

THE UTILITARIAN ROLE OF ROMAN SATIRE. POLITICS AND PATRONAGE
IN HORACE'S SERMONES

Roxana Maria Lăzărescu

PhD, Universität Konstanz

Abstract: The purpose of the present article is to discuss the utilitarian role of the Roman satire, with a main approach on Horace's Sermones. Roman imagery tended to be more superficial than the Greek before the Augustan siècle d'or, and very often it does not achieve the same emotional depth. Poetry and aesthetics developed more on the utile aspect of literature and on demonstrating, into the eyes of Roman statesmen and politicians, the practical role of aesthetic manifestation. Being in a strong connection, poetry and politics determined one another and merged together into sustaining and demonstrating socio-political programs. Political patronage of poetry demonstrated the utilitarian role of literary manifestations since the beginnings of Roman satire, as it was developed by the partisans of Scipio, Ennius and Lucilius. Later on, Horace took the example of his predecessors and composed his two books of Sermones, satires that are meant to sustain Augustan politics and denounce the insufficiencies of the Republican Rome, but in a more elevated and elaborated style. Satire, by means of laughter, engaged itself into representing the private side of authority's voice. Laughter, by the pleasure created, will easily reach its audience and will propagate its intended ideologies. Even though satire's pretext is to reveal a disinterested observation of society, Horace's Sermones are developed in conformity with the author's political position, proving the political utilitarian role of the satire in the Age of Augustus.

Keywords: utilitarianism, Roman satire, Horace, politics, patronage

Since Ancient times, literature had played various roles, from its early forms of manifestation (traced back to the Mesopotamian cultural area), until the Greek and Latin literature that can be considered the ground on which modern European way of writing was developing on. In this literary evolution we may observe multiple functions and aesthetic changes, from the entertainment role, particular to the Greek way of producing literature, to its more pragmatic manifestation cultivated by the Romans. The imagery of the Roman poetry derived from many sources, mainly from a combination of ancient *carmen* (italic at its origins) and the Greek meters.

Aesthetics and stylistics, the main interest of the Greek literature, constituted a model for the Romans, but their emotional depth wasn't adopted so quickly, mainly due to the practical and businesslike thinking of the Roman statesmen and politicians and their strong connection with the literary circles. The relationship between writers and statesmen is constantly defined by the urge of poets to demonstrate their utility into the Roman world. In this direction, we may observe the utilitarian aspect sought by authors in their works. Social and political function may be considered one of the primary interests, evoking the quotidian realities and political constructs. Political affiliation of one author shaped the ideological implication of literature, being a mixture of personal view on contemporaneity and a political correctness manifestation of the ideology proposed by the leading statesmen. Religious and mythological symbolism merged with this pragmatic view in order to encapsulate and encode some other aspects rather than political *utile* objectives and conceptions. Feeling the need to

Section: LITERATURE

manifest some contrary opinions and other facets of reality, poets confided in the richness provided by means of laughter. Laughter provoked by literary way of expression (*comedia* and *satura*) proved to reach its goals more rapidly than sober poetical discourses, untying the rode for a new genre.

The behavior of Rome`s moralizing satirists evolved over time, from its early manifestation in the poetical works of Ennius and Lucilius, until the more evolved forms exposed by Persius and Juvenal. Horatian satire played a major role into the development of Roman satire, evolving from the Lucilian style, it soon become one of the reference points in satire`s history, not only for its stylistic form, but also for its deep meanings. Along with the formal and stylistic outlook we may observe the utilitarian role of satire, establishing the poetical and political intention of it.

Positioning himself in an extraordinarily complicated historical and cultural situation, between Republic and the new Principate, Horace offered through his satires a different literary perspective. As a freedman`s son, Horace didn`t have much opportunities and chances to evolve, but only to adhere to a literary circle and Gaius Maecenas offered him this occasion, probably in 37 B.C. Without this friendship with the rich friend of young Caesar, it is hard to see how he could make a living out of his work. Selling his writings to the statesmen, aediles mainly, for the annual *ludi* would have been the only monetary source for an author, which means that, in order to live out of writing, an author must become a member of a literary circle, patronized by an influent man. Patronage, being in a strong connection with the political world, enforced literature to expose and promote a certain ideology.

