ‘bloated with torrents of sewage’ and drift around the imperial palaces (a delicacy that reflects in all kinds of ways on the decadent and disgusting elements of Flavian politics).¹¹⁹

In terms of its engagement with the period’s state affairs, Juvenalian satire was precipitated by the self-destructive civic violence, state crimes, and political confusions of a principate transformed into a dominate by traumatic state events. It was satire composed in reaction to the submission of Roman society as a whole to the internal grammar of court intrigue. Juvenal was not alone in condemning the Flavian past. The reign of Domitian, which is likely to have overshadowed Juvenal’s early life, was the subject of much retrospective condemnation in antiquity. Piecing together an accurate political and social history of Domitian’s reign using ancient sources is made really quite difficult by that society’s near-industrial efforts at retrospective condemnation. Modern historians have to be very cautious about the sensational accounts that can be found in the histories of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, as well as the first five satires of Juvenal.¹²⁰ There are fanciful stories of death-themed banquets in dining rooms painted black (Cassius Dio 67.9.1–2) and actors murdered in the street (Cassius Dio 67.3.1), for instance. However such stories are interpreted as historical evidence, there was clearly a high degree of cultural and political trauma left by Domitian’s ‘reign of terror.’¹²¹

We know almost nothing about the satirist we have come to refer to as ‘Juvenal’, who emerges from very weak biographical documentation and a bewildering manuscript stemma that still poses challenges to even the most responsible and insightful editors.¹²² At least thirteen ancient biographers attempted to reconstruct a life of Juvenal using tiny scraps of pseudobiographical information that can be found in the sixteen surviving satires. Perhaps unsurprisingly, each produced a very different result.¹²³ The ancient biographers tend to agree that Juvenal was born in Aquinum (modern Aquino), a Volscian settlement well supplied with water sources (giving the settlement its name) that had been colonised by the Romans, improved through strategic urban development, and then used as a military and administrative hub to link up Rome and Capua. Juvenal is thought to have been exiled for attacking an actor and possibly sent to Roman Egypt (although some suggest that he was actually exiled to Caledonia, just beyond the border established under Agricola). Juvenal’s satires may have fallen into five books (Book 1: 1–5, Book 2: 6, Book

3: 7–9, Book 4: 10–12, Book 5: 13–16), but this is not entirely certain. The satires are referred to here as 1–16.

Freudenburg has memorably and influentially stated that Juvenal composed retrospective satire in a ‘time-warp’.¹²⁴ Many of these satires are participating in the activities of retrospective condemnation that can also be observed in the surviving works of the historians—a crucial feature of their rhetorical and condemnatory strategy, which has been of exceptional interest to satirists in English literature who have themselves been looking back on uncongenial, unpropitious, or hated political situations. Juvenal also claimed to have formed his satire in a context of overstated pseudo-epic self-description, in which the sycophants and poetasters of the Flavian courts were constantly proclaiming the glories of the regime in terms that might once have been more appropriate to something like Homer’s *Iliad*: ‘Semper ego auditor tantum? numquamne reponam / uexatus totiens rauci Theseide Cordi?’, ‘Must I *always* be stuck in the audience, never get my own back / for all the times I’ve been bored by that ranting *Theseid* / of Cordus?’ (1.1–6).¹²⁵ Juvenal said that the misery of Domitian’s tyranny had gone uncriticised because there had been no conditions in place to facilitate a modern Lucilius: ‘unde illa priorum / scribendi quodcumque animo flagrante liberet / simplicitas?’, ‘and where [is] our outspoken / ancestral bluntness, that wrote at burning passion’s behest?’ (1.151–153).

Juvenalian satire is notoriously aggressive. Centuries on, the texts remain haunted by a whole series of questions about attribution and permissibility. The question is whether Juvenal really could have written such passages of satire in a fundamentally unfree society of the kind he endured under Domitian, or indeed in the post-Flavian context.¹²⁶ Much of his reception in European literature has been defined by questions of permissibility, including those being asked by the societies who have received him. In a passage of the first satire that may or may not have been by Juvenal (modern editions offer different interpretations), we are given a glimpse into a world of terrifying punishment equal to the extremity and sustained grotesque elements that can be found elsewhere in the Juvenal corpus, even if it was not actually written by the figure we refer to as Juvenal: ‘But name an Imperial favourite, and you’ll blaze, a human torch, / bound upright, half-choked, half-grilled, your calcined carcase / leaving a broad black trail as it’s dragged across the sand’ (*Satires*, 1.153–157).¹²⁷ The ‘verso pollice uulgu’ or ‘turned thumb of the mob’ was something that—suggestively—fascinated Juvenal (*Satires*, 3.36–37): Rome is a zone of societal suppression and reactive populations, and a city that lacks a core of moral reason.¹²⁸ Notoriously, in the first satire of the first book, Juvenal said, ‘difficile est saturam non scribere’, ‘it is difficult not to write satire’ (1.30). Many have taken this to be a generalisation about the restless critical attitude of all writers who feel an urge to satirise. It has also been taken as a

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