Luxury, waste, and ridicule. An emperor, a fish, and a fisherman. These themes and characters are what make up the majority of the fourth satire of Juvenal, a Roman satirist who wrote around the turn of the first century AD. His satires, divided into five books, discuss the problems he sees with society and with certain people in particular. The fourth satire, which serves as Juvenal’s critic on the emperor Domitian, is of particular interest. It is a satire which depicts the emperor by telling a story that actually goes inside the Roman court and is the only one of Juvenal’s sixteen satires to take such a leap. It is a satire which uses diction, an oversized fish, and contrast between characters to tell its story and to ridicule Domitian at the same time. It is a satire which tells its story predominantly through its style, leaning very little on its plot to get its message across. It is a satire which depicts themes of *luxuria* and waste through a court assemblage about a giant fish, which in fact has no actual conclusion. The fourth satire of Juvenal uses diction and a kaleidoscope of literary devices to describe the fish, fisherman, and members of the court as a means to depict his issue with the *luxuria* and waste of Domitian as well as the plague of violence that is the scene in Rome during Domitian’s reign as Juvenal perceives it for his audience.

Juvenal’s fourth satire is different from the satires preceding it in both subject and structure. While the other satires explore multiple topics, the fourth satire examines the court of the Roman emperor and does little jumping around as far as subject manner goes. For example, the first satire discusses all the reasons why Juvenal is writing satire in the first place. The second satire jumps into a detailed analysis on hypocrites and the immorality of effeminate Roman males. Both include a plethora of examples. Most of the subsequent satires follow in their predecessors’ footsteps and examine many different topics. However, the fourth satire perseveres with the tale of the fish and is divided into just
two parts, an introduction and a main story. The introduction describes Crispinus as “the Egyptian colonel of the Emperor Domitian’s bodyguard.” Juvenal depicts him as a “monster with no redeeming qualities” (monstrum nulla virtute redemptum, IV.2) and a “man with a strong lust for unmarried women alone” (solaque libidine fortes…viduas tantum aspernatus, IV.3-4). In order to prove his point about the unredeemable qualities of Crispinus, Juvenal tells the story of how Crispinus used to be a poor man, but then, when he came into a state of luxuria, “he bought a six pound fish for 6000 sesterces” (mullum sex milibus emit, aequantem sane paribus sesteria libris, IV.15-6). To further his point, Juvenal claims that Crispinus bought the mullet to “eat all by himself” (emit sibi, IV.22). A six pound fish would have been enough to feed many people and yet Crispinus chooses neither to share with friends nor to give to the less fortunate. The mention of Crispinus at the start of the satire can seem to be a random choice made by Juvenal. He has little to do with the main body which is used to ridicule the emperor, Domitian. However, Crispinus is used here by Juvenal to foreshadow the degrading of Domitian which is to come in the main story.2

After the introduction involving the story of Crispinus is complete, Juvenal shifts to the main story which portrays Domitian and revolves around a giant fish. The turbot is brought in by a fisherman who claims that the fish itself “wished to be captured” (ipse capi voluit, IV.69). Upon receiving the fish, the emperor Domitian is unsure of what to do with it since “it would have been a barbarism to chop it up and stew it.” Domitian, “therefore, calls together the members of his court” (vocantur ergo in consilium procures, IV.72-3) to figure out the best way to both cook and consume the turbot. After suggesting that a large vessel with a spacious circumference is needed, the court is dismissed without anything having actually been accomplished (IV.131-2). It is assumed that Domitian ate the turbot by himself just as Crispinus did with his six pound mullet in the introduction.

While the stories of Crispinus and Domitian are quite different, parallels cannot help but to be drawn between the two. Both men spend the early years of their lives in poverty. It is likely because of this that they each gained a “desire for material possessions.” This desire is shown blatantly by Juvenal when he depicts each man and the fish with which he comes into contact.
Crispinus, on the one hand, buys a fish for much more than it is worth and subsequently devours it on his own. On the other hand, Domitian is given a giant fish and, although he seeks advice from his council members about what should be done about it, he just ends up dismissing them and eating the turbot all by himself. Both interactions show the themes of *luxuria* and waste because both men think only of themselves. The two men are also quite similar when it comes to the catalogue of their immoralities. Both Crispinus and Domitian have a lust for other woman, specifically other men’s wives, and are both overly conscious of their appearances. Such iniquities by both men easily lend themselves to the themes of *luxuria* and waste that Juvenal is portraying in his fourth satire.