Maecenas took part of the Sicilian war, along with Horace, on the side of the young Caesar, the winner, fact that assured a secure road for both of them. The context seems to require a pro-Augustan position, and literature must sustain this new political regime. Literature is to be used as a tool in the creation of the new ideology. Theatre games and comedies were played for the entertainment and instruction of an extended auditorium, while literature was meant to manipulate the educated classes. Poetry was used by prominent classes to take political advantage, as Gordon William states in *Phases in Political Patronage of Literature in Rome*:

``As poetry became a respectable activity for Romans of the upper classes Greeks took over the function of poetry that was of political advantage to prominent Romans. This meant, however, that poetic celebration was confined to certain traditional fields, mainly military exploits, and that current political and social problems`` (Gordon Williams, 1982, p.10)¹

Living on a patron`s expense, Horace would be required to write for and in favor of the new regime. One of his methods was the use of satire, a literary device that could easily reach its targets, mainly the enemies. We may consider that a direct attack on certain Augustan enemies would have been less effective than a straightforward combat against the political rival.

Utilitatas of Roman poetry demonstrates its specific role due to its highly involved political society in which it develops. In times of major changes when a new regime was trying to be implemented and appreciated, poetry was being used as an ideological tool. Poets concurred in presenting the battle of Actium as a fight against a foreign enemy, won by the young Caesar. Truth was positioned in a niche, from where propaganda must actively emerge in demonstrating the positive aspects of this crucial battle. The poetical persona provided by Horace as a critic of its contemporaneity allows his real, private individual position to be

¹ Barbara K. Gold (ed.), *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1982.

protected. Poetry had to make an immediate impact on the audience and by means of satire, not by panegyric, Horace tried to reach his purpose and enforce Octavian's power and ideology among the elite.

In the first collection of satires, Horace refuses the role of public critic, as his predecessor, Lucilius, was encouraging: "My writings no one reads, and I fear to recite them in public, the fact that being that this style is abhorrent to some, inasmuch as most people merit censure" (Horace, *Satires*, I. IV: 22-25)². His intended public position masks the poetical intention, as Catherine Schlegel in *Horace and the Satirist's Mask: Shadowboxing with Lucilius* correctly states:

"Horace works hard in the Satires to style himself as a figure who, among other things, inhibits the darker forces of traditional satire that provide its impulse for attack and invective. Lucilius is enlisted in Horace's satiric project as a figure of contrast, against whom Horace can appear moderate and restrained, poetically and ethically". (Catherine Schlegel, 2010, p. 254).³

However, the second collection begins with a completely different position:

"O Jupiter, Sire and King, let perish with rust the discarded weapon, and let no man injure me, a lover of peace! But if one stir me up (Better not touch me! I shout), he shall smart for it and have his name sung up and down the town. [...] How everyone, using the weapon in which he is strong, tries to frighten those whom he fears" (Horace, *Satires*, II:40-46, 50-52).

With the second affirmation, Horace announces that he is no longer afraid of the people he might offend, manifesto that could be seen as a change of author's socio-political position, that could no longer represent an impediment for his freedom to speak and denounce. Due to the coalition with the power, *in persona* of Octavian, Horace is approved by the highest power in state. Octavian and Maecenas are the two key personalities through whom the political optimism is directed. By the triangle Poets-Maecenas-Octavian the tone for the new ideology is set. Dealing with some contemporary political issues, Horace makes from his satire a mean of promulgating young Caesar's political view. Criticism is more or less a direct attack on opposition, representing its own literary weapon in combating and announcing a new era. Poetry becomes more utile in the Roman society and takes direct part in the establishing process of a new political view.

