

Persius

The Satires

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Prologue

That's not how I suddenly become a poet,
By wetting my lips in the Hippocrene,
Or dreaming on the twin peaks of Parnassus.
I leave the Muses, and Pirene's pale
Spring, to those with busts to which
A crown of ivy clings; a semi-pagan
I bring my song to the bards' holy rites.
What teaches the parrot to squawk: 'Hello!'
And urges the magpie to try human speech?
It's that master of arts, and dispenser of skills,
Hunger, expert at trying out sounds nature denies.
For if there's the gleam of a hope of crafty gain,
You'll hear crow-poets and magpie-poetesses
Singing in praise of Pegaseian nectar.

Satire I

– O troubled humanity! O the emptiness of life!
– Who wants to read about that?
– Are you asking me? No one, by Hercules!
– No one?
– No one or two.
– That’s wretched, pathetic.
– Why? Because noble ‘Trojans’ and their women
Happen to prefer Attius Labeo’s *Iliad* to my verse?
Nonsense. If turbid Rome weighs something lightly
Don’t go looking for a fault in the scales, don’t look
Beyond yourselves. For who at Rome lacks – O if I
Could say it! – and I might, gazing at our grey heads,
And this sad life of ours, and whatever we play with
Now we’ve left off marbles, and smack of gravity.
Then, then – forgive me (I’d rather not, but how can I
Help it?) I’ve an impudent streak – I’d have to hoot!
We scribble something grand, behind closed doors,
One in verse, another in prose that only a generous
Lungful of air can exhale; it being what, combed
Neatly, in a white toga, wearing your birthday ring
Of sardonyx, you’ll read to the audience from your
Tall seat, while you gargle with water to rinse your
Fickle throat, your expressive eyes moved to tears.
Then you’ll watch as grown men tremble, their sober
Manner and tranquil voices gone, as your poetry stirs
Their loins, your rhythmic verse works away inside.
So, old man, you compose tit-bits, for others’ ears
To make even your decrepit skin and bones cry ‘Stop!’?
– Why study, if this ferment, this wild fig that has taken
Root within, can’t burst forth in passionate eruption?
– Behold, pallid decrepitude! What a way to behave!
Is knowledge nothing unless others know you know?
– But it’s lovely to be pointed out, to hear: ‘It’s him!’
Is it nothing to be a text for hundreds of curly-headed lads?
– Look, the sated scions of Romulus, are no sooner asking,
Over the wine, what sacred poetry has to say, when he rises,
A hyacinth coloured cloak round his shoulders, to stammer
Some rancid nonsense through his nose, squeezing out

Songs about Phyllis, Hypsipyle, some bardic tear-jerker,
Stumbling over the words on his oh-so-delicate palate.
The great approve: are the poet's ashes happier now?
Does the tombstone settle more lightly on his bones?
The guests applaud: will violets spring then from his
Embers, out of the tomb, from those fortunate remains?
– You mock too much, you look down your nose at me.
But who's without the desire to earn the people's praise;
Leave behind work worthy of preservation with cedar-oil,
Not doomed to end as wrapping for mackerel or incense?
You, whoever you are, you whom I've created to present
The opposite case, if by chance something good emerges
From my writing – a rare bird that would be – but if it does,
I'm not anxious for praise. Not because I'm made of iron,
But because I refuse to consider your 'bravo' and 'lovely'
As the be-all and end-all of endorsement. Examine that
Cry of 'lovely' thoroughly: and what does it not embrace?
Isn't the *Iliad* there, that *Iliad* by Attius, who gets drunk
On hellebore? And all those little elegies dictated by our
Dyspeptic lords? In short whatever's scribbled on couches
Of citron-wood? You know how to serve up warm tripe,
Make a shivering client the gift of a second-hand cloak,
Then say 'I love the truth, tell me the truth about myself.'
How can I? Do you want me to say you're talking rubbish,
Baldy, you with your fat belly sticking out a foot and half?
O, bi-faced Janus, never suffering gestures behind *your* back;
Pecking storks; nor wagging hands imitating donkey's ears;
Nor a hanging tongue like some Apulian dog dying of thirst!
But you, of patrician blood, you who must do without eyes
In the back of your head, come see the grimaces behind you.
– What's the popular view?
– What indeed, but that poetry at last moves in a measured way,
So that the links flow smoothly through critical fingers. Bravo,
To the poet, who knows how to lay out a line with one eye shut,
As if he were stretching a plumb-line! Whether he aims to talk
Of morality, luxury or the banquets of kings, the Muse grants
Him ample matter. Behold, we're teaching people now to pen
Heroic sentiments who used to dabble in Greek foolishness,
Not artful enough to paint a grove, to praise rich countryside,
Its hearths, baskets, pigs, and its burning hay at the Palilia,

