

The Laughter of Democritus: Humour and Glory in Satire

10¹

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Introduction:

Early on in Satire 10, Juvenal compares the laughter of Democritus with the tears of Heraclitus. He praises the one, but brushes off the other. From the beginning, the elements of laughter and philosophy haunt the 10th Satire, perhaps the most “philosophical” of all satires in the Juvenalian corpus. Nowhere is this clearer than in the *gloria* passage, which runs from 10.133 to 10.187. A broad study of the word *gloria* indicates that Juvenal connects it closely with images of food, the comedic value of which had a long history in Roman literature. In Section II, closely analyzing each example of *gloria* in Book 10 discovers both subtle and obvious ways of making a joke of glory. This paper traces a few of those specific jokes, but does not intend to be an exhaustive litany of them. The final section of this paper turns toward the philosophies mentioned or referenced in Satire 10, and discusses the validity of an “Epicurean” reading of Satire 10. Ultimately, while Juvenal might seem to condemn glory from a philosophical perspective, a broad philological analysis of the word, along with a close reading of the *gloria* passage in Satire 10 make clear that comedy, not philosophy, is the essential element of his satirical attack.

Part I: Glory and Comedy Across the Satires

Each time *gloria* appears outside of Satire 10, the poet mentions it in connection with food. The speaker laments the miserable meal served to him, and declares “once upon a time, the glory of giving was regarded greater” (*olim maior habebatur donandi gloria, 5.111*). This, the only positive depiction of *gloria* in all 16 of the *Satires*, claims that true glory *gives away* food, and does not hoard it. Juvenal invokes *gloria* twice and then, shifts to a wholly negative contextual of it when he writes “what will, however so much glory, be to Serranus and to emaciated Saleius, if it is only glory” (*Serrano tenuique Saleiio /*

gloria quantalibet quid erit, si gloria tantum est, 7.81). The speaker here denounces poetic or rhetorical fame and glory, because the poet is poor. So starved is he that even a lion's appetite seems smaller (*leviori sumptu, 7.77*), while the poet's gullet is parasitically voluminous (7.78). When it next occurs, at 7.118, *gloria's* association with food has only grown more prominent. The lawyer "bursts his liver" so that he might win green palms, the "the glory of stairs" (*scalarum gloria, 7.118*) for his doorpost. However, the honour comes at a cost: he eats only (*siccus patasunculas et vas pelamydum aut veteres...bulbi 7.119-7.120*). Bypassing Satire 10, Juvenal uses the word *gloria* on only one other occasion: at 13.98, where the speaker condemns a runner, because he cannot actually eat the wreath he wins. Images of eating and food are invariably found wherever *gloria* appears.

This undeniable association with food makes a joke of glory and robs it of any serious weight. Food and appetite are stock tropes in Roman comedy. Anecdotally, Plautus's *Menaechmi* makes this point abundantly clear. The play's first speech alone contains no fewer than seven jokes about appetite, the slavery of hunger, and different kinds of food. This, of course, is anecdotal evidence. More systematically, however, the stock characters of Plautine comedy prove the same point. Plautine comedy gives ample space to the parasite (*Bacchides, Persa, Captivi*, and a great many others) and the cook (*Mercator, Miles Gloriosus, Aulularia*), whose humour rests in their connections to food. Additionally, invented foods make for some of the finest wordplay in the *Menaechmi*. *Glandionidam* and *pernonidam*, for instance, pun on the Latin patronymic; A.S. Gratwick renders them splendidly as "Miss Piggy Sweetbreadson" and "Master Porky Baconnson." Food provides a space for much of the humour of the *Menaechmi*, and Plautine comedy in general.

The usage of food in Juvenal exists within this tradition and draws much humour from it. Satire 5, for instance, concerns itself with the life of the parasite. The speaker mocks Trebius as *parasitus*, setting Satire 5 in the line from the food-jokes of Roman comedy. Similarly, the *patasunculas* and *pelamydum* of Satire 7, with their ridiculous, broken rhythm practically ooze

contempt. The mere names for types of food become jokes of their own. It is important to note, however, that the point is not whether Juvenal explicitly draws inspiration from Roman comedy; certainly, *pelamydum* is not directly related to *pernonidam*. The comical predecessor is important because it bears witness to what the Romans thought was funny: parasites, appetites, and wordplay, to name but a few. Food, since it is intimately connected to both verbal humour and stock characters, retains its implicit comedic value in Juvenal's satires. Food is historically funny; its association with *gloria* reduces the thirst for glory to a lust for the bathetic.