Direct address, marked by the dedication found at the beginning of *Sermones I (Qui fit, Maecenas – Satire I:1)* indicates to the reader that the problems of the poem are the same with those of Maecenas and Octavian. Written from a street philosopher point of view, Horace's first *Liber Sermonum* displays the human discontent of those who are constantly seeking for more. If we observe this first book of satires as a collection of related poems, we may note that it reflects a controlled poetical attitude towards author's contemporary society.

The propaganda value of *Sermones I* is instated by the socio-political context, mainly by Octavian's politics to which Maecenas was serving in the process of imperial propaganda. Without doubt, we may assume that Octavian will have destroyed or not accepted other than positive writings addressing him (directly or indirectly) and Appian is recording a similar

² For the citation of Horace's *Satires* was used the bilingual Loeb edition, Latin and English (translated in English by H. Rushton Fairclough): T.E. Page, E. Capps, W.H.D. Rouse, L.A. Post, E.H. Warmington (eds.) *Horace. Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica*, with an English translation by H. Rushton Fairclough, London/Cambridge, Massachusetts, William Heinemann Ltd/Harvard University Press, 1942.

³ Gregson Davis (ed.), *A companion to Horace*, U.K., Willey-Blackwell, <<Blackwell companions to the ancient world>>, 2010.

attitude in *The Civil Wars* (V:132)⁴. Above all, Maecenas expected from his poets to merge with him in this propaganda and manifest public support, since Horace was his *amicus* and accompanied him in journeys:

``Be cautious in your approach: neither fail in zeal, nor show zeal beyond measure. A chatterbox will offend the peevish and morose; yet you must not also be silent beyond bounds. Act the Davus of the comedy, and stand with head bowed, much like one overawed. With flattery make your advances; warn him, if the breeze stiffens, carefully to cover up his precious pate; shoulder a way and draw him out of a crowd; make a trumpet of your ear when he is chattering. Does he bore you with his love of praise? Then play him with it till with hands uplifted to heaven he cry `enough!` and blow up the swelling bladder with turgid phrases`` (Horace, *Sermones*, II.V:88-98)

Horace also states that he sought for the approval of Maecenas regarding what he wrote and should write (Horace, *Sermones*, I.X:81-90). In this direction we may take under consideration what I.M. Le M. Du Quesnay was affirming in his article *Horace and Maecenas*:

``What Horace hoped for from the *amicitia* with Maecenas is easy to imagine. He had returned from Philippi with sufficient wealth to buy the post of *scriba questorius*, which was often held by *equites* like himself, and this probably guaranteed him a (minimum) annual income of 24.000 sesterces.`` (I.M. Le M. Du Quesnay, 1984)⁵

Financial matters were quite important for poets, as stated before, even though we may assume that they weren't quite poor citizens (Horace came from an equestrian family) and, along with the fame gained by their public role came the auditorium desired. In conclusion, utility of the poetry is associated both with the economic status of the writer and with the necessity of it in a well-development propaganda machinery. Politics need literature as much as literature needs politics for its own gain, on one hand politics make use of literature for distributing, implementing, and consolidating ideologies, while on the other hand, literatures makes economical use out of politics, as well as it assures itself a certain public. In this order, Horace emphasizes the implication of a satirist into the Roman politics:

``Not everyone can paint ranks bristling with lances, or Gauls falling with spearheads shattered, or wounded Parthian slipping from his horse.

TRE. But you might write of himself, at once just and valiant, as wise Lucilius did of Scipio.

HOR. I will not fail myself, when the occasion itself prompts. Only at an auspicious moment will the words of a Flacus find with Caesar entrance to an attentive ear. Stroke the steed clumsily and back he he kicks, at every point on his guard`` (Horace, *Sermones* II. I:19-26).