Diction plays an important role in the creation of contrast between Crispinus and Domitian throughout the satire. Staying true to his character, Juvenal wrote his fourth satire in “mock-epic style” with a “deliberate and effective use of diction.” Mock-epic style, also known as mock-heroic, employs the use of language usually used in epic and applies it to an everyday subject. One of the first instances of such mock-epic diction appears in the introduction when Crispinus “buys a mullet for 6000 sesterces” (*mullum sex milibus emit*, IV.15) all for himself. This is a distinct example of “deliberate bathos,” a sudden shift in style from the grand to the everyday. Such use of bathos provides both a humorous effect and a sense of mock-heroism. Crispinus is described using the same diction as an epic author would use to portray a hero. However, all Crispinus did was buy a fish. He did nothing that would normally be deemed as heroic and so through the mock-epic language is made out to be a fool for buying the six pound fish for so much.

This mock-epic style can also be seen poignantly in lines 34–36 when Juvenal feigns the invocation of a muse to assist him as he tells his story: *incip, Calliope, licet et considere, non est cantandum, res vera agitur, narrate, puellae Pierides;* The muses are called upon throughout Greek mythology to help the teller of the tale explain his story, whether it was written or in the oral tradition. Juvenal asks Calliope, the Muse of Epic, to assist him and then subsequently asks everyone “to be seated” (considere, IV.34). However, poetry is usually recited standing up unless the subject matter is trivial. Juvenal continues on to explain that the tale is
not just some story, but rather the truth, \( (\text{res vera agitur}, \text{IV.35}) \). In calling his subject matter \textit{vera}, Juvenal clarifies the reason he asked his audience and Muse to be seated—not because the subject at hand is trivial, but because he does not need a Muse to assist him because he is expressing his own account of the truth of the situation.

Such mock-epic language continues to appear as Juvenal depicts Domitian and the enormous turbot. For example, lines 72-122 contain a detailed catalogue of the members of Domitian’s court. Such an extended enumeration is typical of any epic, such as the catalogue of ships in the second book of Homer’s \textit{Iliad}. Another illustration of Juvenal’s mock-epic style appears in lines 37-38. These two lines demonstrate clearly the author’s use of epic structure as well as epic vocabulary. \textit{Cum iam semianimum laceraret Flavius orbem ultimus et calvo serviret Roma Neroni}. The last four words of each line are of the same pattern – adjective describing object/verb/subject/object. The four-syllable word \textit{semianimum} (IV.37) also lends itself to the mock-epic style because of its length. The sound of the word itself is unpleasant and, therefore, helps to create the contrast between the epic style being used to describe the non-epic subject matter of Domitian destroying the world. The mock-epic style is used to describe Domitian more than Crispinus, showing a contrast between the two men. It proves Crispinus to be merely a device of foreshadowing and as a “miniature Domitian,” unworthy of any lengthy epic sounding description.10

The use of Crispinus as a foreshadowing device can also be seen in Juvenal’s use of language of the stage in the fourth satire. Such language is particularly evident in the opening two lines of the satire in \textit{Ecce iterum Crispinus} (IV.1) and \textit{vocandus ad partes} (IV.2). \textit{Ecce} is often used in plays to show the introduction of a new character onto the stage. Here, Juvenal uses it to introduce his audience to Crispinus. \textit{Vocandus ad partes} continues the metaphor of the stage and is used to mean that Crispinus has entered “to play his role.”11 In particular, he has entered to play his role as Domitian, giving the audience an idea of who Domitian is before the emperor is presented to them.12 Thus, \textit{ecce} is used by Juvenal to introduce both Crispinus and Domitian and, as such, is appropriately the first word of the satire. \textit{Ecce iterum Crispinus} also represents Crispinus’ unavoidable appearance in satire.13 His presence is particularly inevitable in the fourth satire as he is the perfect character to
foreshadow and seamlessly transition to the upcoming character
depiction of the emperor, Domitian.

Throughout the satire, Juvenal fails to attack Domitian
directly. He instead mocks him because “ridicule is as powerful a
weapon as injective.” Juvenal uses ridicule successfully to degrade
Domitian in his fourth satire. Before his name is even mentioned,
Domitian is labeled as a bald Nero (calvo serviret Roma Neroni, IV.38).
This is not an attack on Domitian, but rather a ridicule of his since
baldness was an attribute often associated with clowns by the
Romans. Ridicule serves as such a useful tool for satirists because
although many great criminals will be indifferent when they are
named as villains or ruthless scoundrels, they will assuredly grimace
if they are derided and fashioned to be purported as fools. Domitian
believed himself to be of divine status while he was still
alive, a designation which was only offered to deceased monarchs
and those who could perform miracles. Juvenal uses this fact to
his advantage and states that Domitian “possesses power equal to
that of the gods” (cum laudatur dis aequa potestas, IV.71). On the
surface, it may seem as though Juvenal is merely flattering
Domitian. However, reading between the lines yields an
understanding that Juvenal is using flattery as a means of
controlling the emperor and, “simultaneously, to mock before
those who know better, his divine pretensions.”

