

Satire, parody and the generation of fiction [Discussion]

Read the passages below with these questions in mind:

1. How different is ancient satire from modern satire?
2. Why is Passage 1 satirical? What is it parodying?
3. What is the function of the 'Town Mouse and Country Mouse' story in Passage 2?
4. Why does Horace choose the characters Odysseus and Teiresias (see Passages 3a and 3b)? What does this parody achieve?
5. What kind of work is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? If it is an epic, what kind of epic is it?
6. What is unusual/interesting about Ovid's description of this divine council (see Passage 4)?
7. Can you figure out what is happening in Passage 5?
8. What, if any, is the point of this passage from Julian's *Caesars* (Passage 5)?
9. Is satire/parody simply mockery? Or is it something more/can it be something more?

PASSAGES FOR DISCUSSION

(1) Horace, *Satires* 1.8

Long ago I was the trunk of a fig-tree, a lump of useless wood, till the carpenter, uncertain whether to carve Priapus or a stool, decided on the god. So I'm a god, the terror of thieves and birds: my right hand keeps the thieves away along with the red shaft rising obscenely from my groin: while the reed stuck on my head frightens naughty birds, and stops them settling here in Maecenas' new gardens. Once slaves paid to have the corpses of their fellows, cast from their narrow cells, brought here in a cheap box ... Personally it's not the usual thieves and wild creatures who haunt the place that cause me worry and distress, as those who trouble human souls with their drugs and incantations: I can't escape them or prevent them from collecting bones and noxious herbs as soon as the wandering Moon has revealed her lovely face. I've seen Canidia myself, wandering barefoot with her black robe tucked up, and dishevelled hair, howling with the elder Sagana: pallor making them hideous to view. They scraped at the soil with their nails, then set to tearing a black lamb to bits with their teeth: the blood ran into the trench, so they might summon the souls of the dead, spirits to give them answers. There was a woollen doll there, and another of wax: the wool one was larger to torment and crush the other. The wax one stood like a suppliant, waiting slave-like for death. One of the witches cried out to Hecate the other to cruel Tisiphone: you might have seen snakes and hell-hounds wandering around, a blushing Moon, hiding behind the tall tombs, so as not to be witness. If I'm lying, foul my head with white raven's droppings... Why tell every detail – how the spirits made shrill sad noises as they conversed with Sagana, how the two witches stealthily buried the beard of a wolf, and the tooth of a spotted snake, how the wax doll made the fire blaze more brightly, and how I shuddered, witnessing all the Furies said and did that night? Still I settled the score. My figwood buttocks split out a fart as loud as the sound of a bursting bladder: and off they ran to the city. You'd have been laughing and cheering to see Canidia's false teeth drop, and Sagana's tall wig, herbs and magical love-knots tumbling from their arms.

(2) Horace, *Satires* 2.6.77-115:

Amid this talk my neighbour Cervius prattles away telling old wives' tales that are to the point. For if anyone praises Arellius' wealth, unaware of the troubles it brings, he begins like this: 'It's said a Country Mouse welcomed a Town Mouse once to his humble hole. The guest and the host were old friends: he lived frugally, and was careful, but his spirit was still open to the art of being hospitable. In short, he never grudged vetch or oats from his store, and he'd bring raisins or pieces of nibbled bacon in his mouth, eager by varying the fare to please his guest, whose fastidious tooth barely sampled it.

At last the Town Mouse asks: 'Where's the pleasure, my friend, in barely surviving, in this glade on a steep ridge? Wouldn't you prefer the crowded city to these wild woods? Come with me, I mean it. Since all terrestrial creatures are mortal, and there's no escape from death for great or small, then live happily, good friend, while you may be surrounded by joyful things: mindful while you live how brief existence is.'

His words stirred the Country Mouse, who scrambled lightly from his house: then the two took their way together as proposed, eager to scurry beneath the city walls in darkness... the pair of them made tracks through a wealthy house, where... baskets piled nearby held the remains of all the courses of a magnificent Feast, that had been celebrated the previous evening. Once the Town Mouse had seated the Country Mouse amongst the purple, he rushed about like a waiter, the host serving course after course, performing the role himself, and not unlike a slave first tasting what he served. The Country Mouse at ease enjoyed the change of style, playing the contented guest amongst all the good things – when suddenly a great crashing of doors, shakes them from their places. They run through the hall in fear, stricken by greater panic when the high hall rings to the barking of Molossian hounds. Then says the Country Mouse: 'This life is no use to me: and so, farewell. My woodland hole, and simple vetch, safe from such scares, they'll do for me.'