The land of Remus, and of Cincinnatus, polishing his plough
In the furrow, his flustered wife dressing him as a dictator
In front of the oxen, the lictor bearing the ploughshare home!
Nowadays one will linger over Dionysian Accius' dry tome,
Others do likewise over Pacuvius, and his warty *Antiope*,
'Her melancholy heart besieged by troubles.' When you see
Bleary-eyed fathers pouring this sort of education into
Their sons, need you question where the stew of language
On their tongues derives from, or that disgraceful rubbish
Your young knights on the benches exult in? Aren't you
Ashamed you're unable even to defend some white-haired
Old client on a charge, without needing to hear that tepid
'Nicely done'? They tell Pedius: 'You're a thief!' What
Does Pedius reply? He frames the charge smoothly as an
Antithesis, and is praised for expressing it all so skilfully:
'How lovely, that is!' Lovely, *that*? Isn't it mere flattery,
Roman? Should I be stirred, and toss a penny to every
Shipwrecked sailor who sings a song? Isn't that how you
Sing, with a picture of you in a crushed boat, by your side?
Whoever wants to move me with his lament will show
Genuine tears, not some tale he's drummed up overnight.
– Yet elegance and harmony has been added to raw measure.
Here's how 'Berecynthian Attis' learned to do line-endings,
Thus: 'The dolphin that sliced through cerulean Nereus,'
And: 'We stole a flank of the long chain of Apennines.'
'Arms and the man'! isn't this foaming juice on a rich rind,
As good as that old corky branch with its swollen bark!
– So what about all that effete lax-postured recitation then?
'Their savage horns rang with the calls of the Bacchantes,
And Bassaris, leaving, with the head torn from a proud
Calf, the Maenad, who directs the lynx with an ivy-cluster,
Cry, Euhö, over and over, while the far echoes resound.'
Would that exist, if a vein of our father's balls pulsed in us?
That feeble stuff swims in our saliva, 'Maenad' and 'Attis'
On our moistened lips; there's no smashing the bookcase
To pieces here, no flavour here of those bitten fingernails.
– But why must you savage delicate ears with bitter truths?
Take care lest the thresholds of the great grow cold towards
You: here there's only this endless noise of a dog snarling.
– Well then, as far as I'm concerned then, everything's fine.

I'll not delay you. Bravo to all, all's well, you're marvels!
Does that satisfy you? 'No one permitted to kick up a stink,
Here!' you proclaim. Put up the warning sign, twin snakes:
'This place is sacred, lads, piss outside!' I'm off. Lucilius
Tore into the place, targeted you, Lupus and Mucius, broke
A canine on you. And crafty Horace touched on every fault
In a smiling friend and, once admitted, toyed with the heart,
Clever at dangling people from his briskly-shaken muzzle.
No way I can whisper it? In secret? Down a hole? Nowhere?
Yet I'll bury it here. I've seen, I've seen them, little book;
Is there a single one that lacks ass's ears? That's my secret,
That's my so slight jest, but I'll not barter it with you
For an *Iliad*. Whoever grows pale at Aristophanes' anger,
That grand old man, or Eupolis, or is fired by bold Cratinus,
Glance at this too, maybe you'll like to hear what's distilled.
I want readers with cleansed ears, fired by such stuff, not
Some wretch who delights in poking fun at Greek sandals;
A one-eyed man who loves to call another man 'One-eye',
Who thinks he's something, full of provincial importance,
Because at Arretium, as aedile, he ruled on half-measures,
Not some crafty fellow who's used to jeering at maths
On the abacus, or diagrams drawn in the furrowed dust,
One ready to howl with delight when some insolent whore
Tugs at a Cynic's beard. To them I'd recommend reading
Posters in the morning, a novel, say *Callirhoe*, after lunch.

Satire II

Mark it with a finer pebble, Macrinus, this shining day
That numbers the years, in your account, as they slip by.
Pour pure wine for your guardian spirit. At least you're
Not one to make requests of the gods in some grasping
Prayer, one only to be whispered to them in confidence;
The majority of noble libations flow from a secret censer.
It's not so easy to transport those murmurs and half-heard
Whispers from the temples, and speak your request openly.
'Good sense, reputation, credit,' he says aloud, for anyone
To hear, but here's what he murmurs to himself, inwardly,
Under his tongue: 'O, to brag about uncle, his fine funeral!
Or: 'O if Hercules would only grant a pot of silver clinking
There under the hoe!' 'I'd love to wipe out my ward, I'm
Next in line to inherit; after all he has the mange and he's
Swollen with jaundice. Nereus has already buried his third
Wife.' To make such prayers chastely, you'll even plunge
Your head two or three times in the Tiber's stream at dawn,
And purge the night away with river water. So tell me, (one
Small thing only I'd like to know) what's your view of Jove?
Would you care to rank him higher than – who? 'Who then?'
Well how about our good Staius? Does that make you hesitate?
Who's a safer judge, or better guardian for orphaned children?
So then, tell Staius just how you go about bending Jove's ear.
'O, for Jupiter's sake!' he'd cry; wouldn't Jupiter do the same?
Do you think you're excused, because the lightning flash with
Its sacred sulphur, shatters the oak rather than you and yours;
Because you're not lying, a sad object, in some grove, a place
Lightning-struck, proscribed by Etruscans and their sheep-gut,
Do you think he's asking you then to tug at his stupid beard?
And what's the bribe exactly you employ to buy an audience
With the gods? An offering is it, of lungs and greasy guts?
Behold, some grandmother or aunt in awe of the gods lifts
A boy-child from his cradle, purifies his wet lips and brow,
First of all, with her middle finger, and propitiatory saliva,
She being skilled at warding off that evil eye that withers;
Then rocks him in her arms and, with a prayer of entreaty,
Points her meagre prospect towards Licinus' estates or at
Crassus' palace: 'May some king or queen choose him for

