Influences of Greek Literature on Latin Satire. A Diachronic Analysis

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Abstract:
This article aims to highlight the Greek literary sources that had a concrete influence on Latin satire. I will discuss these sources in a chronological and progressive order, allowing the elements of direct influence to be seen in concrete terms. The study is structured into seven main sections, except for the introduction and conclusions, and identifies as sources of influence the following landmarks: Greek mythology, Homeric epos, iambic poetry, Platonic dialogue, Greek comedy, cynic diatribe, and Alexandrian poetry. The goal of such research is to gain a thorough understanding of the literary genre known as „satire" by presenting its archetypal patterns (originating in Greek culture) and the approaches that have ensured its structure and implicit existence in Latin literature.
Keywords: Greek mythology, Homeric epos, iambic poetry, Platonic dialogue, Greek comedy, cynic diatribe, Alexandrian poetry, Latin satire

Introduction

In the most common and widespread sense, "satire" is that type of writing in verse (or prose) in which people's moral failings or negative aspects of society are criticized by offensive language. So far so simple and relatively easy to accept. However, issues arise regarding the origin of this type of literary genre, as opinions appear to be divided into two major distinct directions. Quintilian's contentious dictum *Satura quidem tota nostra est* (*Institutio Oratoria* X.1) has most likely served as an "apple of discord" and played an essential role in delineating and shaping two different streams of interpretation. On the one hand, there are scholars who seek to demonstrate the eminently Latin origins of the satire and implicitly the idea that tends to confirm Quintilian's controversial dictum. On the other hand, many scholars refuse to take the message of the great orator *ad litteram*, seeking to prove the contrary.

The purpose of this study is to identify the main sources of inspiration from Greek literature and, more specifically, to demonstrate that each of them played an important role in the development of Latin satire as a distinct genre. We will thus consider the following landmarks: Greek mythology, Homeric epic, iambic poetry, Platonic dialogue, ancient Greek comedy, cynic diatribe, and Alexandrian poetry.

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1. Greek mythology

Latin satire certainly developed some particularities due to its association with a well-known mythological figure: the satyr. Leaving aside the speculation that has been made about possible etiological interpretations determined on nominal grounds between the two terms, *satyr* and *satire*, we must accept that this character played an important role in shaping the literary species in question. In Greek mythology, the satyr is a nature demon who represents sexuality and fertility. He is typically depicted as a corpulent, bald, and drunken old man holding a flute or a pipe. He may have the legs of a horse or, more commonly, of a goat. He is very vulgar and insolent, he plays tricks on everyone and is not shy at all[1]. The best known satyrs of mythology are Silenus and Marsyas. They can also be joined by the god Pan, at least if we are looking at the aesthetic aspects.

The presence of Marsyas in the Ovidian *Metamorphoses* as well as the mythological episode that shapes the vision of the Thomitan poet are significant in terms of possible Greek mythological influences on Latin satire. The duel between Apollo and Marsyas is significant because it pits two rivals from different social classes fighting against each other: Apollo, son of Zeus, a solar deity who plays the lyre, symbol of the aristocratic class, and Marsyas, a poor satyr, representative of a social stratum with questionable morals, who competes with the pan flute, symbol of a humble class of people. The profile of the Latin satirist, who often attacks the authorities with his literary weapon, can thus demonstrate its validity in terms of possible influences received through Greek mythology.

2. Homeric epos

Discussing the character of Thersites in *Iliad* II, 210-270, Catherine Keane presents him as a man of low social status, ugly, misshapen and bald, a stupid orator who likes to play the clown and who certainly have been a possible model of inspiration in connection with satire. The author's arguments revolve around the concept that both the image and the speech of Thersites validate the behaviour of a satyr/satirist, and can thus reinforce possible influences: "Thersites' attack and his pose are often seen in later Greek and Roman "blame" genres. He focuses on his target's greed, a moral theme also taken up in Hellenistic diatribe and Roman verse satire" (Keane, 2007: 33). Using slander and words of blame, Thersites spreads a variety of reproaches aimed at morally chastising Agamemnon's character. We are targeting a contest based on the inability of social status and noble descent to ensure

[1] Satyrs are frequently depicted with their phallus exposed.

morality[2]. The man of lesser status is fighting back by speech against the great people of the city, against the leaders who make the laws. Thersites' blaming and mocking of Agamemnon is relevant in this regard by representing aspects that are clearly consistent with satirical attitudes.

