

Jew-venal: Jews in the Satire of Juvenal

Throughout the poems of Juvenal, the poet attacks various “out-groups” of Roman society.¹ Sexual deviants, women, and foreigners are all examples of groups who fail to live up to the standards of Roman society. In her 2006 book *Nation, Empire, and Decline: Studies in Rhetorical Continuity from the Romans to the Modern Era*, Nancy Shumate argues that “whichever of the three demonized Others [Juvenal] is explicitly targeting at any given moment, in the speaker’s world, they are always the same person.”² Juvenal satirizes numerous groups of foreigners, including Egyptians, Greeks, and Jews among others. While Shumate’s thesis may work for some foreigners, sexual deviants, and women, I argue that the picture is more complex, as the Jews do not fit neatly into Shumate’s equation. An investigation of the instances of Judaism in the satires of Juvenal will demonstrate that while the Jews are a distinctly foreign, non-Roman group, Juvenal’s criticism rests not in equating them with foreigners and sexual deviants, but rather in attacking them for specifically Jewish reasons.

Juvenal mentions Jews in five passages throughout the satires: III.12-20, III.292-6, VI.157-60, VI.542-5, and XIV.96-106. Throughout these passages, Juvenal characterizes the Jews as a distinctly separate group, maligning their religious practices and cultural habits. Rather than associating them with all foreigners, Juvenal targets them specifically *as* Jews, directing his anger at Jewish encroachment into Roman space. In fact, careful analysis of these five passages reveals that Juvenal is careful to differentiate the Jews from other foreign groups throughout the corpus of extant satires.

¹ Richlin, 1984, 67.

² Shumate, 2006, 22.

Furthermore, in contrast to Shumate's thesis, Juvenal does not associate the Jews with sexual deviancy. Even when his source material may have provided the opportunity to do so, Juvenal is careful to confine his attacks on the Jews to their religious practices. While Shumate is correct that "'true' Romanness... is articulated less as a positive assertion of who 'we' are and what 'we' stand for than as a defensive declaration of who 'we' are not, and what 'we' stand against,"³ in the instance of the Jews, at least, we cannot draw clear parallels between all foreigners, women, and sexual deviants. The picture Juvenal paints of Roman society is more complex and variegated and we cannot always break the world of his satires down so easily.

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³ Shumate, 2006, 19.

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