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## **CONTRA UXORES – A PERSPECTIVE ON THE EXEMPLA IN JUVENAL’S SATIRE 6**

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to discuss the use of a rhetorical resource, the *exempla* (“examples”), in Satire 6 by the Roman poet Decimus Junius Juvenalis, about married women (*uxores*). Based on the division of the poem into sections made by G. Highet, it is argued that the *exempla* are distributed with the aim of criticizing Roman marriage in four aspects: religious, emotional, sexual and moral. Notwithstanding Juvenal’s exaggerated attack on married women, it is argued that Satire 6 ends up reaffirming the ideal of the wife/mother of a family in Rome at the time of the poet.

**Keywords:** Latin satire. Juvenal. Roman wedding. *Exempla*.

To write about Juvenal’s Satire 6 today is an action that faces two challenges: the first concerns the apparent exhaustion of the subject. What is new to say about this satire? What has been discovered about Juvenal in recent years? It is one of the best-known satires for those dedicated to the studies of Latin and Latin literature. When you choose an object about which a lot has already been said, the task is difficult, becoming, then, attractive for the instigation in which it materializes.

The second challenge concerns the subject of satire: it is a satire about women, which, although plausible within the historical context in which it was written, is nonetheless a text of extreme misogyny - and we, therefore, run the risk of falling into the trap of anachronism. Furthermore, it must be remembered that, despite being famous as “Juvenal’s satire on women,” it refers more specifically to married women (*uxores*). In some of the works consulted, this information seemed omitted, not to say unknown - which makes much difference for the analysis of Satire 6. Pomeroy (1995, p. 210), for example, in her book *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, fundamental for anyone

studying the subject, comments that Juvenal included an empress in his satire 6, but did not criticize the Vestal Virgins. Vitorino (2003, p. 77), in turn, registers the caveat that Juvenal censures “not the young woman, nor the prostitute, nor the free woman, but the matron.” Courtney (2013, p. 217) also clarifies that these are married women. Juvenal targets not one woman, nor several women, but an image of woman.

It is this collective image built throughout the poem that interests us. The objective of this work is to observe the *exempla* groups used by Juvenal in the chosen satire as a rhetorical instrument that, by drawing a negative image of the *uxores*, ends up revealing the conservative thinking still in force at the time regarding the role of married women. This article is neither a moralist nor a counter-moralist work but an analytical one, of an exploratory nature. According to Courtney, satire 6, if defined in rhetorical terms, would be a *dissuasio* (“deterrence,” “speech to convince not to do something”); however, insofar as it makes known the object to be avoided, it outlines and highlights the idealized object.

Little is known about the life of *Decimus Junius Juvenalis*, and much is speculated. Most of the information we have concerns his maturity and old age. He says nothing about himself in his works. We know that he was free, born around 60 AD in Aquinum, a small town near Mount Cassino, and that he obtained the elementary education provided to middle-class boys. Furthermore, nothing can be confirmed about his youth: where he lived, whether he was married, whether he was rich or poor. Vitorino (2003, p.24) criticizes the fact that some scholars of Juvenal seek definitive information from mere deductions about the author’s historical-social profile. What is known is that Juvenal’s period of literary activity falls between 92 and 128 AD, during the governments of Trajan and

Hadrian. His first book was published around 110 AD, when he was about 50 years old. His entire life work – his Satires – consists of 16 poems, separated into five books, published one after the other, at intervals of many years. The first contains five poems; the second, just a satire, the sixth, about women, and this is what we will focus on in this study; the third and fourth books contain three poems each; the fifth and final book, four poems.