A son-in-law, may the girls grab at him; wherever he treads
May there be roses.' But I'd not trust a nurse's prayer. Deny
Her wishes, Jupiter, even if she dresses in white to ask you.
Is it muscular strength and a body to rely on in old age, you
Ask for? Fine, but your vast dishes and loaded casseroles
Forbid the gods' to grant it, and weigh on Jupiter himself.
You long to pile up wealth so kill an ox, and over its liver
Call out to Mercury: 'Bring fortune to my house, give me
Herds and fertile flocks.' How, exactly, you wretch, when
The fat of so many of your cattle are melting in the flames?
Yet he'll still strive for gain with entrails and sacrificial cake:
'Already my land increases, and my sheepfold, already it's
Being granted, now, now' – until, deluded, and in despair
He'll sigh for the single coin left in the depths of his purse.
If I bring you silver bowls and gifts richly encrusted with
Gold, you sweat, the drops go rolling down your left breast
And your heart leaps impatiently: that's what prompted it,
Coating divine images with triumphal gold. 'Oh, grant the
Supremacy to those brothers in bronze who send us dreams
That purge our humours most: let them wear golden beards.'
Gold has ousted Numa's pots, and even Saturn's bronze,
Transmutes the Vestal's urns, the Etruscan earthenware.
O spirits bent to Earth, and unaware of celestial things,
What use is it to impose our human ways on holy shrines,
And seek heavenly virtues in this flawed flesh of ours?
This flesh that pollutes our olive oil with perfumed spice,
That spoils Calabrian fleeces with misused Tyrian purple,
That orders us to strip the pearl from its shell, and carve
Veins of glowing ore from the raw earth. The flesh sins,
It sins, and gains from its weakness. You priests, tell me
What is the value of displaying gold in some sacred place?
The same value as the dolls pubescent girls give to Venus.
Why don't we offer the gods something the blear-eyed
Scion of the great Messalla can't give from his vast dish?
Justice and right blended with the spirit, a mind pure to
Its inner depths, a heart steeped in nobility and honour.
Let me bring these to the temple, corn-meal my offering.

Satire III

– It's always like this. Morning's already bright through
The shutters, swelling the narrow cracks with light,
And I'm snoring enough to drown the wild Falernian,
And the shadow on the sundial's now nearing eleven.
– 'What are you up to?' cries a voice. 'The Dog-Star's
Been scorching the crops, madly, for hours already,
And all the cows are sheltering under the spreading elm.'
– Really? Truly? Here, quickly, you. No one there?
The green bile's flowing, my head's bursting, you'd
Think all the donkey-herds in Arcadia were braying.
Now my book's to hand, the two-toned parchment
Purged of hair, the paper, and a jointed reed-pen.
Now I groan, the liquid hangs heavily from the pen,
But adding water over-thins the black cuttlefish ink,
Groan, the reed keeps gathering up the diluted blobs.
– O you wretch, every day more wretched, is this
What it's come to? Why not throw a tantrum, act
Like a baby bird or a little prince, demand your
Food's cut into tiny pieces, spoil mummy's lullaby?
– Yet how can I work with a pen like this?
– Who do you think you're fooling? Why ring the
Changes on such excuses? You're a joke. You're
Rushing mindlessly to oblivion. You'll be derided.
An ill-fired pot sounds flawed when you strike it,
Its green clay responding grudgingly. You're soft
As wet mud, you need to be dragged off now, now,
And shaped on the swift ever-turning potter's wheel.
But then you've a modicum of grain, on the family
Estate, a pure and unstained salt-cellar, and a decent
Salver to do the hearth sacrificial honour (so, why
Fret about your spiritual health?) Enough said?
Or would you prefer to burst your lungs boasting
Yours is the thousandth branch on an Etruscan tree,
That you wear equestrian purple to greet the Censor?
Let the mob wear honours! I know you inside out.
You're not ashamed to live like that dissolute Natta,
Who's stultified by vice, his liver all creased in fat;
With no sense of guilt, or of what he's lost, sunk

