

JUVENAL (A.D. 55/60 - c. 127)

Decimus Junius Juvenalis was the most powerful of all Roman satiric poets. He had hoped for a career in the administrative service of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) but failed to obtain promotion and grew embittered. He wrote a satire attacking court favorites and was banished. In 96, after Domitian's assassination, Juvenal returned to Rome; but, without money or a career, he was reduced to living as a "client" on the grudging charity of the rich. His situation improved, for remarks in Satire 11 show him, now elderly, living in modest comfort in Rome and possessing a farm at Tibur (now Tivoli) with servants and livestock. The later Satires show a marked change of tone and some touches of human kindness, as though he had found some consolation at last.

Juvenal's 16 Satires deal mainly with life in Rome under the dreaded emperor Domitian and his more humane successors Nerva (96-98), Trajan (98-117), and Hadrian (117-138). They were published at intervals in five separate books.

The Satires attack two main themes: the corruption of society in the city of Rome and the follies and brutalities of mankind. In the first Satire, Juvenal declares that vice, crime, and the misuse of wealth have reached such a peak that it is impossible not to write satire, but that, since it is dangerous to attack powerful men in their lifetime, he will take his examples from the dead. Satire 3 (perhaps the most famous) depicts a crowded and dangerous Rome, which has been ruined by Greeks and other foreign immigrants. Satire 4 relates how Domitian summoned his cringing Cabinet to consider an absurdly petty problem: how to cook a turbot too large for any ordinary pan.

Satire 6, more than 600 lines long, is a ruthless denunciation of the folly, arrogance, cruelty, and sexual depravity of Roman women. Satire 7 depicts the poverty and wretchedness of the Roman intellectuals who cannot find decent rewards for their labors. Satire 8 attacks the cult of hereditary nobility. One of his grandest poems is the 10th, which examines the ambitions of mankind—wealth, power, glory, long life, and personal beauty—and shows that they all lead to disappointment or danger: what mankind should pray for is "a sound mind in a sound body, and a brave heart."

Juvenal's Satires are full of skillfully expressive effects in which the sound and rhythm mimic and enhance the sense; and they abound in trenchant phrases and memorable epigrams. Vivid, often cruelly frank, remarks appear on almost every page.

Forgotten for a time after his death, Juvenal was later read and quoted by Tertullian (c. A.D. 200) and by other Christian authors. From late antiquity forward Juvenal has never ceased to be studied and admired, and he has been imitated by many satirists. The term "Juvenalian satire" still denotes any criticism of contemporary persons and institutions in Juvenal's manner.