It was not until the 4th century that grammarians began to take an interest in Juvenal's work; with the Renaissance came the understanding that satire went beyond mere moral censorship, and satirists came to be considered objects of poetic imitation, no longer seen only as sources of maxims. Many European satirists admired and were inspired by Juvenal; for example, Geoffrey Chaucer read Satire 6 before writing *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, one of his Canterbury Tales. In addition to Chaucer, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, John Donne, John Skelton, among others, are also mentioned as his admirers.<sup>1</sup>

As for his poetry, it arises from Juvenal's anger at Roman corruption, not from his *natura* ("talent"), nor from his *ars* ("technique"). Juvenal is not so concerned with the rules of his genre, satire, being even called "anarchic" by Bramble (1982, p. 120), because of his language. Kenney (2012, p. 127) points out that the vivid description of Rome was Juvenal's strong point, such that no other ancient author has managed to convey a more immediate impression of his society.

In the words of Paul Harvey (1987, p. 299), Juvenal's satires are "notable for their bitterly ironic humor, inventiveness, ruthless expressions, sympathy for the poor and a blindfolded pessimism that sees only the worst side of life." More than that, Juvenal is despotic: he obligatorily induces the questioning of established values.

However, Juvenal is a satirist, not a moralist;

<sup>1</sup> Howatson, 1989, p. 309-310.

his aim is not to make value judgments. He says that Lucilius and Horatius were his masters, but he does not write with the elegance or finesse of irony of either of them (Howatson, 1989, p. 309). In his frankness, Juvenal uses grecisms, diminutives, slang words, obscenities, but all mixed with a grandiloquent language, which makes us feel that there is "a gap between life as it is and as it must be" (Bramble, 1982, p. 121).

By emphasizing how life is – in his eyes – Juvenal ends up also emphasizing how life must be – from the perspective of his time.

## THE SATIRE NUMBER 6 FROM JUVENAL

As stated earlier, Satire 6 is not about all women. When Juvenal wrote this poem, he was not thinking of courtesans, pubescent girls, or freed slaves. He thought of the woman after she marries: the *uxor*.

Juvenal consecrates such cruel and heavy lines to women who, according to tradition, would be the strength of Rome, even more than men, and whose piety and prudence go back to its foundation. However, Satire 6, while revealing the vices of Roman *uxores*, presents characteristics of a behavior still considered standard for married women at the time of Juvenal. He builds this positive/negative image throughout the poem through the *exempla* ("examples"), in this satire of well-known women in Roman history and literature, which we will discuss later.

Before dealing specifically with the women mentioned in this poem, it is necessary to give a preview, albeit superficial, of Satire 6. For this, we present the division of the long poem of more than 660 lines - in addition to the Oxford fragments, included in 1899 - into sections, with their summary, as we see below:

vv. 1-20 – Preamble; the disappearance of modesty from this unworthy world.

Nostalgia, in a desire to return to the roots of Rome, in a time of prosperity, the Golden Age.

vv. 21-59 – Postumus, friend of Juvenal, dreams of his *iustae nuptiae*; Juvenal discourages him because, according to him, there is no chaste woman in Rome or in any of its provinces.

vv. 60-81 – There is no woman who is not vicious or unbearable; theatrical performances drive them crazy, and they lose what little control they have over themselves.

vv. 82-135 – Eppia and Messalina – extreme examples.

vv. 136-160 – It may be that there are men who like their wives, but this sympathy is justified by the dowry or the physical beauty of the woman.

vv. 161-183 – A woman is impeccable if she employs her qualities not for her arrogance but to give her husband “more sweetness than bitterness.”

vv. 184-199 – Women with a mania for Greek, who think highly of themselves just because they have a grasp of the language, but who are ignorant of Latin, are worthy of contempt.

vv. 200-205 – There is no reason to get married if the man is not sure that he can love his wife.

vv. 206-241 – The man who gives his heart completely to his wife, gives himself to the worst tyrant, and yet he will run the risk of divorce and being bothered by a mother-in-law.

vv. 242-285 – Varieties of female types: the one who likes trouble, the women who like sports, and the ones who pretend to be jealous.

vv. 286-299 – The ancient chastity of the

Romans no longer exists because of lust and money.

vv. 300-345 – The excesses to which the depravity of certain women leads; even public worship may serve as a pretext for their wiles.

vv. 346-351 – Even if she were imprisoned, the woman could corrupt her guardians; such is her power.