So deep he no longer leaves a trace on the surface.
Great Father of the Gods, may you choose to punish
Savage tyrants in just this way, when fatal passion
Has affected their minds, steeped in its fiery poison:
May they see true virtue, and may they pine at its loss.
Worse than the groans from the bronze Sicilian bull,
Or the sword of Damocles hanging terrifyingly from
The gilt-panelled ceiling over the noble necks beneath,
Is a man crying inwardly: 'I'm falling, falling headlong!'
Wincing within at things unknown to the wife at his side.
I remember, when I was little, I used to feign sore eyes,
And dab them with oil so as not to have to learn Cato's
Majestic speech as he faced death, a speech praised to
The skies by my mad teacher, which my sweating father
Listened to with the friends he'd brought along. That's
No surprise, the height of my wishes then was to know
What a lucky treble-six might win, how much I'd lose
On a treble-one, the Dog; how to get those nuts through
The narrow neck of a jar; and that no one might make
A boxwood top spin more deftly than me, with the whip.
You're experienced enough to spot deviant conduct,
You know the teachings of the Stoic school, that Stoa
Daubed with 'the baggy-trousered Persians at Marathon';
Teachings the unsleeping shaven-haired lads study all
Night, fed on their lentil bakes and mounds of polenta.
That divided letter, *upsilon*, Pythagoras employed, with
Its right hand stem a symbol of virtue, its left hand the
Curve of sin, was revealed to you too. Yet you're still
Snoring, your lolling head with its jawbone unhinged
Still yawning yesterday's yawn, your mouth wide open.
Are you heading anywhere, has your bow a target even?
Or is yours a wild crow hunt, chancing your arm with tiles
And clods, careless where it leads, living the moment?
It's useless to ask for hellebore, you know, when the
Skin of a gouty joint is already swollen; face the disease
At its approach, and you won't need to promise the earth
To Craterus, your doctor. Learn, you wretched creatures,
Discover the causes of things: what we are and what we
Are born for; what our station in life is; how and where
Navigating the turning-post is easy; what the limits to

Wealth should be; what it's right to pray for; the use of
New-minted coins; how much to spend on your country;
Or your nearest and dearest; what the gods command
You to be; and where in the human world is your place.
Learn, and don't begrudge doing so; ignore the smell
Of the pots in your larder, richly-stocked from defending
Fat Umbrians, of pepper and hams, mementoes of your
Marsian client; ignore the sprats still left in that first tub.
Here one of the goatish tribe of centurions may well say:
'What I know is good enough for me. I've no wish to be
Like Arcesilas, or wretched Solon, with head bent and eyes
Fixed on the ground, chewing over their murmurings and
Rabid silences, weighing their words with protruding lips,
Reflecting on the fantasies of some clapped-out invalid:
That nothing is born of nothing, nor can return to nothing.
Is that what makes so you pale? Is that why you're missing
Lunch?' His comments raise a laugh, his muscular lads
Wrinkle their noses, redouble their high-pitched cackling.
'Examine me, I've odd palpitations in my chest, a sore
Chest, and I'm wheezing heavily, so examine me please'
Someone, like me, will ask the doctor. The patient is told
To rest, but when by the third night his pulse is steady,
He'll be round to a rich friend's house with a somewhat
Depleted flagon, seeking a light Sorrentine to drink at
The baths. 'You're looking pale, my friend!' 'It's nothing.'
'Well see to it, whatever it is. Your skin's turning yellow.'
'It's not as pale as yours: don't try to imitate my guardian.
It's him I've just buried, not you.' 'Carry on then, I'll say
Nothing.' Stuffed from his feasting he goes white-bellied
To bathe, but as he drinks, his throat emitting long noxious
Belches, a sudden tremor makes the warm glass slip from
His hand, his bared teeth chatter, and the greasy food slides
From his slack mouth. Then it's the bugle, the candles, and
Finally the dear deceased, thick-coated with perfumed balm,
On a tall bier, with his rigid heels extended towards the door.
And his slaves, instant citizens in liberty-caps, as the bearers.
– Wretch, feel the pulse, put your hand on my chest; there's
No fever there. Feel the fingertips and toes, there's no chill.
– But if there's money about, or the stunning girl next door
Gives you a winning smile, does your pulse beat steadily then?

Stringy greens served on a cold plate, with meal that's been
Sifted through the common sieve: let's inspect your throat;
There's an ulcerous sore lurking behind your tender palate;
You should try not to chafe it with plebeian beef. You feel
Cold, when pale fear raises the bristles on your body. Then
You're feverish when the lamp is lit, when your eyes flash
With anger, and you say and do things that even maddened
Orestes himself would swear were signs of human madness.