Juvenal, however, does not rely merely on the comic history of food; each occurrence of *gloria* becomes its own kind of joke. The poet's longing for glory, for instance, becomes an exercise in prostitution. Courtney's comment is insightful. He argues that Juvenal's *promisit diem* at 7.82 "is characteristic of the whore or bawd," while "female friends" (*amicae*, same line) is "the first hint of the sexual imagery which follows, and which conveys that Statius has to prostitute his talent." Glory makes the poet a hungry whore; this is simultaneously cruel and comical. Nor is the lawyer spared. His wreath is described as the "glory of the stairs" (*scalarum gloria*, 7.118). The successful attorney has no house of his own, but lives in a room at the top of the steps. Juvenal's runner, if he is really sane, wishes for gout (*locupletem podagram*, 13.96), because he cannot eat an olive-wreath. The irony of a successful athlete longing for gout is difficult to overstate. The runner Ladas gives his life in pursuit of something which he does not even want; indeed, he wants the very opposite. In different fashions -- bawdiness, absurdity, and irony in particular -- the poet turns every pursuit of glory into a farce.

Ultimately, a philological analysis of the usage of *gloria* throughout the Satires yields a simultaneously generalized and specific critique. Invariably, glory and food appear together. Comestibles make for excellent comedy, historically speaking; the works of Plautus attest to that. The presence of gluttony calls glory's worth into question, and allows the reader to laugh at it instead. The poet then puts his finger on the baseness, absurdity, or irony of each specific situation. Laughter grounds the poet's thinking on glory; it is always the occasion for mockery,

derision, or both. This insight informs any intelligent reading of the *gloria* passage in Satire 10.

Section II: Gloria in Satire 10

To begin, it must be noted that this section will not attempt to catalogue every joke in the *Gloria* passage; instead, it will point out a few particulars, trusting that these will be enough to make the point.

The particular *exempla* of glory in Satire 10 develop the preceding critique in distinct ways. The attack on Hannibal, the longest of the three *exempla*, draws peculiar power from the image at its center. Hannibal declares “” (*acti nihil est, nisi...media vexillum pono Subura 10.155-10.156*). The Subura is not the Capitoline Hill; it was Rome’s equivalent of a red light district. At line 5.106, the Subura is directly related to its overflowing sewer. Hannibal’s Glory is nothing until it claims the human sewer; that is the Carthaginian’s great desire, the end of all his conquest. It is a picture which the speaker calls *digna quali tabella*, worthy of some kind of cartoon (10.157). Already, the picture of Hannibal’s advance is a highly comical one.

It becomes even more comical with the line *cum Gaetula ducem portaret belva luscum* (10.158). Of particular importance are the words *belva* and *luscum*. Both suggest a kind of physical monstrosity. *Luscum*, which roughly means “blind,” appears only at two other points in the Juvenalian corpus. In one, it describes a statue of a Lawyer in a chariot, missing one of its eyes, in a threatening pose with its bent spear (7.126-128). Ferguson calls it “a ludicrous statue of a lawyer.” At another point, Juvenal applies it to an old man who is practically falling apart, envied by the other old men because he has one eye, rather than zero (10.228). In either case, it calls attention to humorous physical decay. Its application to the great general undermines his status as a military chief, and implicitly compares him to a broken old man or crumbling statue. *Belva* brings out another dimension of the physical image. It appears six times in Juvenal’s works, always describing animals of particularly great size: fish (4.121, 4.127); lions (7.77) and elephants (10.158; 11.126; 12.104). The explicit sense of the Latin is “a beast, distinguished by size or ferocity.” It carries with it a sense of

uncommon monstrosity, as the case of the turbot in Satire 4 suggests. The result is an absurd physical picture: the decrepit man riding the enormous beast, in order to set his standards in the sewer of Rome. Glory makes a general into an absurdist caricature; by laughing at him, Juvenal condemns him more effectively than *indignatio* ever could.