vv. 352-365 – Not even they themselves know that they are not trustworthy.

vv. 365.1-34 (Oxford fragments, first published 1899) – If a woman is determined to misbehave, there is nothing that can turn her from her evil ways.

vv. 366-397 – There are women who seek eunuchs, whom their husbands would not even suspect; other women fall in love with singers.

vv. 398-473 – Portraits of women: the brutal, the pretentious, the rich and vain.

vv. 474-511 – Women who exaggerate in their care for beauty, not with the intention of pleasing their husbands, as would be considered appropriate, but to get or keep their lovers.

vv. 511-591 – The superstitious are exploited by charlatans in their exuberant and absurd rites.

vv. 592-609 – Rich women no longer want to have children – the time when this was a virtue is gone. Others present bastard children to their husbands as if they were legitimate.

vv. 610-625 – There are women who give their husbands magic potions so that they do not perceive – or do not understand – the ruses they manufacture.

vv. 626-661 – The poet makes his apology,

authenticating everything that has been said so far. Women are cruel, willing to do anything to achieve their goals, even the most obscure ones.

## THE WOMEN FEATURED IN SATIRE 6

The first thing to keep in mind in reading this satire is that a considerable part of ancient literature is the literature of people in the ruling class. As Pomeroy (1995, p. 16) says:

The women who are known to us from the formal literature of antiquity are mainly those who belonged to or associated with the wealthy or intellectually elite groups of society. It must also be recognized that there is more information available on women who were evil — whether for good or evil.

The fact that Juvenal, in a given passage of the satire, briefly compares poor and rich women (vv. 582-609) does not contradict what we have just mentioned, because the names that appear in the satire are all of women well-placed socially and well known in history and mythology.

That said, we look at Juvenal's Satire 6 as a clipping. This reinforces what we said earlier when announcing the objective of this work: Juvenal presents an image of a woman, within a particular profile. For this, he chooses examples of women famous for their meanness, or for escaping what was expected of their behavior. Were another author, writing another type of text, his choice could be different, and I am not just referring to the names of classical literature. Jérôme Carcopino (s/d., p. 113), a scholar whose name is well known among those who study classical culture, writes about some women of the imperial era, saying that they are "the most beautiful incarnations of human greatness." After mentioning Plotina, Sabina,

Arria, among others, he even writes that "the cruelty of daily life still left them too many opportunities to show an equal capacity for sacrifice and, at least in the elite, women had not degenerated" (p. 114). It is, without a doubt, another clipping about women of the same period.

In the first verses, Juvenal begins serene, almost impersonal, without any direct attack. The word *pudicitia*, the focus of the prologue, can be translated as "modesty," "chastity," as a common noun, but also as the goddess "Chastity." The latter seems more appropriate to us, above all because this tone of appeal to a divinity would be more useful to Juvenal, especially when invoking Rome's past of glory and virtue.

From the serenity of the prologue, evoking the past, Juvenal goes to the present, addressing, in the poem, Postumus (who may have really existed or may have just been a persona created for stylistic effect)<sup>2</sup> and vehemently tries to convince him not to marry (vv. 30-37). To support his advice, Juvenal mentions, throughout the poem, married women who, in many ways, he considers bad examples.

Right from the start, Juvenal reminds us of Cynthia and Lesbia – sung by the elegiacs Propertius and Catullus, respectively, and their lovers – women who are symbols of adultery. These were not their real names, obviously; since they were married, they could not be the subject of love poems written by other men. Moreover, being so celebrated, even if their true identities were not known to everyone, they would certainly not be lacking in this satire by Juvenal.