3. Iambic Poetry: Archilochus and Hipponax

We will now target to a more specific source of Greek literary influences on Latin satire. One such source is certainly iambic poetry. Archilochus and Hipponax both used violent, abusive or even obscene language in some cases, which resulted in attacks on people whose morality was deemed repugnant.

A first argument that warrants the intended influences is Ennius' use of the iambic meter in *Saturae*, a meter proper to Archilochus' writings (Hooley, 2007: 16). Another argument is that Lucilius who also showed a great aptitude for satirical discourse confirms that his style was inspired by the iambic poet: "Metuo ut fieri possit; ergo antiquo ab Arciloco excido" (Warmington, 1938: 252). Finally, regarding the influences received by Latin satire from the verses of Archilochus, Horace also confesses his contributions to their spread in the Latin cultural space (*Epistulae* I, 25).

Hipponax's influence on Latin satire can be attributed to similar characteristics. Persius used in the *Prologue* of his satire the "limping iambic" meter also known as choliamb (σκάζον in Greek), whose inventor was Hipponax (Freudenburg, 2004: 138). Hipponax's influence on Latin satire is not only limited to issues of metre, but also to other aspects such as Persius's preference for exotic terms[3], a characteristic habit of Hipponax's speech (McNelis, 2012: 244).

[2] The presence of such an attitude can be confirmed in the 8th *Satire* of Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis. This aspect deserves to be mentioned even if, in the course of the same satire, Juvenal demonstrates that he does not appear to value Thersites' character. The idea of challenging morality based on the "guarantees" offered by noble descent is certainly accepted by Juvenal.

[3] Such a term is, for example, *caballus*, which is found in the form *cabalino* also in the *Prologue* of Persius' *Satire* I. Here is what McNelis explains: „Though caballus itself was adopted from Latin by Romance languages (e.g. Sp. caballo; Fr. cheval), it may have been a loan-word from Greek or another language (TLL III.3.40–43); but regardless of that, caballino does have a foreign aura. This suffix -inus was native to Latin, but its application to a noun that denotes an animal finds parallels in other words that derive from a Greek noun (e.g. camelinus (Pliny HN 11.261), from κάμηλος, "camel"; pantherinus (Plaut. Epid. 18; Pliny HN 35.138) from πάνθηρ, "panther"; tigrinus (Pliny HN 13.96) from τίγρις, "tiger"). Latin artificially creates such adjectives, for often there was no corresponding Greek adjective (Butler, 1971: 60-61; however, -ῖνος is an ending for Greek nouns denoting animals: ἐχῖνος "hedgehog," ἰκτῖνος "kite," κορακῖνος "raven")". Charles McNelis, *Persius, Juvenal, and Literary History after Horace* in Susanna Braund, Josiah Osgood, *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2012, p. 243-244.

4. The main character of the Platonic dialogue

Even if we are discussing a refined form of invective, one that is elegant and involves complex intellectual notes, we cannot say that certain aspects of satire are not present in the Platonic dialogue. The form of invective to which we refer is obviously irony and the Platonic dialogue's character who performs it admirably, Socrates. Let us first of all mention the allusion to Socrates' satyr aspect in *Symposium* 215a-215c in order to establish the correlation that can be set up in this matter. This is how Alcibiades presents the controversial philosopher to the participants of the event:

> The method of praising Socrates that I shall adopt, gentlemen, is to make comparisons. My subject here will perhaps think I am doing this for amusement but my comparisons will be for the sake of truth, not just to amuse. It is my contention that he is very like those sileni that you find in statuaries' workshops which the craftsmen make holding pipes or *auloi*, and when you open them up you see that they contain small statues of the gods inside. I say also that he is like the satyr Marsyas in particular. Not even you, Socrates, could dispute the fact that you are like these creatures in appearance, and now you are going to hear how you are like them in other ways too. You treat people insolently. Isn't that true? If you don't admit it I will produce witnesses (*Symposium*, 215a-215b).

Many of the scholars who have dealt with the influence of Plato's texts on satire have started from this point. It is the basic argument that can justify the acceptance of Socrates' speech and attitude as a possible source of inspiration for satirists. Horatius, Maria Plaza points out, loved, when he used self-irony, to camouflage his lyrical ego by using the "mask" of Socrates: "The role of Socrates, ugly on the outside but brilliant underneath, was gladly taken up by the Roman satirists, especially Horace, in their self-directed humour" (Plaza, 2006: 170).