Satire IV

‘You’re handling affairs of state!’ (Imagine Socrates, the bearded Master, speaking, the one done in by that fatal gulp of hemlock)
‘On what basis, then? Tell me that, O ward of great Pericles!
Wisdom, I suppose, and knowledge of the world, have come
To you before your need to shave, and you know what ought
To be said or not said. So when the rabble seethes with anger,
It’s your spirit will be roused, to still the fevered crowd with
An imperious hand. And what will you say to them? ‘Citizens,’
I’d imagine, ‘this is not right, that’s wrong, something else is
Yet more correct.’ You clearly know how to weigh justice in
The twin pans of the quivering scales. You can find a straight
Path among curved ones, even as the crooked foot-rule fails,
And set a black *theta*, the mark of death, against a fatal crime.
So, since superficial adornments are worthless, why not cease
Wagging your tail for that fawning crew? Far better to be sane;
Not before time, take a gulp of the undiluted juice of hellebore.
What *is* your idea of the highest good? To feed off sumptuous
Dishes every day, and then tan your skin endlessly in the sun?
Well, that’s the same reply that some old crone might give.
Go on, swell with pride! ‘I’m Alcibiades, I’m beautiful.’ Fine,
But you’ve no more understanding than wrinkled Baucis, who
Cries her herbs loudly, sells her basil to some dissolute slave.
No one is tempted to examine themselves, no one: instead, they
Point, said Phaedrus, at the sack in front, on another’s back!
If you should ask: ‘Do you know Vettidius’ estates?’ ‘Whose?’
‘That rich man at Cures, with more land than a hawk can cover.’
‘Oh him! The one the gods hate, with a perverse guardian spirit,
Who when he hangs his yoke on the open crossroads shrine, at
The Compitalia, anxiously scrapes the slime from his little jar,
And groans: ‘Let it be all right!’ while munching an onion in its
Skin, with salt, and while his slave boys cheer at a pot of gruel,
Will be gulping the naked dregs of a half-dead glass of vinegar.’
That’s the reply you get! While if you’re lying there well-oiled,
In the sun, some stranger next to you, will nudge you, making
Acid comments: ‘What manners! Weeding the hair round your
Prick, down your groin, showing your wrinkled orbs in public!
And, though it’s fine to comb and scent the fuzz on your jaws,
Why must that shaved windpipe be mirrored ‘twixt your thighs?’

Even if five champion wrestlers had a tug at those sproutings,
And with curved forceps made those basted buttocks shake,
That untamed bracken of yours would still defy the plough.’
We fire arrows, and in turn expose our legs to their flight.
That’s the way we live, the way we know. You’ve a hidden
Wound in the groin, but your belt with its broad gold band
Conceals it. Fool about, as you will, and deceive your flesh
If you can. ‘If the whole neighbourhood proclaims me
As wonderful, should I not believe it?’ Shameless wretch,
If you itch at the sight of a coin, if you follow your prick,
If, with wealth secure, you whip up the rates at the well
Of bitter waters, leaving a host of scars; no point lending
Your eager ears to the public. Spit out what’s not yours;
And let the tradesman recover his interest. Learn to live
With yourself, and you’ll find how badly you’re furnished.

Satire V

It's ever the way of these bards, to demand a hundred voices,
To beg for a hundred mouths, a hundred tongues, for song,
Whether its a tale presented by some sad actor with gaping
Jaws, or a scene where a wounded Parthian drags the sword
From his groin. 'What then? What vast heaps of mighty verse
Are you creating, that only a hundred throats could be equal to?
Let those destined for grandiose declamation gather the mists
Of Helicon, those who wish to boil sad flesh in Procne's pot
Or Thyestes', to serve at that boring actor Glyco's many feasts.
You're not one to force gusts of air from the bellows to smelt
The ore in the forge, nor hoarsely muttering under your breath,
Croak who knows what solemn nonsense to yourself, or strain
Fit to pop, and burst your cheeks. You pursue the language of
The simple toga, skilled at the shrewd conjunction of words
Shaped by a temperate tongue, cleverly scraping away at the
Surface of shaky morals, and nailing faults with a delicate wit.
Draw your matter from that, and leave Mycenae to its banquets
Of heads and feet, resign yourself to more customary tables.'
Indeed it's not my aim to swell the page with nonsense robed
In black, designed only to make the fumes weigh more heavily.
I speak intimately. Encouraged by the Camenae, the Muses, I
Offer you my heart for inspection, Cornutus, my dear friend,
I delight in showing you just how much of my spirit is yours.
Strike it, you have the knowledge to discern what rings true
On the tongue, and what is painted plaster. Here's where I'd
Ask for those hundred throats to convey in a pure voice, how
Deeply I've fixed you in the windings of my breast, and have
My words reveal all that lies hidden, unutterable, within me.
When as a timid youth I first shed that protective purple toga,
And my amulet hung there as an offering to the girdled Lares,
When dressed newly in white, with pleasant companions, I
Dared cast my eyes over the whole Subura with impunity,
At the age when the road's unclear, and in our ignorance of life,
Confusion clouds the anxious mind at the branching crossroads,
I placed myself in your hands. You gathered my tender years
To your Socratic breast, Cornutus. Then, without my knowing,
Your skilful rule was applied, straightening my twisted path;
My mind assailed by reason and labouring to yield to it, thus

