

Vivaria Caesaris: Ambiguity, Irony, and Imagery in Juvenal's Fourth Satire

Two decades ago, Emily Gowers in *The Loaded Table* (Cambridge 1993) persuasively interpreted Juvenal's Satire 4, the satire on Domitian and the giant fish, as an "epic parody" (202), in which eating and the outsized fish itself are symbols of Domitian's reign and court retinue. Following David Sweet, Gowers then develops an analogy of the fish as an ostentatious sign of Domitian's power, that the whole world is his personal *vivaria*, or fish-pond. As much as Domitian is the most monstrous fish in his pond, his courtiers, Gowers argues, are "smaller sea-monsters" (208). In my paper, I propose to expand this analysis, showing that Juvenal couches within the animalistic imagery of the *vivaria* a type of symbiotic relationship between Domitian, the Emperor monster-fish, and his courtiers, the smaller monster-fish. Within this *vivaria*, the smaller monster-fish grow corpulent and vicious (*grande et conspicuum... monstrum* 4.115) under the unchecked power of the Emperor; in turn, however, the Emperor violently feeds on these smaller fish (*Lamarium caede madenti* 4.154), thereby eating up the very support and supply on which he is dependent. The result is his eventual demise at the hands of Rome's lowest caste of citizens (*perit postquam cerdonibus esse timendus coeperat* 4.153-54); for the courtier monster-fish, having been destroyed, leave the Emperor monster-fish bloated, vulnerable, yet still dangerous (*cerdonibus esse timendus* 4.153) to the mass of "little fish" at large. With this particular class of "little fish," Juvenal sympathizes (*malim fraterculus esse gigantis* 4.98).

As Gowers has argued, Juvenal uses the incident and environment of the fish's arrival to describe Domitian's court. Domitian visibly bristles (*illi surgebant cristae*, 4.69-70; cf. Gowers 207) like the turbot (*cernis erectas in terga sudes?*, 4.127-128; cf. Gowers 208). The blind courtier Catullus is described as a *grande et conspicuum... monstrum* (4.115), and Crispinus is a *monstrum* (4.2; cf. Gowers 209), just as the turbot is a *monstrum* (4.45). Domitian takes for

himself the world's choicest fish, wherever they swim, which are *conspicuum pulchrumque* (4.54), just as the famous and illustrious aristocrats he took from Rome (*claras quibus abstulit urbi inlustresque animas* 4.151-52). Also, the Younger Pliny refers to Domitian in his *Panegyricus* as an *immanissima belua*, "a most enormous monster" (48.3; cf. Helmbold and O'Neil 71). Moreover, the *Lamiae* of the satire's final line translates both as the aristocratic Lamian family line, and also as a type of flat fish, or gristlyfish, mentioned in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historiae* (9.24; cf. Holland IX.24.4). All of these images blend to create an imagined environment succinctly defined in the phrase *vivaria Caesaris* (4.51).

The ambiguities of the satire reinforce this identification of the fish and Domitian, Domitian and his court. In Peter Green's notes on the satire, he states, "At 56, *ne pereat* is ambiguous: is it fish or fisherman that must not perish?" (143); I argue, however, for a third possible reading: "The fish must be given, lest the Emperor perishes." This reading is supported by Juvenal's exclusive use of the verb *perire*, which links *ne pereat* with *sed periit* in the satire's penultimate line (4.153). In addition, the supposed argumentation of Domitian's lawyers in line 53, that whatever is striking and beautiful in the entire sea belongs to the Treasury, is placed by Juvenal in such a way as call our attention not only to Domitian's far-reaching power, but also his insecurity, on which his courtier "monster-fish" feed.

Finally, Juvenal presents a key ambiguity, which, I argue, reinforces the view that Domitian's savage appetites left him devoid of the very support he required to persist. In 4.152, the phrase *inpune et vindice nullo*, provides an image of Domitian, having destroyed Rome's aristocrats *inpune*, "with impunity", thus leaving him *vindice nullo*, "without a protector". Therefore, the great irony of Juvenal's satire comes after the courtier Montanus exclaims that a "sudden, great Prometheus" is needed to build the fish's mammoth, clay vessel. Although a

mythological joke, Montanus is more right than he knows - only this Prometheus is not needed to build a large dish, he is needed to build more men, aristocratic men, whom Domitian keeps killing off.

Works Cited

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