Conversely, Juvenal does not use ridicule as a means to
paint the verbal portraits of the eleven men whom Domitian
assembled. Several of the council members, such as Pegasus and
the son of Acilius, are “treated not unkindly by Juvenal.” Juvenal
tells his audience that Pegasus is the “best and most sacred
interpreter of the law” (optimus atque interpres legum sanctissimus,
IV.78-9). The son of Acilius is likewise portrayed as a “youth who
did not deserve the harsh death that would soon be brought upon
him by his master’s sword” (iuvne indigno quem mors tam saeva maneret
et domini gladiis tam festinate, IV.95-6). Others are not treated quite so
kindly by Juvenal. For example, Rubrius, another member of
Domitian’s court, is said to be “guilty of an old crime that cannot
be mentioned and to be more shameless than a pervert writing
satire” (offensae veteris reus atque tacendae, et tamen inprobior saturam
scribente cinaedo, IV.105-6). Although some court members are
described as villains while others “at least had a degree of decency”,
the eleven members of the court are “considered collectively.”
This collective is seen most manifestly in line 113 in which Juvenal uses the literary device of chiasmus to depict sensible (prudens) Veiento and deadly (mortifero) Catullus, (Et cum mortifero prudens Veiento Catullo, IV.113). Chiasmus is the reversal of the order of words which places them in ABBA form. The use of such a literary device helps Juvenal convey his point that his main issue is with Domitian. He must mention the men of the court in order to accurately describe what goes on in it since “it would be a pointless satire were it not formally correct.”

Juvenal also uses the fear the court has for Domitian to demonstrate his issue with the emperor. Crispus, one of the eleven members of the court, is described as “a pleasant old man” (iucunda senectus, IV.81) whose gentle soul matches his eloquence meaning that he does not speak freely the thoughts that are in his head. He is terrified of what will happen to him if he says what he truly thinks – that he “condemns the plague of violence” (saevitiam damnare, IV.85), brought upon Rome by Domitian. Crispus is just one example of the terror felt towards Domitian by the court members. Pegasus “sped up” (properabat, IV.76), when Domitian ordered him “to run” (currite, IV.76) because he was afraid of what would happen to him if he did not comply with Domitian’s orders. Collectively, the members of the court bore pale demeanors as a result of their great and miserable relationship with the emperor (IV.75-76). Another blatant example of their fear comes with the fact that they do not laugh in Domitian’s face when he calls them to give council about a fish. This meeting has little to do with running the Roman Empire, but is rather a ludicrous assemblage to discuss a how best to cook a fish and is somewhat nonsensical in nature. However, the members of the court rush straight to Domitian’s side when he calls them, no matter how trivial the reason, for fear of what would happen to them otherwise.

In his fourth satire, Juvenal describes two fish in particular -a mullet and a turbot. Mullum (IV.15) is used to describe the mullet bought and consumed by Crispinus at the start of the satire. Rhombi (IV.39) is the name given for the giant turbot caught in the Adriatic Sea and brought to Domitian. Both the mullet and the turbot are fish of enormous magnitude. The former is bought for thousands while the latter is too large for any to dare to sell or buy at a fish market as there are “investigators of seaweed everywhere” (dispersi protinus algae inquisitors, IV.48-49). Both are extraordinary fish and
therefore highly valued in Roman society along with the murena, a type of sea eel. However, the mullet bought by Crispinus was 2.4 kg while the greatest mullets had the potential to be around 9.5 kg in modern measurements. Even though Crispinus paid so much for his mullet, it was a fourth the size of the most extraordinary mullets available. Similarly, the turbot was found off the shore of Ancona while the greatest turbots of the time were found off the shore of Ravenna, a little further north. Even though the turbot was not the greatest of its kind, Domitian made a big deal of the fish, calling his council together to figure out how best to deal with it. Both fish show the luxuria of the two main characters of the fourth satire, Crispinus and Domitian, and their link to one another as prime examples of the waste apparent in Roman society during Domitian’s reign. Crispinus wastes his money while Domitian wastes the time of the members of his court and neither perceives that he has done anything remotely profligate.