(3a) Homer, *Odyssey* 11

Then came also the ghost of Theban Teiresias, with his golden sceptre in his hand. He knew me and said: 'Odysseus, noble son of Laertes, why, poor man, have you left the light of day and come down to visit the dead in this sad place? Stand back from the trench and withdraw your sword that I may drink of the blood and answer your questions truly.'

So I drew back, and sheathed my sword, whereon when he had drunk of the blood he began with his prophecy.

'You want to know,' he said, 'about your return home, but heaven will make this hard for you. I do not think that you will escape the eye of Neptune, who still nurses his bitter grudge against you for having blinded his son. Still, after much suffering you may get home if you can restrain yourself and your companions when your ship reaches the Thrinacian island, where you will find the sheep and cattle belonging to the sun, who sees and gives ear to everything. If you leave these flocks unharmed and think of nothing but of getting home, you may yet after much hardship reach Ithaca; but if you harm them, then I forewarn you of the destruction both of your ship and of your men. Even though you may yourself escape, you will return in bad plight after losing all your men, in another man's ship, and you will find trouble in your house, which will be overrun by high-handed people, who are devouring your substance under the pretext of paying court and making presents to your wife. When you get home you will take your revenge on these suitors; and after you have killed them by force or fraud in your own house, you must take a well-made oar and carry it on and on, till you come to a country where the people have never heard of the sea and do not even mix salt with their food, nor do they know anything about ships, and oars that are as the wings of a ship. I will give you this certain token which cannot escape your notice. A wayfarer will meet you and will say it must be a winnowing shovel that you have got upon your shoulder; on this you must fix the oar in the ground and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Neptune. Then go home and offer hecatombs to the gods in heaven one after the other. As for yourself, death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind, and your people shall bless you. All that I have said will come true.'

(3b) Horace, *Satires* 2.5.1-22, 70-88

ODYSSEUS: Answer this, too, Teiresias add to what you've told me: by what methods and arts can I hope to recover my lost fortune? Why do you laugh?

TEIRESIAS: 'So it's not enough for the man of cunning to sail home to Ithaca, and gaze on his household gods?'

OD: You, who never lie to any man, see *how* I return, naked and needy, as you foretold, to stores and herds stripped by the Suitors: birth and ability (unless you have money to go with them) are more worthless than seaweed.

TEI: Since it is poverty you shudder at, to put it unambiguously, learn in what way you can become rich. If a thrush or something is given you for your own, let it fly to where a great fortune gleams, to an old master: Let some rich man taste your sweetest apples or whatever beauties your tilled farm brings you, before your Lar does, he is worthier of your respect. However great a liar he is, of no family, stained by a brother's blood, or a runaway, don't refuse, if he asks you, to walk on his outside.

OD: What, walk with some filthy slave? Not thus did I behave at Troy, matched always with my betters.

TEI: Then, it's poor you'll be.

OD: I can command my noble spirit to bear it, I've suffered worse. Tell me at once Prophet, from where I may shovel up riches, heaps of cash.

[...]

TEI: This too I recommend: if a crafty woman or freedman happens to have sway over a senile old man, join them as partner. Praise them, so that you may be praised in your absence. This too helps; but it's better by a long way to storm the principal himself. If he's a maniac writing bad verse, praise it. If he's a womaniser, don't wait to be asked. Be obliging, of your own accord hand over Penelope to the better man.

OD: What? Do you think she could be procured? She's so chaste, so honest, no Suitor tempted her from the right course.

TEI: Yes, because the young men who came were frugal with gifts. They were more eager for the cooking than the loving. That's why your Penelope is chaste: but once she scents profit from some old man, in company with you, she'll be like a bitch that won't be scared from a juicy bone.