The example of Alexander the Great develops an element of degrading condescension within the comical vision. Most importantly, when he describes Alexander's death, Juvenal declares *a figulis munitam intraverit urbem* (10.171). Per Courtney, the image of walls fortified by potters "is hardly a flattering description of the brick walls of Babylon." He explains that, for one thing, it parodies the poetic convention, which was fond of such descriptions; for another, the phrase suggests how miserable and paltry was Alexander's end. Juvenal reduces one of the ornaments of the world to the produce of a potter's kiln (*figulis*). Upon Alexander's death, the poet declares *mors sola fatetur quantula sint hominum corpuscula* (10.172-173). The double diminutive is piercingly amusing: the body is so small and weak in death that it needs to be diminished twice. There is a certain tone of condescension here, too, as if the reader looks down upon and sneers at what remains of the body. This is the end of another long pursuit of glory: a tiny corpse, in a city made in a potter's kiln, worthy only of a bit of sneering.

While the preceding section directly ridicules the meanness and indignity of in which the quest for glory ends, the final *exempla* is characterized by a series of consciously hyperbolic images. They make a mockery of the Persian conquest and undermine Xerxes's achievement. The section begins, *creditur olim / velificatus Athos et quidquid Graecia mendax / audet in historia* (10.173-175). The sentence turns around the image of *sailing* Mt. Athos, a reference to Xerxes' digging a canal to bypass the Chalcidicean promontory. The image, however, sounds as though the ships were literally sailing *up* the mountain. Digging a canal is both a boring and believable image; Juvenal transforms it into an immensely entertaining picture which does not fall remotely within the realm of credibility. The words *creditur olim* and *mendax* make the hyperbole inescapable, for the speaker himself suggests that the

claim is manifestly false. The reader is encouraged to laugh both at Xerxes sailing up a solid stone mountain, and at the mendacious Greek historian who claims he actually did it.

In the next line, both of these comments become even sharper. The speaker snarls, *altos defecisse amnes epotaque flumina Medo / prandente* (10.176-178). Again, we have a comically absurd physical picture: a single Mede, guzzling away at the rivers of Greece. The contrast of the plurals *amnes* and *flumina* with the singular *Medo* is skillful satire: one person drains river after river dry. More amusingly, the Mede does not merely drink from the rivers; the participle *prandente* suggests “lunching at,” as though he were making a quick meal of the *amnes* and *flumina*. Both the contrast between singular and plural, and the participle *prandente* introduce the traditional comical elements of appetite and food. We laugh at this image for the same reasons we laugh at the parasite in Roman comedy, or the hungry poets of Satire 7. Finally, the entire statement depends upon *credidimus*, much like the image of Athos being sailed up. The speaker does not believe it himself -- indeed, it's so ridiculous that he rather suspects the historians lied. Like the image of Mount Athos, this peculiar detail laughs at both hyperbole and its implicit untruth, while it also plays with a bit of traditional comestible-comedy.

The particular *exempla* of Satire 10 enrich the comic model of *gloriae* laid out in Satires 5, 7, and 14. The speaker describes Hannibal in comical, dehumanizing terms that make him into a malformed monstrosity. Alexander warrants only a bit of brief condescension, while Xerxes's accomplishments are first made impossible, then brushed off as lies. *Gloria* makes her devotees into mere jokes, and in the process strips them of their dignity. The comical impulse grounds a robust critique of *gloria*; it implicitly de-elevates and demystifies its subjects. From this vantage, the irony, inconsistency, and folly of their behaviour becomes obvious.

Section III: The Philosoph(ies) of Juvenal

At first glance, it seems as though Epicurean philosophy provides another window into the meaning of Satire 10. Ferguson, for instance, claims that “the Tenth Satire is hardly to

be understood without an awareness of Epicurean philosophy.” A number of elements in the *gloria* passage seem to bear out this claim, of which I shall only sketch a few. For instance, the speaker declares, *causas discriminis atque laboris / inde habuit* (10.139-10.140). *Inde*, Ferguson observes, refers rather obviously to military glory. This seems like an Epicurean sentiment. Epicurus taught that only those pleasures should be pursued which are not outweighed by the pain they entail. A philosophical reading would make Juvenal a good Epicurean, for the speaker’s objection to glory is the labour and danger which it entails. This appears to be a classical case of weighing pleasures. The conclusion, where “much-sought glory exacts punishments” makes a similar point: the proposed object of pleasure will really cause more pain, and therefore should be shunned. There are others: the lines *opposuit natura Alpemque nivemque* (10.152) might be explained through the Epicurean notion that desires which oppose nature are anathema, as Ferguson suggests. On the basis of these three passages, the critique of *gloria* might be rooted in Juvenal’s Epicurean ethics.