Juvenal also uses the similarity between the turbot and the fisherman who brought it to Domitian to demonstrate his themes of luxuria and waste. The fisherman is shown to be a nude (remige nudo, IV.49) since he physically has a lack of money and metaphorically has a lack of any means for defense against “tyrannical bureaucracy.” However, he bears no lengthy description to praise or ridicule him unlike Domitian, Crispinus, and the members of the court. Through such a lack of illustration, Juvenal proves the fisherman to be of little value to Domitian. He is seen as a commodity, as something that can be “bought for less than the fish” (potuit fortasse minoris piscator quam piscis emi, IV.25-26). The turbot is also seen as a commodity, as it well should since it is a fish. However, in juxtaposition to the way Juvenal makes the fisherman out to be less than a person, he shows the fish to have the ability to think for itself. The fisherman claims that the fish “wished itself to be caught” for the Imperial Court (ipse capti voluit, IV.69). The fish is also described as “a runaway” (fugitum, IV.50) who, “having escaped, must be returned to its former master” (elapsum veterem ad dominum debere reverti, IV.52). The master (dominum) in this case is Domitian because, according to Palfurius and Armillatus, everything in the whole sea that is beautiful and conspicuous belongs to the Imperial Treasury. Both the fish and the fisherman are seen thinking for themselves, but both have the ability to be sold as slaves if need be. This similarity shows the
presence of luxuria in Domitian’s time. Anything and anyone, no matter how big or small, had a price. Everyone who possessed any assets deemed valuable by Domitian could be stepped on and drained of them for the expenditure of the emperor.

The role reversal apparent in the fish and the fisherman is also used by Juvenal to show his issue with Domitian and the themes of waste and luxuria caused by the emperor’s actions. While both are seen as commodities by both Domitian and the court, the turbot is personified as a person while the fisherman is made out to be as easy to sell as a fish. The turbot is described as “a foreign beast with upright spikes on its back” (peregrina est belua, cernis erectas in terga sudes, IV.127-128). These spikes are a direct comparison to the spikes on a warrior’s helmet. Earlier in the satire, Domitian was described in a similar way – “the spikes of his helmet stand erect when he is praised for having power equaling that of the gods” (et tamen illi surgebant cristae; nihil est quod credere de se non possit cum laudatur dis aequa potestas, IV.69-71). Such a comparison gives Juvenal’s audience the sagacity that the turbot may be viewed as not just a fish, but as a warrior caught in battle. On the other hand, the fisherman becomes the fish, a commodity able to be used and sold. He does not appear to Domitian as a person, but rather has something he has every right to control. It is in this comparison that Juvenal shows the luxuria of Domitian. He does not care about his people as people; as long as he has the ability to control them, he is happy.

Likewise, the luxuria and waste of Domitian can be seen when comparing the members of the court with the poor fisherman. Both are under the control of Domitian and both fear Domitian, but they serve different purposes for the emperor. The fisherman is merely a pawn in his empire that can be bought, sold, and moved to any place that is the most suitable for Domitian. The members of the court see the fisherman in the same way. While they are also used by Domitian as a means to his selfish ends, the eleven court members are called upon for actual advice when the emperor is unsure of what to do, even if the question at hand is illogical and absurd. Domitian does not care that his question is irrational; he just wants an answer even though it is wasting the time of his council who should be spending their time debating more important topics. Juvenal chose to tell the story of the turbot for just this reason, to show “the ridiculous disproportion between the
trivial subject and the portentous importance of the emperor’s deliberations.”

The themes of *luxuria* and waste are directly tied to the mullet and the turbot. Both are huge fish and, as such, are huge luxuries in the Roman world and should be shared in a great *cena*. Yet, in both circumstances, neither is shared and so no such *cena* occurs. The mullet is eaten by Crispinus alone and the turbot is supposedly eaten by Domitian alone although the actual consumption of the second fish is never explicitly stated in the fourth satire. It is a commonplace saying to declare “you are what you eat.” In this case, Domitian and Crispinus become large people when they eat such large meals singlehandedly. This picture adds to the portrait of the absurd amount of waste apparent in Domitian’s time.

Throughout his fourth satire, Juvenal employs an expert use of language and literary devices and styles to take a careful look inside the Roman court run by Domitian. Juvenal operates his fourth satire with ridicule and vibrant comparisons between his characters. However, the story of the turbot is not as important as the message it yields: the message that Domitian is a force to be stopped, the message that waste and *luxuria* have taken over Rome, and the message that Rome is in need of someone to speak out against Domitian’s plague of violence.
Bibliography


Notes

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