Satires I.5 and I.6 provide us much more detailed picture of Maecenas` literary circle. Here it can be observed a description of Brundisium journey (preliminary to the negotiation between Octavian and Marc Antonius from 37 BC) and Horace`s reticent position regarding the political context. In other words, these satires are meant to justify the propaganda of the Triumvirs: Sextus Pompeius, Octavian and Marc Aurelius. The three power-men were trying to advertise their lasting friendship and coalition that survived the conflict of Tarentum. Probably, the intention of these poems is to encourage the auditorium to reflect on the

⁴⁴ Appian records that Octavian destroyed the propaganda writings of the civil wars. For the citations from Appian, *The Civil Wars* was used the Loeb edition (1913), published on-line: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/appian/civil_wars/1*.html (27.04.2018).

⁵I.M. Le M. Du Quesnay, *Horace and Maecenas* in Tony Woodman, David West (eds.), *Poetry and politics in the age of Augustus*, Cambridge, London, New York ..., Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 24.

Octavian's public image and military successes. Young Caesar's image was to be considered as an pacifistic one, not trying to start new civil wars, but to protect Roman freedom and to emulate the past heroes and the *mos maiorum*'s achievements, in the benefit of the state. Nothing should lead to an eventual allowance of spoiling the impression that Octavian was a solipsist ruler:

``Here Maecenas was to meet us, and noble Cocceius, envoys both on business of import, and old hands at settling feuds between friends. Here I put black ointment on my sore eyes. Meanwhile Maecenas arrives and Cocceius, and with them Fonteius Capito, a man without flaw, so that Antony has no closer friend`` (Horace, *Sermones*, I.V:27-33)

Textual politics and the nexus of friends and patrons come together into demonstrating the utilitarian role of the Roman literature. Horace progressively demonstrates how satire is *utile* for knowing the actual political `truth` of Rome and also how an author should write in order to be support his patron.

The precise aims of Horace's *Sermones*, and the perspective of positive truth announced and, paradoxically concealed, can be difficult to discern, if only the new image mirrored by the satirist reflects another method of perceiving the previous standards, the classical view. Attacking mainly not directly, but by means of allusions, intertextuality and interconnections, the two books of satires are accepted and approved by the literary patron. Satire speaks with a multitude of voices that find their own unique array of poetic personae. If Horace was truly an admirer and partisan of Octavian politics we may not certainly affirm, but we may observe that he took his own personal interest: writing and making a living out of it. Gordon Williams correctly assumes that: ``It is significant, however, that in Horace's *Satires* and *Epistles* where there is the least distinction between the real personality and the poetic persona there is also the least reflection on political issues`` (Gordon Williams, 1982, p.15).

A corollary is that there is not only a poetical intention, but also a political one, more pragmatic in its meaning. The identity of the two facets (the real individual and the poetical persona) reveals the practical intention of a poet's literary work: forming ideas, sustaining ideologies, manipulating. The two opposing scales of poetic value, socio-political value and poetry itself, are indicating the poet's attitude both to his patron (in which we may encapsulate the politics and economics factors) and to his art. It is necessary to emphasize the fact of artistic patronage because it provides the necessary background for demonstrating the utilitarian role of poetry in Augustan Rome.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Corbeill Anthony, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Roman Republic*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1996.

Davis Gregson (ed.), *A companion to Horace*, Willey-Blackwell: U.K., <<Blackwell companions to the ancient world>>, 2010.

Freudenburg Kirk (ed.), *Horace: Satires and Epistles*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, New York, 2009.

Freudenburg Kirk (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Satire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Gold K. Barbara, *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, University of Texas Press: Austin, 1982.

Hooley Daniel, *Roman Satire*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2007.

Section: LITERATURE

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda, Cornel Sigmirean (Editors)
MEDIATING GLOBALIZATION: Identities in Dialogue
Arhipelag XXI Press, 2018

Page T.E., Capps E., Rouse W.H.D, Post L.A., Warmington E.H. (eds.),*Horace. Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica*, with an English translation by H. Rushton Fairclough, William Heinemann Ltd/Harvard University Press: London/Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1942.

Woodman Tony, West David (ed.),*Poetry and Politics in the Age of Augustus*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984.

On-line resources:

Appian, *The Civil Wars*:

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/appian/civil_wars/1*.html (27.04.2018).