Acquired all its features, under the pressure of your thumb.
Indeed I recall spending long days with you, enjoying the first
Evening hours dining with you. We planned our work as one
Rested together, eased our seriousness at your modest table.
Don't doubt, for an instant, that our lives, guided by a fixed
Bond, by a single star, move in harmony one with the other.
Whether Fate, tenacious of truth, has balanced our destinies
In Libra's hanging Scales, or whether some hour, born for
Fidelity, has divided our harmonious fates between Gemini's
Twins, that we counter stern Saturn, as one, with Jupiter's light,
It must surely be some constellation has blended me with you.
There are a thousand human types and their experience varies;
Each have their own wishes, and no one desire rules every life.
One man trades wrinkled pepper pods and pale cumin seeds
For Italian goods under an eastern sun, another prefers to grow
Fat, sated with refreshing sleep; one heads for the sports ground,
While another man, gambling ruins, or licentiousness corrupts.
But once gout has affected their joints, with nodules like those
On an old beech tree, then they moan of the dullness of days
Spent in a murky twilight; that they themselves forgot to live.
It's your delight instead to grow pale studying nocturnal texts;
A cultivator of the young, sowing Cleanthes' Stoic corn in their
Purged ears. From now on, lads, and you old ones too, set a sure
Goal for your mind, provide for your sad white-haired old age.
'Tomorrow, I will.' Tomorrow, you'll be the same. 'What does
A day matter!' But when the next day's come and gone, we've
Already lost yesterday's tomorrow: behold, another tomorrow
Forever out of reach, pours out our years. For though it turns
Close to you, ahead, beneath the same cart, you, a rear wheel,
Circling on the trailing axle, chase behind that iron rim in vain.
Freedom's essential. Not that which earns Publius, now freed,
A share of the mouldy grain that's allocated to the Veline tribe.
Ah, how deluded are those who think one ritual twirl of a slave
Creates a citizen! Here's Dama, an idle footman, bleary-eyed
With stale wine, who'd cheat you over a handful of horse-feed.
His master spins him round, like a top, and in an instant, there
We have Marcus Dama. Brilliant! 'Will you refuse to lend cash
With Marcus as guarantor?' 'Do you blanch at Marcus the juror?'
'Marcus said it, it's a fact.' 'Marcus, add your name to this paper.'
That's pure freedom: that's what the cap of liberty grants us.

‘So who is free, other than those who may live life as they wish?
I may live as I like, so am I not freer than Brutus?’ ‘Yours is
Faulty logic’, cries the Stoic, his ear cleansed by biting wit,
‘I’d accept the statement without the *may*, and the *as I like*.’
‘Once I’m my own master, freed by the praetor’s wand, why
Am I not permitted to act as my inclination takes me, except
For whatever’s forbidden under Masurius Sabinus’ rubrics?’
Listen and learn, but quench your irritation, lose the sneer
And the flaring nostrils, while I dispel those old wives’ tales.
It was never the praetor’s duty to impart to fools the subtleties
Of social behaviour, or how to pass this fleeting life of ours;
Sooner supply a harp to some lanky barrack-room servant.
Reason’s against it, and mutters privately in your ear, that
No one should be allowed to do something they’ll fail in.
Nature, and the laws of humankind, dictate this principle,
The weak and ignorant should be denied forbidden things.
Should you mix hellebore, not knowing how to measure
The drug precisely? The principles of pharmacy forbid it.
Should a leather-booted ploughman, unskilled in steering
By the morning star, ask for a ship, Melicerta the sea-god
Would claim that all propriety had vanished from the world.
Has your education given you a firm foundation, are you
Clever enough to distinguish realities from appearances,
So that gold overlaid on copper will never ring true to you?
That which should be pursued, or what you should avoid,
Have you chalked the one in white, and charcoaled the other?
Are you humble in your wishes, frugal at home, kind to your
Friends? Can you open, or close, your stores of grain at will;
Or step over a coin that’s fallen in the dirt, without filling
Your throat with the taste of Mercury’s saliva, impure gain?
If you can truly say ‘These rules are mine, I hold to them,’
Be free, and wise, with the blessing of the praetor, and Jove.
But if, having been, not long ago, baked of the same dough
As us, you keep your old exterior; if masked by a cultured
Brow you conceal a cunning fox in your corrupted breast,
I take back what I said above, and reign in the rope I gave.
Reason grants you no concession: move a finger; what’s
Simpler than that; and you’ll err. But no amount of incense
Makes an ounce of wisdom cling to fools for an instant.
It’s wrong to dabble in things; when you’re an oaf in