Juvenal, however, is not writing Satire 10 in isolation; intertextual allusions complicate the apparently straightforward “Epicurean” tones of the poem. Now, the shortest of *exempla gloriae* is Alexander the Great, second in the sequence of three. Alexander is mentioned at only one other point in Juvenal’s satires, in line 14.311. That alone should be enough to establish a solid connection, but there are other echoes which connect 14.308-14.321 with the *gloria* passage. Most notably, the word *sitis*, thirst, occurs only in two places: 10.140, where it is connected with *famae*; and at 14.318, where the speaker is introduced as an opposite to Alexander’s desire to conquer the world. Finally, both passages deal with similar themes -- how much should suffice for a human being, and the objects of human desire. Even if one could critique the link that *sitis* provides, the identical character and similar themes make the connection undeniable. Satire 10 should be read in context of this allusion to 14.

The allusion to Satire 14 undermines any attempt to read Juvenal’s critique of *gloria* as straightforward Epicurean ethics. At first, it seems like the speaker might merely be confirming his

Epicurean influences: he references Epicurus by name, after all, and he reflects, in Ferguson's phrase, "a proper appreciation of Epicurus's cult of the simple life." The allusion to Alexander, however, is not directly connected to Epicurus. Instead, Alexander encounters Diogenes the Cynic (14.308-14.312). Diogenes is practicing his ethics in the public square, in line with the teachings of his school. By contrast, the Epicureans thought the ideal ethical life was one of withdrawal and seclusion from the affairs of the city. The allusion links Alexander with a philosopher whose entire life was a rejection of Epicurean ethics. As the Oxford Classical Dictionary notes, the Epicureans frequently polemicized against the Cynics. The two schools were clearly at odds with one another; the allusion therefore forecloses any straightforwardly Epicurean reading of Satire 10.

As the examination of lines 14.308-14.321 continues, the poet's philosophical leanings, or lack thereof, become clear. The speaker, whomever he may be, sets forth his own opinion: *mensura tamen quae / sufficiat census, si quis consulat, edam* (14.316-14.317). He proceeds to lay out the philosophers whose vision of the moral life he approves of. There follows a citation of Epicurus, and, in the succeeding line, and invocation of Socrates (14.319 - 14.320). Both are called as witnesses to the value of the simple life, against excessive wealth. In the line after that, the speaker declares, *numquam aliud natura, aliud sapientia dicit* (14.321). Ferguson observes that "the Stoics were always insisting, '*secundum natura vivere.*'" In the space of 3 lines, the speaker invokes an equal number of philosophical schools. Each of these, he suggests, nearly matches his own opinions. Cynic, Epicurean, Socratic, Stoic -- each of these offers a coherent and correct moral opinion. This allusion is eclectic, not Epicurean.

This allusion destabilizes the attempt to read Satire 10 as a treatise of Epicurean ethics. It is as undeniable as it is eclectic: Alexander only appears twice in the Satires, as does *sitis*. This is not a coincidence, nor are the thematic similarities between the two passages. Each of the philosophical schools alluded to in 14.308-14.321 could account for philosophical elements of Satire 10. The Stoics insisted on life in accord with nature, in respect to which Hannibal failed abysmally (*opposuit natura*

Alpemque nivemque, 10.152); the Cynics, as Ferguson notes, were notoriously distrustful of military virtues; Socrates lived a simple life. Critically, each of these schools or their figureheads advocated a public, ethically involved life. None of them would have retired to gardens to seclude themselves from the city. Neither does the satirist; he must be involved in the world, for he practices an urban art. No good Epicurean could be a good satirist. On the grounds of that fundamental dissonance, and the strength of the allusion to Satire 14, the “epicurean” understanding of Satire 10 should be dismissed.

Conclusion

A broad philological analysis of the word *gloria* throughout Juvenal’s work and a close reading of the specific *exempla* in Satire 10 indicate that the critique of *gloria* relies on comedy, not philosophy. *Gloria* is contested with laughter, not debate. Satire 10 is perhaps the most serious and philosophical of all of them; if it needs to be understood in terms of humour rather than dogma, so does the entire collection. In that sense, Democritus offers one of the keys to the Juvenalian corpus: the Satirist may never weep; he must always laugh. He may never withdraw; he must always engage. When the poet takes over the podium in the first ten lines of Satire 1, he wants to entertain. That element never disappears; in fact, it grounds the entire work.

Bibliography

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Notes

¹ All definitions of words are from the Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary, while the Oxford Classical Dictionary has been consulted for general background about ancient philosophical schools.