Later, in verse 29, Juvenal asks Postumus a provocative question: "Tell me what Tisiphone, what snakes are driving you mad?" Now Tisiphone, being one of the Furies,

2 Do not confuse this persona, an interlocutor created as a character, with Anderson's theory of satirical persona, which differentiates the outraged satirical Juvenal (of which satire 6 would be an example) from the satirist who laughs at satire (Vitorino, 2003, p. 98).

which is frightening, committed an atrocity to Cithaeron, the young hero, with whom she was in love. When Cithaeron disdained her love, Tisiphone, filled with hatred, turned one of her own hairs into a serpent, which bit him, leading him to death.<sup>3</sup> Was Postumus allowing himself to be seduced by some “Fury”? The comparison to Tisiphone is certainly not gratuitous, as the Furies were loathsome, tormenting mythological figures, exactly the portrait Juvenal desires for the image of a wife he has to offer.

Less evident than Tisiphone, but equally noisy and reprehensible, follows Hiberina, for whom one man was not enough; more shame in the theatrical shows, with the names of Tuccia, who loses consciousness and is unable to control herself; Apula, who groans scandalously, as in sexual intercourse; and Thymele, who pretends to be learning from the former. In the same way, Aelia and Hispulla fall in love with actors, as if they were allowed another love outside of marriage. These are women whose lack of chastity is revealed in the theater.

Eppia abandoned her husband, senator, to follow a disgusting gladiator. Even worse is Messalina, called *meretrix Augusta* by Juvenal, an “empress whore,” who left Emperor Claudius’ bed at night to prostitute herself in a lupanar, where there was a chamber reserved especially for her – this certainly an exception to truly worthy empresses, as Carcopino writes (*s/d.*, p. 111).

Juvenal goes on to mention the names of Caesonia, who is praised by her husband because of her dowry (she bought a husband and with him the image of a happy marriage and the respect of others), and of Bibula, who is loved for her beauty – while the teeth are still white and, in appearance, she is young – until wrinkles appear.

It was expected that women of a similar

3 Grimal, 1997, p. 453.

4 Howatson, 1989, p. 157.

nature to Messalina would appear in this satire. Nevertheless, not even Cornelia, mother of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, a great example of a virtuous woman, the *mater familias* par excellence, escaped Juvenal. She bore her husband twelve children – although only three survived to adulthood – and, after being widowed, she never married, spurning irrefutable marriage proposals to remain faithful to the memory of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus. He tirelessly watched over her children’s education and exerted great influence on Rome’s political scene through them. As if that weren’t enough, she was the daughter of Scipio Africanus, Hannibal’s victor in the Punic Wars.<sup>4</sup> What could be so objectionable about this seemingly perfect woman? In spite of her *laudes*, Juvenal sees her as haughty for the glory of her ascendants and descendants, as a woman that no one would bear as a wife.

As proud as she is – Juvenal tells us – is Niobe, who declared herself more blessed than Leto, mother of Apollo and Diana, as she had six couples of children. They were almost all killed by Apollo and Diana, who spared only one couple. In other words, what was the use of having the blessing of fecundity if, because of her pride and haughtiness, the seeds were lost?

All these women are still present in the first part of the poem, before what is called the “second prologue” (vv. 285-300). In the second part, Juvenal continues his fierce attack, but in a generalized way, citing few names of women. Tullia and Maura are mentioned, of whom Juvenal says that they abandoned the altars of ancient *Pudicitia*, making their litters ready at night, urinating on the effigy of the goddess, “riding each other reciprocally” (*vices equitant*). In addition to these, Saufeia challenges the brothel slaves and shares the prize with Medulina, another

of similar audacity. Ogulnia, who rents clothes, a companion, a litter, a pillow, friends, a wet nurse who takes care of her son and a girl to whom she gives orders, all this just to go to the games, is the lavish one. In the end, Caesonia, Caligula's wife, who gave him a potion to make him go mad, could not be out of this list. There is also no lack of Agrippina, wife of Claudius and mother of Nero, who killed her own husband, as well as Pontia, Medea and Procne, who killed their own children, to take revenge on their husbands. Eriphyle, wife of Amphiaraus and sister of Adrastus, serving as arbitrator between them, accepted Harmonia's necklace as a bribe and decided that Amphiaraus must help Adrastus in the war, even though she knew, through guesswork, that her husband would die in combat. Follow the Belides or Danaides, fifty daughters of King Danaus, who married their cousins, the fifty sons of King Egypt, received from their father, as a wedding gift, a dagger each, and killed their husbands; only one of them, Hypermnestra, spared Lyncaeus. Finally, comes Clytemnestra, daughter of Tyndareus, who, according to the tragedians, killed her husband Agamemnon with her bare hands, having prepared for him a dress with the sleeves and neck sewn together. A veritable gallery of "criminals," which Juvenal left for last, strengthening his argument against marriage.