Other ways, to dance even three steps of Bathyllus' *Satyr*.
'I am free.' Why assume that; subject to so many things?
Is the only master you recognise one who waves a rod?
'Be off, boy, take Crispinus's back-scrapers to the baths.'
Or who scolds? 'Still hanging about, you idler?' No bitter
Slavery impels you, nothing external enters you and sets
Your muscles working; but if what masters you is born
Of diseased passions, how shall you emerge as freer than
That slave, sent with the back-scrapers, fearing the whip?
At dawn, you're snoring deeply. 'Arise!' cries Avarice,
'Arise, now!' You won't. She's firm. 'Arise!' she cries.
'I can't.' 'Arise!' 'But why?' 'You ask! Go, trade in
Black Sea sprats, beavers' castor extract, hemp, ebony,
Incense, slippery Coan silks. Be the first to unload fresh
Peppercorns from some thirsty camel. Barter something;
Swear a deal.' 'But Jupiter might hear.' 'Oh, you dunce,
If you aim to live by Jupiter's rules, you'll have to remain
Content with scraping a nail round the crusted saltcellar.'
So, all equipped, you load the slaves with bags and bottles.
Quick, all aboard! What can stop you skimming the wide
Aegean, in your mighty vessel, unless its sly Indulgence,
Taking you aside to lecture you: 'Where are you rushing
Off to then, you lunatic? What's your aim? Even a jug
Of hemlock couldn't quench the raging madness swelling
In your fevered breast. You, leaping the waves? You, in
The thwarts, eating, sprawled on a coil of rope, quaffing
A beaker reeking of red Veientan marred by rotten pitch?
Why? Just so the money you've nurtured here at a modest
Five per cent can proceed to sweat you a usurious eleven?
Give your spirit free play; let's snatch at pleasure; life is
Ours alone; you'll soon be mere ashes, a ghost, a tale ended;
Live mindful of death; the hour flees; as I speak it passes.'
What to do? You're on the horns of a dilemma. To pursue
This, or that? By turns, you must submit, enslaved by your
Two masters; by turns, desert them. Even though you resist,
Refusing to obey their imperious orders, you can't claim:
'Now my chain is broken!' For, though the struggling bitch
Slips the leash, and runs, a length of rope trails from her neck.
'Soon, I aim to put my sorrows behind me,' so Menander's
Chaerestratus says, chewing his nails raw, to *Davus*, his

Slave, 'you'd better believe it. Why shamefully embarrass
My respectable relatives? Why ruin my name, acquire a vile
Reputation at her sordid threshold, drunkenly singing with
Quenched torch before *Chrysis*' damp portal?' 'Bravo, lad,
Be wise, slaughter a lamb to the gods that drive away evil.'
'But do you think she'll cry if I leave her, *Davos*?' 'Nonsense,
Merely expect a pummelling from her red slipper, lad, to
Stop your anxious struggling and biting at her taut snare.
You're fierce and violent now; but if she summoned you,
You'd ask instantly 'So what should I do? Fail to go, now,
When she sends for me, and positively begs me?' If you've
Escaped whole, intact, no not even then.' This, this is what
We seek, not that freedom the foolish lictor's stick confers.
Does a fawning wretch represent what's right, whom Ambition,
Dressed in a candidate's white robes, leads around, yawning?
'Forget about sleep, lavish chickpeas widely on the brawling
Mob, so that old men in the sun can remember our Floralia.'
What's handsomer than that? Or when the days of Herod
The Jew are here, and the lamps, wreathed with violets, set
In the greasy window, vomit oily vapour, and the tunny fish
Tail swims, encircling the red bowl, when the white jug
Brimms with wine, and you move your lips silently, grown pale
At the Sabbath of the circumcised? There are black ghouls;
Danger from eggs too cracked in the fire; the huge Galli, the
Eunuch priests of Cybele; and the one-eyed priestess of Isis
With her sistrum; to drum gods into you that bloat the body
Unless you've downed a garlic head thrice, at dawn, as bidden.
Say all this to some gathering of bulging-veined centurions,
And, instantly, vast Pulfenius, with a hoot of laughter, will
Bid you a hundred shaven pence for any hundred Greeks.