Thomas Habinek identifies in Iuvenal's *Satire* IX a certain character that we could consider a "reassembly" of Marsyas and who may be a possible allusion to Socrates. This is Naevolos. This character's lamentations, Habinek concludes, are strikingly similar to the scene in *Symposium* in which Alcibiades complains to Socrates (Habinek, 2006: 185-187).

5. Greek comedy: Aristophanes and Menander

Aristophanes used an abusive and tendentious language against political figures with questionable ethical values or against the reprehensible *mores* of the time. We know that in the play *The Clouds* Socrates is ridiculed beyond measure, in *The Knights* the demagogue Cleon is harshly admonished by the playwright's persiflage, and, in *Lysistrata*, the reckless instigation of war is condemned. All these aspects highlight the possible links between Aristophanes' work and the valences of the satirical genre.

Horatius, referring to the texts of Lucilius, confirms the influences suffered by Latin satire from the works of Greek comedians (*Sermones* I, 4). Gilbert Highet, however, explains these aspects in very concrete terms:

> The comedies – or should we call them comic operas – of Aristophanes and his contemporaries were plays of fantasy in verse, often soaring high into beautiful lyric imagination, often crudely vulgar, sometimes downright silly. They were rich with music and dancing, and used many of the technical resources of the theatre. The satires of Lucilius were non-dramatic poems meant to be read. Although they contained lively dialogue, they could scarcely be put on the stage and acted. What then does Horace mean buy saying so emphatically that Lucilius «entirely derives from Aristophanes» and the others? He means chiefly that Lucilius writes non about fictitious or mythical characters but about real contemporary people; and that he does so in a spirit of mocking criticism (Highet, 1973: 26);

> Horace was right, then, to say that Lucilius "depended on" the Attic comedians. Take away the stage and the costumed chorus; keep the gaiety and the feigned inconsequence, the hiccupping rhythms and indecorous words; allow a jester with a great hart to speak the truth directly to the people, naming names outright and mocking knaves and fools, and you will have Roman satire as Lucilius wrote it (Highet, 1937: 29).

Even if Horatius condemns the fact that Lucilius was inspired by Greek comedians, this does not mean that he was not also impressed by the value of their works. Ralph Rosen is one of the scholars who points this out:

> Sometimes, as we have seen, poets showed themselves to be drawing self-consciously on traditional poetic structures and protocols that take them well beyond their own historical moment – we may think of Callimachus's relationship with Hipponax, for example, or Horace's professed admiration for Athenian Old Comedy (Rosen, 2007: 243).

Persius also appreciated Aristophanes. He calls Aristophanes *the sublime old man* and acknowledges his inferiority to him (*Satura Prima*, 120).

Another important argument regarding the influences that Greek comedy exerted on Latin satire is made by Catherine Keane who presents the point of view that the grammarian Diomedes expressed in his *Ars Grammatica* on this issue:

> Although it borrows from many literary traditions, Roman satire is most frequently compared to Old Comedy. It is another definitive paradox of satire that the so-called <<entirely Roman>> genre is viewed as a descendent of the genre that died with Classical Athens. The late antique grammarian Diomedes describes Roman satire as a kind of poetry <<composed for the purpose of carping at human vices in the manner of Old Comedy>> (Keane, 2006: 15).

Jennifer L. Ferriss also seeks to argue such perspectives and invokes the *parábasis* (παράβασις) procedure that was drawn from Greek comedy and used in Latin satire. Horatius' satires, Ferriss argues, also

often make use of this process, converting and adapting it to the requirements of the literary genre of satire (Ferriss, 2015: 10).

As for the influence of the other great Greek playwright on Latin satire, Menander, this can be confirmed because of a well-known literary *topos*, that of the slave who is smarter than his master (Cucchiarelli, 2012: 167).

Catherine Keane acknowledges the presence of the Menandrian character typology in Horatius' satires:

> Horace employs many stock types from comedy in vignettes about social behavior and human motivation; examples are the bumpkin (1.3.29–32), the stern father (1.4.105–120; cf. 48–56), the spendthrift and the miser (1.2.4–22; cf. 1.1.41–99), the adulterer (1.2.38–46 and 127–133, 2.7.53–67), the cheeky slave (Davus, the primary speaker in 2.7, who shares his name with one of Terence's slaves), and the parasite (2.7.36–39, 2.8.21–24). Comedy's stock characters represent particular vices, foibles, or misguided attitudes (Keane, 2006: 21).