## RHETORICAL DEVICE IN SATIRE 6

According to Courtney (2013, p. 28), citing Juvenal's own case, the study of rhetoric could be a kind of preparation for writing poetry. The *exempla*, used abundantly by Juvenal in more than one satire, are also rhetorical devices. The use of historical characters works as a kind of argument from authority, as they relate to people who really existed and to facts

<sup>5</sup> Kenney, 2012, p. 130.

that their contemporary readers assume are reliable, as tradition narrates. It is a resource used in profusion by Roman orators and historiographers.<sup>5</sup>

It is for this reason that I title this work *Contra uxores* [...] as if it were a title of a speech given against married women. I also justify my choice of the word *uxores*: the word *uxor*, in its origin, refers to one of the customs of the wedding ritual, which was to put ointment on the door of the house for the bride to enter for the first time (cf. verb *ungere, unxi*). Although most of the examples presented by Juvenal in Satire 6 are of matrons, and this term carries the weight of virtue and dignity inherent in the ideal image of a Roman woman, those who were not mothers also appear in the satire, including those accused by Juvenal of having an abortion or of preventing pregnancy by deceiving their husbands (vv. 592-609). Furthermore, Juvenal intends to dissuade Postumus from getting married – and one of the Latin translations for the verb “to marry” is *uxorem ducere*. According to Juvenal's argument, any woman who becomes an *uxor* also becomes a creature with the “evil potential” of the women he lists in his Satire 6.

Kenney (1963, p. 718) argues that Juvenal's *exempla*, rather than pretending to teach about something, seek to “sharpen the listener's emotions,” “inflare him with the love of virtue or the hatred of vice.” The rhetorical questions present in this satire have the same effect as in a speech: bringing the listener closer to the speaker, in a kind of implicit pact – questions whose answers are obvious and with which the listener can only agree.

More recently, Courtney (2013, p. 16) recalls that the contours of satire are not drawn by a kind of rancor on the part of the poet but are part of fiction. Following Mack, he says that it is as if there are two layers: one, exacerbated by rhetoric in demonstrating one's faults; another, based on the idea of the ideal man

(in the case of satire 6, of the ideal wife). If this reading is possible, then we have that the rhetoric, evidencing the differences between the “real” (even if exaggerated) and the “ideal” (even if too embellished), not only serves one of them but both. By contrasting them, it defines them and reinforces their characteristics.

As for the structure of Satire 6, Highet (1961, p.99-101) reduces it to four major sections:

Verses 1-132: The uncleanness of wives - Chastity left the world; they are not pure like those of the past and they deceive their husbands<sup>6</sup>;

Verses 136-285: The impossibility of love in marriage – it is a contract made because of riches or physical attraction, not out of love, and the wives then become despotic;

Verses 286-351: The depraved habits of Roman women – they are concerned with satisfying their own desires and therefore ignore their husbands;

Verses 352-661: The various crimes and atrocities of which they are capable - they plunder and kill their husbands, their children.

This structuring proposal is the one generally considered in works on Satire 6. There are many questions, such as: why does he abandon his friend Postumus in the midst of the satire, if it is aimed at him? Why does Juvenal sometimes seem repetitive, showing the wives in the theater at two times (verses 60 et seq and 379 et seq), and speaking of their crimes (verses 133-135 and 626 et seq)? Why the sudden stop in the presentation, with a sort of “second prologue” in lines 286-300? For them we have not yet found a unanimously accepted answer. But, in our view, as W. S. Anderson points out, perhaps it is better to put aside the idea of a gradual structuring; Juvenal does not seek to develop a theme. His <sup>6</sup> Highet transposes the verses 133-135 to the verse 626

method of presentation is to move from one scene to another, getting the contrast between good and evil. His skill is precisely to select and arrange his examples so that they do not just say the same thing but complement each other. This is, albeit unconsciously, a rhetorical strategy.

