

BEASTS AND BARBARIANS

HOW TO INSULT IN THE ANCIENT ROMAN WORLD

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Outline



1. Ridicule and denigration
2. Immoralities, sexual slander
3. Feminization
4. Filthiness, disease, pollution
5. Barbarization
6. Preposterous things, magic ...
7. Dehumanization, bestialization ...
8. Demonization

Late antique polemic

- Late Antiquity
- late Roman Empire (200)-300-400-(600)-(800)
- gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire
- My examples 200-300-400
 - polemic between 'pagans' and Christians
 - polemic between Christians and Christians

Ridicule and denigration

- Pagans: *impii, infideles, inimici, irreligiosi, sacrilegi, profani, iniusti, perfidi, iniqui*
- ignorant, foolish, stupid and infantile
- *mira dementia, deliramentum*
- Christians: stupid, insane, ignorant and perverted

Immoralities

- Jerome of Stridon (c. 346–420)
- (in)famous for his polemic against his ecclesiastical adversaries
- luxury, drunkenness, lingering with women and sexual promiscuity



Immoralities

- Jerome against Jovinian:
- Jovinian, a slave to vice and extravagance
- Jovinian “has abandoned his filthy tunic, bare feet, and simple bread and water for a beaming white garment, smooth skin, for honeyed wine and refined meat dishes, for exquisite sauces, for baths and massages and for taverns”

Immoralities

- Jerome against Jovinian:
- Jovinian: *Epicurus noster*, lustfully loiters in his gardens with his youths and women
- Jovinian's followers: belong to Jovinian's herd, or rather they grunt among his pigs
- Jovinian's followers are fattened to be pork for hell

Sexual slander

- Pagan writers against Christians:
 - sexual excesses (sister-brother kisses - incest, nocturnal ceremonies – orgies, sexual promiscuity)
- Christian writers against pagans
 - licentious and bloody orgies
 - theatre performances connected to the cult of Flora depicted as filled with obscenities
 - cult of fallos in honour of the god Priapus
 - revelries connected to the cult of Bacchus
 - *galli*, eunuch priests of Cybele

Sexual slander

- Jerome against Jovinian:
 - Jovinian's followers are goats and horses
 - mad horses that neigh after women as soon as they see them
 - hoopoes, which fly around the whole brothel of filthy debauchery

Feminization

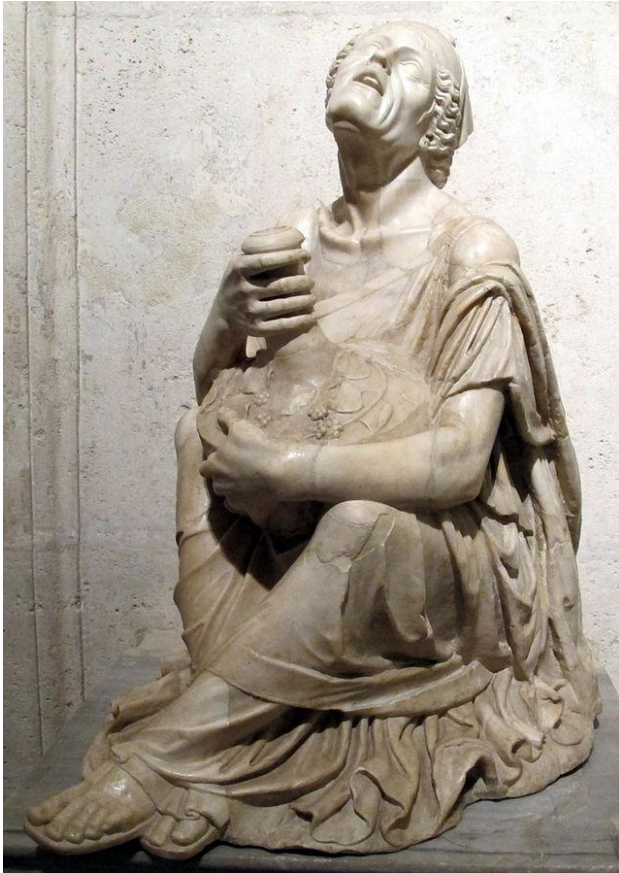
- charge of lingering with women
- insinuation of female influence
- embarrassing a rival in Roman political invectives
- religious and ethnic groups labelled as dominated by women



Feminization

- Jerome against Vigilantius:
 - associating Vigilantius with the looms of women (*inter mulierum textrinas*)
- Jerome attacked by his opponents:
 - consorting with aristocratic women in Rome
 - insinuations of *muliercularum deliramenta*

Old women's tales



- Plato, Cicero ...
- old women and their tales, superstition, songs or whispers
- implying to magic
- intellectual disqualification

Alienating the opponent

- enemies of the society, *hostes publici*.
- in sharp contrast with our values, or even lacking values altogether
- in the terms of religion
- lacking all morals, religion and laws



Filthiness

- Pagans against Christians:
 - the blemish (*miasma* or *macula*) of impiety
- Christians against pagans:
 - polluted and stained
 - filthy *superstitio*

Disease

- Against Christians:
 - Pliny the Younger, reporting to Emperor Trajan: the contagion of Christians' superstition:
superstitionis istius contagio.
 - severe disease and sudden storm

Disease

- Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* (c. 350):
- justification of the religious oppression
- disease and healing
- dirt and purification
- “the noxious error of paganism” should no longer pollute the Roman world
- “the depravity of this pestilential tradition”