Satire VI

Has winter driven you to your Sabine hearth now, Bassus?
Are the lyre strings already alive to your harsh plectrum?
You're a master at setting the elements of ancient speech,
And intensifying the virile strum of our Latin instrument,
At rousing youthful jests, at teasing distinguished old men
With your upright thumb. I'm now warmed by this Ligurian
Coast, wintering by the sea, where the cliffs present broad
Flanks, where the shoreline's broken by a net of valleys.
'Get to know the port of Luna, citizens, it's well worth it.'
That's Ennius' cry from the heart, after dreaming himself
To be Homer, transmigrated from a Pythagorean peacock.
Here I'm untroubled by the mob, by whatever the hostile
Southerlies threaten cattle with; untroubled that a corner
Of my neighbour's field's more fertile than mine, so much
So, that even if everyone of inferior birth were growing rich,
I'd refuse, to the end, to sit hunched, prove mean because of it,
Dining without gravy, sniffing the seal on a bottle of sour wine.
Let others think otherwise. Horoscope, you produce divergent
Twins: one, the wretch, dips dry vegetables, but on his birthday
Only, in a cup of brine; he alone sprinkles the precious pepper
On his plate; while the other, brave lad, chews his way through
A large fortune. I enjoy what I have, not so lavish as to serve
Turbot to the freedmen, nor such a gourmet I can tell the subtle
Flavour of the female thrush from the male. Live to the full extent
Of your harvest, mill all that's in your granary (that's your right).
What's to fear? Harrow the seed, and a second crop will shoot.
'But duty calls; a shipwrecked friend clings to the Bruttian rocks,
Penniless now, his whole wealth, his unheard prayers, sunk in the
Ionian Sea, he's hurled on shore with the huge figureheads of gods
From the stern, the ribs of his shattered boat now a roost for gulls.'
Then carve out a portion of your green fields to give to the pauper,
Lest he wander round with a picture on a sea-blue placard. 'But,
Your heir, angry you've diminished your wealth, will skimp on
The funeral banquet, commit your ashes un-perfumed to the urn,
Indifferent to whether the cinnamon smells stale, or the cassia's
Tainted with cherry. How can you lessen your fortune unscathed?'
While Bessius blames extravagance on Greek teachers: 'That's it;
Ever since these effeminate tastes of ours arrived in Rome, with

The pepper and dates, hay-cutters ruin their porridge with fine oil.’
Why would that bother me beyond the grave? So come, my heir,
Whoever you may be, edge from the crowd a little and take ear.
Haven’t you heard, my friend? Caligula’s requested a triumph,
From Germany on account of his ruination of their armies, dead
Ashes are being swept from all the altars, and Caesonia’s already
Declaring contracts for weapons to decorate the doorposts, royal
Cloaks, yellow plush for the captives, chariots, vast paintings of
The Rhine. So I’ll be staging a show for the gods, and our Leader’s
Guardian Spirit, with a hundred pairs of gladiators, on account of
His wonderful deeds. Who’ll prevent me? Try it: but beware if you
Choose to do so. I’ll treat the mob to bread, meat, oil. Who disagrees?
Speak up! ‘That field nearby’, you say, ‘still has a few stones to left
To hurl at you.’ Well, if I find I’ve no paternal aunts alive; no female
Cousins on my father’s side; or paternal uncle’s great grand-daughters
Left; if my maternal aunt died childless; and naught of my grandmother
Survives, I’m off to Bovillae, to Virbius Hill, I’ll readily make Manius
The beggar my heir. ‘A son of the soil?’ Well ask me who my ancestor
Was four generations back: I’ll tell you, in a bit. Back a generation, now
Back again: there’s a child of the soil, and by all the rules of genealogy,
The said Marius, the beggar, must be my great-great-uncle, more or less.
You there, in front, why demand the torch from me if I’m still running?

I'm your Mercury; I come to you like the god as he's portrayed. Do you Refuse? Or will you be pleased to have what's left? 'The total's somewhat Short.' I've spent a little on myself, but whatever there is, it's all yours. Don't ask where that legacy is that Tadius bequeathed to me long ago, Don't keep repeating: 'Put down what you had from your father, add The interest on the capital, take your expenditure from it: what's left?' What's left? Come, boy, come, pour dressing on my salad, pour it on, More generously. Do you think I'm going to endure boiled nettles, And smoked pig's head with a split in the ear, on festive days, so a Wild offspring of yours, all stuffed with goose liver, his limp cock Stuttering between those fickle thighs, can leak into some patrician Womb, one day? Or that I'll suffer starvation, while that belly of a Minor priest quivers with fat? Sell your soul for lucre; trade; comb Every quarter of the world, adroitly, so no one else outdoes you as You exhibit, with a slap or two, on the harsh auction platform The fine condition of your plump Cappadocian slaves; double Your wealth. 'It's done; now it's tripled, and quadrupled, now A tenfold increase is mine. Tell me where to stop.' He's found, Chrysippus: the man who'll show you what constitutes a pile!

End of the Satires