Examining the four sections into which the satire is divided (according to Highet’s proposal), we see that the *exempla* are broken down into four arguments against *uxores*. The first section, in which the lack of purity of wives is presented, is an argument that rests on religion, or the **spiritual** aspect; the second, on the impossibility of love in marriage, rests on the feelings, or the **emotional** aspect; the third, on the depravity of Roman wives, rests on the **sexual** aspect; the fourth and last, about the crimes of the wives, rests on the **moral** aspect.

If, on the contrary, we observe each of these aspects being fully satisfied, linked to the others by the force of tradition, we will see the ideal Roman marriage, expressed in both the public and private spheres. By saying that wives cannot meet the conditions for an ideal marriage, he ends up revealing that, even in his time, these same conditions were understood as necessary for a happy marriage, or the collective image that we mentioned at the beginning of this article. He does not arbitrarily distribute his *exempla* as if he were shooting arrows at random: he has different targets in each part of the poem, and uses *exempla* of transgressive wives for each aspect of Roman marriage, understood as a fundamental institution.

The wild tone that is imprinted on the image of the *uxor* in the prologue – through expressions such as *frigida spelunca* (“cold cave”), *parvas domos* (“small houses”), *communi umbra* (“common shade”), *silvestrem torum* (“rustic bed”), *frondibus et culmo vicinarumque ferarum pellibus* (“with



leaves and thatch and with the skins of wild beasts that live there”) – refers to the very origin of Rome, in Romulus suckled by a wolf, raised by shepherds; it is a divine, sacred origin. This poverty and rusticity are opposed by the rich wives of satire 6, who think they can get anything with money and are severely criticized by Juvenal: *Intolerabilis nihil est quam femina dives* (v. 460).<sup>7</sup> From simplicity to opulence, the real and the ideal wife take diametrically opposed paths, reaffirming their presence in the satirical text at every step.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the period between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire, legends became the propaganda of an ideal Rome in contrast to the real one. This was part of Augustus’ policy, which intended, among other things, to rescue traditions and restore the old moral. Thus, the current image of a virtuous woman is that of a woman capable of spinning and weaving, as in the beginnings, and the example of women like Cornelia (mother of the *Gracchi*) is constantly evoked. Despite this, by this time, women had already become quite independent, especially those of the aristocracy, who were involved in politics and literature, spending most of their time in them, and continued this way beyond the Augustan period, throughout the Empire. In the first two centuries, the aristocratic Roman woman enjoyed a great deal of autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps Juvenal, already at the time of Trajan and Hadrian, distorted some aspects when describing the Roman *uxores*. After all, he is a satirist, and satire has a bit of exaggeration inherent in it – and even more so would Juvenal exaggerate, among the Roman satirists. He is an author who fits what Funari (2011, p. 105) says when he writes that “they were frankly misogynistic, presenting a very

critical view of women even though, even in these cases, one can glimpse the social importance of women.” Juvenal writes his satires (especially the first six) in the frenzy of his *indignatio* (*ficta* or *facta*), with much exaggeration.<sup>9</sup>

From the division of Highet into sections, we can see that Juvenal, using *exempla*, a rhetorical resource, presents his cast of women known from history and mythology to destroy one by one the aspects of marriage as idealized by the Romans: the religious, the emotional, the sexual and the moral. It is necessary to be aware of the fact that this satire refers to married women (*uxores*). By attacking them, however, Juvenal ended up giving witness to the ideal of a wife that existed in Roman society at the time.

<sup>7</sup> "Nothing is more unbearable than a rich woman."

<sup>8</sup> Carcopino, s/d., p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Kenney, 2012, p. 125.

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