6. The diatribe of cynical philosophers: Bion of Borysthenes and Menippus of Gadara

The cynical diatribe also criticized social *mores* using an offending language. One of the relevant elements in terms of the influence of Latin satire by this genre is the literary technique known as *spoudaiogeloion* (σπουδαιογέλοιον). This technique is, as we know, the reinforcement of a literary *topos* that consists in a joyful merging of seriousness and amusement. Catherine Keane sees a Horatian satire leitmotif in this topic of cynical diatribe (Keane, 2006: 105).

Looking now for other concrete examples, we also highlight *the contestation of the alleged moral qualities of people noble by birth*, an idea that we find in Bion of Borysthenes and that Lucilius, Horatius, and Iuvenal greatly valorize (Fiske, 1920: 181). The personalization of the discourse with autobiographical episodes as well as quasi-permanent references to notorious cultural figures are also recurrent themes in both Bion of Borysthenes and the Latin satirists (Fiske, 1920: 183).

The presence of Bion's name in the second Horatian epistle also demonstrates in concrete terms that the Latin satirist knew the work of the cynical philosopher and could have been inspired by it (Hooley 2007, 31). The influences are not only visible from this point of view:

> He begins, then, in the manner of Bion. Satire 1.1 is a sermon on the theme of *mempsimoiria*, discontent with one's lot in life. In good diatribe style, examples are instanced, soldier, merchant, lawyer, farmer, each preferring the life of another; (…). Quotable aphorisms, *sententiae*, anecdotes from mythology and the animal world of fable duly turn up as does that stock butt of critical attention, the miser: canonical elements of cynic diatribe. So this is what Horace has on offer: a cleverly constructed and elegant rendering of the streetcorner commonplaces of the diatribe in rather refreshingly crafted verse (Hooley, 2007: 32).

As for the second cynical philosopher mentioned, Menippus of Gadara, his influence on Latin satire is proven through the concept of *Menippean satire*, a type of satire quite relevant to Latin literature. Menippus' literary approaches followed a certain pattern, mirroring fantastic places and journeys and paradoxical scenes meant to ridicule the philosophers. In Latin literature, some of these topics can be identified in the works of authors such as Marcus Terentius Varro (*Saturae Menippae*), Seneca (*Apocolocyntosis*) or Petronius (*Satyricon*). Other aspects that can be mentioned in this register are the invective, the admonition of the misbehavior or the scrupulousness with which the moralizing attitude is manifested.

7. Alexandrian Poetry: Callimachus' legacy

Horatius' tendency to depart from his predecessors' writing style entails, Daniel Hooley argues, something of Callimachus' attitude. We know that the Alexandrian poet, through the innovations he introduced into poetry at the time, broke away from the old tradition that was eminently tributary to classicism, thus marking the contentious transition from one literary epoch to another: „At this point Horace signals his difference from Lucilius on aesthetic grounds, declaring for Hellenistic principles deriving from Callimachus: he draws in fact the critical image of the muddy river from Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*" (Hooley, 2007: 47). The mixture of literary material captured in Callimachus' text, which can be found in Lucilius and which is criticized by Horatius, can also be considered an element of influence exerted by Alexandrian poetry on Latin satire: "(…) the charges of mixing material or dialects anticipate that of *contaminatio*, and both foreshadow Horace's description of Lucilius at *Satires* 1.10.20–1 as given to mixing Greek and Latin" (Ferriss-Hill, 2015: 137).

Conclusions

At the end of the study, we summarize the entire list of landmarks that complete the circle of literary elements of Greek culture and civilization that influenced Latin satire. We therefore recall the role played by the characters of mythological discourse, the satyrs who inspired many Latin satirists with their character traits. We can also note as an inspirational model the Homeric epos, especially the most concrete example in this topic, the character of Thersites. Iambic poetry (Archilochus and Hipponax) is also very significant in terms of influence on satire. The Platonic dialogue through the attitude of the character Socrates, the Greek comedy (Aristophanes and Menander), the cynical diatribe (Bion of Borysthenes and Menippus of Gadara), as well as the Alexandrian poetry (Callimachus), all constitute landmarks that can also

be recorded in this register. As a result, the consistency of Greek sources of influence is quite significant. Thus, Latin satire can be viewed as a literary genre composed of disparate elements, many of which were borrowed from Greek literature, elements that consolidated an autonomous literary type by being arranged in a unitary structure by Latin poets.

Horatius himself recognized the value and significance of Greek heritage in the development of Latin culture. For this is what he says in his *Epistle II*: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*.

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