

## In a Distorting Mirror? Law as Presented in Roman Satire

Legal jokes reserved only for lawyers? Not in ancient Rome! This is confirmed not only by Plautus' or Terrence's comedies but especially by Roman satire. Satires are full of legal humour, topics and metaphors, which is quite an unusual literary tendency nowadays. Even more surprisingly, it was neither some kind of snobbery nor prevented the authors from reaching a wider audience. In fact, legal language was a common language. Legal training made a fundamental part of general education. Therefore, this kind of knowledge made up a significant part of everyday Rome life and its cultural code. There is no other literary genre that was closer to these spaces than the Roman satire. Thus, the works of Horace, Persius, Juvenal and Martial can shed some new and humorous light on our knowledge about Roman law, including morals and legal philosophy, inheritance law or trade. **The main objective of the project is to describe legal culture through the writings of Roman satirists and to show Roman law not as a rigid set of rules but, simply, as a part of civic life.**

The problem with satire is that it does not inspire confidence among serious-minded scholars who seek credible knowledge about the legal world of Romans and who think of satire as of a genre limited to lecherous topics. This attitude is mistaken for two reasons. Firstly, all the Roman satirists were educated in the field of law. Like any other education, this background also influenced both their language and the way they perceived everyday life. This light reading proves that Roman satirists were technically correct while applying legal terminology or discussing fundamental legal issues. It is not reasonable to expect from them the same level of technicality as from the jurists. However, a relevant perspective can allow us to see some new fascinating aspects of the Roman legal culture – the law as it was in the eyes of society. Secondly, this genre provides a fascinating window into what it meant to be a real Roman, who was always ready to switch between the matters that, on the one hand, were touching such serious issues as the law and legal institutions and, on the other, were turning stomachs. Satire was not only about mocking and making jokes. It was, in fact, one of the oldest forms of social study. Its principal aim, similarly as today, was to describe the most pressing social problems, including the legal ones embracing both the law in books and the judicature – the law in action. To give some examples, such issues as venal judges, soldiers who were standing above the law, deterioration of family life or legacy hunting were like grits to the satirical mill.

These pieces of work were composed in a way that allowed calling the Romans to reflect and make them laugh at the same time. Because satire is at its most authentic at a particular moment and in a certain context, the research should offer a broader understanding of the whole Roman society in the times from the first century BC until the second century AD, the apex of Roman satire. The researcher will select and divide the material according to the legal-social topics that occur in the content of the satires and provide a complete perspective by comparing satirical and legal sources.

In the light of this, this interdisciplinary study:

- (1) will offer a broad perspective on the legal-social problems and their development in the period between the second half of the first century BC and the very beginning of the second century AD;
- (2) will allow understanding the complex nature of Roman satire as a literary genre;
- (3) should verify if Roman satire is a credible source of knowledge about Roman law;
- (4) offer a fresh look on satirical sources by showing the hidden legal meanings of the verses;
- (5) will take an attempt to shed some new light on high legal awareness in everyday life of Romans.