Pollution

- not merely metaphorical
- also a concrete state of affairs
- keeping both spiritually and physically away from “heretics”
- idolatry defiles the whole community



Pollution

- fifth-century imperial legislation
- decree of 425:
 - “Manichaeans, all heretics, schismatics, *mathematici* and all sects inimical to the catholic faith must be expelled from the sight of the towns in order to prevent people becoming polluted by the presence of these criminal sects”

Pollution



- the order of the society and the universe as connected with the practice of the correct religion
- early Empire: *pax deorum*
- Christian Empire: *pax Dei*

Barbarization

- Prudentius (early 5th c.):
- “Leave the pagan divinities to barbarian districts or villages!”
- Romans and barbarians all tread on the same earth, they all have the same sky and the same ocean bounding their world

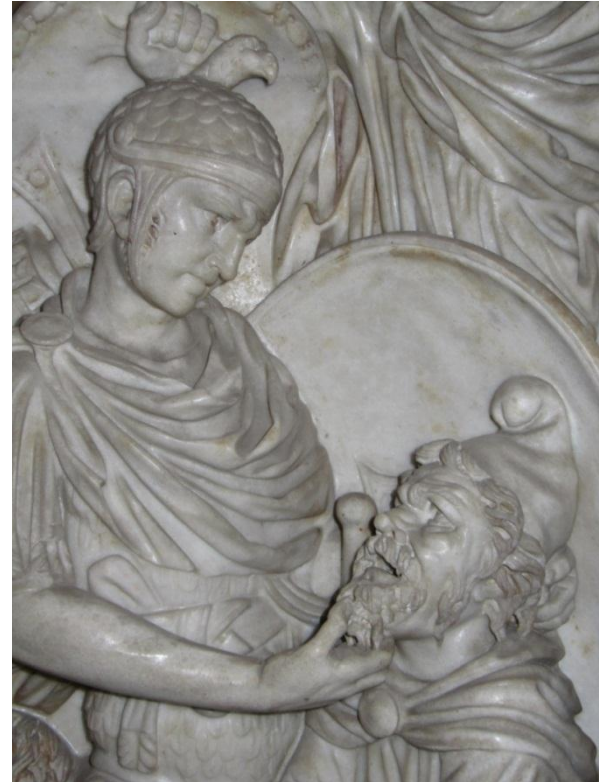
Barbarization



- Prudentius:
- what is Roman (*Romana*) and what is barbarian (*Barbara*) are as different from each other as the four-footed creature is distinct from the two-footed or the dumb is from the speaking

Barbarization

- Prudentius:
- the sun shines on the bright marbles of the Capitol but also on a prison, dung-heap and brothel



Magic

- Label of magic reveals cultural prejudices and fears of the surrounding society
- Label of magic was used in marginalizing and alienating groups
- An opponent's religion was labelled as magic
- “My religion, your magic”



Magic

- malevolent magic (*maleficium*) one of the gravest offences in late antique legislation
- Priscillian of Avila
- Rival bishops accused him of incantations, obscenity, magic and Manichaeism
- obscene doctrines, nocturnal gatherings with shameful women and praying while naked
- was convicted to death in 385

Preposterous things

- Minucius Felix's *Octavius* reporting accusations against Christians
 - secretive people that shuns the light
 - mob of blasphemous conspiracy
 - bound together by nocturnal meetings
 - inhuman feasts
 - secret marks and signs

Dehumanization

- wolves, scorpions, snakes, vultures and other dangerous animals
- Augustine: a pagan patron as fever, scorpion or noxious mushroom
- Jerome: horses, goats, doves and hoopoes: sexual immoderation



Dehumanization

- Jerome against Vigilantius:
- mythical and biblical monsters
- centaurs and sirens, owls and pelicans,
- Leviathan and Behemoth



Dehumanization

- Jerome against Vigilantius:
- Cerberus and the Stymphalian birds,
- the Erymanthian boar, the Nemean lion, the chimaera
- multi-headed Hydra,
- Cacus
- three-bodied Geryon



Dehumanization



- Jerome:
- “I ask what I have said with excessive freedom ... Have I assailed anyone in bitter terms?”

Demonization

- Against pagans:
- worshippers of demons
- their Gods as the fallen angels or demons under the direction the devil
- *diaboli ecclesia*, the congregation of the devil
- *daemoniorum conventus*, the gathering of demons.

Demonization

- Heresies as the cunning device of the devil
- Cyril of Alexandria (376-444) against Nestorius:
 - “a terrible and recalcitrant serpent”
 - “many-headed serpent”
 - “the poison of its own impiety”
 - Beliar
 - “the sting of the devil’s malice”

Demonization

- A contemporary writer on Cyril of Alexandria:
 - “At last with a final struggle the villain has passed away. ... His departure delights the survivors but possibly disheartens the dead; there is some fear that under the provocation of his company they may send him back again to us. ... Care must therefore be taken to order the guild of undertakers to place a very big stone on his grave to stop him coming back here.”

Imperial legislation



- Emperor Constantine

in 324:

- “With regard to those who draw back, let them have, if they desire, their sanctuaries of falsehood. We have the shining house of the your [god’s] truth that you [god] have granted in accordance with your nature”

Imperial legislation



- A law of 425 forbidding games and theatrical performances on Christian feast days:
 - those still “enslaved by the madness of the Jewish impiety or the error and insanity of stupid paganism”