(4) Ovid, *Met.* 1.177-200 (Jupiter threatens to destroy mankind):

When the gods had taken their seats in the marble council chamber their king, sitting high above them, leaning on his ivory sceptre, shook his formidable mane three times and then a fourth, disturbing the earth, sea and stars. Then he opened his lips in indignation and spoke. 'I was not more troubled than I am now concerning the world's sovereignty than when each of the snake-footed giants prepared to throw his hundred arms around the imprisoned sky. Though they were fierce enemies, still their attack came in one body and from one source. Now I must destroy the human race, wherever the ocean roars throughout the world. By the streams of the Stygian river below I swear I shall do it! Let other cures be attempted first, but what is past remedy calls for the surgeon's knife, so that the healthy part is not infected. I have my demigods, the wild spirits, nymphs, fauns and satyrs, and sylvan deities of the hills. Since we have not yet thought them worth a place in heaven let us at least allow them to live in safety in the lands we have given them. Perhaps you gods believe they will be safe, even when Lycaon, known for his savagery, plays tricks against me, who holds the thunderbolt and reigns over you.' The house was in uproar; passions blazed as they called for blood of the reckless traitor; just like, when that band of disloyal conspirators raged to extinguish the name of Rome by murdering Julius Caesar, the human race was suddenly struck by a terrible fear of awful disaster to come and the whole world shuddered with horror. And just as your people's loyal devotion is welcome to you, Augustus, so was his subjects' loyal to Jupiter. A word and a gesture sufficed to control the murmuring hubbub and all were silent. Then Jupiter again broke the silence again with these words: 'Have no fear, he has indeed been punished, but I will tell you his crime, and what the penalty was...'

(5) Julian 'the Apostate' (emperor AD 361-3), *Caesars* 335-6

[The *Caesars* is a humorous tale of a contest between some of the most notable Roman emperors: Julius Caesar, Augustus, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Constantine, and also Alexander the Great. This was a satiric attack upon the recent Constantine, whose worth, both as a Christian and as the leader of the Roman Empire, Julian severely questions.]

Silenus was at a loss as though he had been hit by a good boxer, then he said: "There is perhaps something in what you say; but now tell me what did you think was really meant by 'imitating the gods?'"

"Having the fewest possible needs, and doing good to the greatest possible number." said Marcus [Aurelius]

"Do you mean to say", he asked, "that you had no needs at all?"

"I had none," said Marcus, "but my wretched body had a few perhaps." [...]

When Marcus had finished his speech, Hermes asked Constantine: "And what was the height of *your* ambition?"

"To amass great wealth," Constantine answered, "and then to spend it liberally so as to gratify my own desires and the desires of my friends."

At this Silenus burst into a loud laugh, and said, "If it was a banker that you wanted to be, how did you so far forget yourself as to lead the life of a pastry-cook and hairdresser? Your locks and your lovely scent augured this all along, but what you say about your motives convicts you." Thus did Silenus sharply reproached Constantine.

Then silence was proclaimed and the gods cast a secret ballot. It turned out that Marcus had most of the votes. After conferring aside with his father, Zeus asked Hermes make a proclamation as follows: "All you mortals who have entered this contest, know that according to our laws and decrees the victor is allowed to revel but the vanquished must not complain. Depart then wherever you please, and in future live every one of you under the guidance of the gods. Let every man choose his own guardian and guide."

After this announcement, Alexander hastened to Heracles, and Octavian to Apollo, but Marcus attached himself closely to Zeus and Cronus. Julius Caesar wandered about for a long time and ran hither and thither, till mighty Ares and Aphrodite took pity on him and summoned him to them. Trajan hastened to Alexander and sat down near him. [336]

As for Constantine, he could not discover among the gods the model of his own career, but when he caught sight of Pleasure, who was not far off, he ran to her. She received him tenderly and embraced him, then after dressing him in clothing of many colours and making him beautiful, she led him away to Incontinence. There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her and cried aloud to all comers:

"He that is a seducer, he that is a murderer, he that is sacrilegious and infamous, let him approach without fear! For with this water will I wash him and will straightaway make him clean. And though he should be guilty of those same sins a second time, let him not smite his breast and beat his head, I will make him clean again." To him Constantine came gladly when he had conducted his sons forth from the assembly of the gods. But the avenging deities nonetheless punished both him and them for their impiety, and extracted the penalty for the shedding of the blood of their kindred, until Zeus granted them a respite for the sake of Claudius [= Claudius Gothicus, putative founder of the Constantinian dynasty] and Constantius [= Constantius Chlorus, father of Constantine].