

**Catherine KEANE**

**Making Satiric History: Horace and Persius Re-read Old Comedy**

This paper argues that Horace and Persius draw on the production and transmission history of Old Comedy when constructing their images as satirists. As Hinds (1998) has shown, it is fruitful to read Roman poets' accounts of literary history not as static and objective, but as dynamic and tendentious. I apply this insight to the programmatic passages in Horace and Persius that relate Old Comedy to satire. While Horace links satiric and Old Comic social criticism, I argue that he also highlights the agonistic relationship between Old Comic poets as a model for his own self-presentation. Horace and Persius also represent the later reception of Old Comedy as 'dynamic' as symbolically important for the construction of new genres and audiences. The two satirists employ images of comedy's production, transmission, and readership in order to construct self-promoting accounts of their own tradition.

First, in the opening of Serm. 1.4, Horace engages his predecessor Lucilius in a revival of the Athenian dramatic agon. Horace lists the three best-known Old Comic poets (Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae, 1), and describes Lucilian satire as a continuation of that tradition (hinc omnis pendet Lucilius, 5). Despite traditional claims about satire's 'Romanness,' it is reasonable to compare the agendas of the two genres. But a closer reading of the passage reveals another analogy: Horace's ensuing stylistic critique of Lucilius contains suggestive echoes of Aristophanes' ridicule of Cratinus (Mueller, Hermes 1992). The poets of Old Comedy, including those named here, 'performed' rivalries in their plays, accusing one another of incompetence and plagiarism (Harvey and Wilkins 2000). Thus the satire's opening lines suggest not only a generic model, but also the competitive posturing of that genre's authors. While Horace avoids face-to-face poetic contests (lines 13-21), his literary-critical Sermones summon Lucilius to a weightier, inter-generational agon.

In the same passage, Horace poses a second challenge to Lucilius in the broader arena of literary canon-formation. The list of three great comic poets is followed by an entire hexameter gesturing to 'the other' representatives of the genre (atque alii quorum comoedia prisca virorum est, 2). The second line seems superfluous unless Horace means to highlight the difference between two categories of author: first the playwrights who came out on top in the Hellenistic and Roman canon-making process, then a sea of contemporaries (alii) who earned a lower status. Horace reminds us that authors are also texts, subject after death to further 'competition.' In the context of Serm. 1.4 this reads as a boast that Horace will rival Lucilius in the Roman satiric canon, a work in progress.

While Serm. 1.4 offers analogies between comedy's literary history and the shaping of the satiric tradition, comic texts also figure more concretely in the self-presentation of both Horace and Persius. At Serm. 1.10.16-17, Horace accuses Lucilius' blind devotees of never having read Old Comedy. The implication is that readers display their competence through the makeup of their own private 'canons,' and that the choices of Lucilius' readers reflect poorly both on themselves and on their beloved satirist. Persius borrows this same concept at Sat. 1.123-24, when he describes his own ideal reader as

one who silently devours the Old Comic authors. The scene essentially combines the two Horatian passages, featuring the three larger-than-life comic poets (audaci Cratino, iratum Eupolidem, praegrandi sene) as well as the canonical texts which will prime a reader to appreciate Persius's satire.

While this allusion appears to support Horace's criticism of Lucilius, Persius also poses a challenge of his own to Horace. His ideal reader recalls Serm. 2.3.11-12, where the Stoic Damasippus describes Horace as an inept reader of certain Greek authors, including Eupolis. As often, Persius reshapes Horace's self-mockery into serious if subtle criticism (Hooley 1997): his own excited reader succeeds where Horace had "confessed" failure. Thus Persius deftly appropriates all three images of Old Comedy seen in the *Sermones*: the rivalries performed in the Athenian theatre, the three great authors as an established canon, and the telling attitude of a given reader toward comic texts. With the last image in particular, Persius positions himself as a rival of Horace.

This strategy, I intend to show, adds significantly to the Roman satirists' already complex treatment of their predecessors (Hooley 1997; Freudenburg 2001). When the satirists name the comedians, they invoke a genre whose immediate performance context was fundamentally competitive, and whose later reception was guided by subjective external judgments (Csapo in Depew and Obbink, 2000). By borrowing from the literary history of Old Comedy, Horace and Persius create a more complex and more charged account of their own tradition-in-progress. They encourage us to imagine the two genres not simply as branches of a literary "family tree," but as exhibiting similar patterns of production and transmission.