Sexual Excess, Cultural Loss (Words: 597 without notes; 693 with notes)

Lines 314-345 of Juvenal’s Satire VI feature a secret, annual rite in honor of the Good Goddess (Bona Dea),[[1]](#footnote-1) a fertility ritual restricted to women and requiring that they abstain from sexual intercourse for a certain number of days. Even male animals were supposed to be excluded and male statues veiled. In the rite described here, however, the flutes activate the loins when Priapus’s maenads sweep through, taken over entirely by inebriated sexual desire. Women from ancient families challenge prostitutes to a sexual contest. Their actions—bumping and grinding—are not make-believe but real enough to awaken sexual yearning even in the genitals of old men. The women’s sexual cavorting makes them impatient for penetration. “Let the men in,” they cry. They are so obsessed with desire that if their lovers aren’t available, they go for the younger brothers. If that doesn’t work out, they opt for slaves. If there aren’t enough slaves, they move to water carriers, and finally to donkeys. The satirist then reflects, lamenting the perversion of ancient rituals and wishing that past values could be restored. But it’s hopeless now. In the past, no one would have shown contempt for the gods or for the disciplined moderation of an ancient king. But now no altar escapes degradation. The present is typified by a famous politician crashing the women’s ceremony in drag.

The satirist characterizes this scene not as a fertility ritual, performed for the sake of the culture, but as an extravagantly sexual display, wholly out of control. Women become nothing other than a concentrated and enlarged form of sexual desire, a desire that compromises, even overturns, the fundamental order of the society. Forgetting entirely all distinctions of social rank, Saufeia and Medullina, whose names signal an ancient pedigree, flout the values of their families as they level themselves in a contest of skill with women of no pedigree at all. In Juvenal’s view, such skill is contemptible, while the pedigree they dishonor is essential to the order of culture. The women’s transgressions intensify as they make no discrimination even between human and animal, moving down the ladder from lovers to donkeys. In saying they “cock their dish for a donkey,” Juvenal both enlarges them and reduces them, that is, he enlarges their transgressions and reduces their sexuality to a dish, awaiting any instrument of fulfillment.

Here, as elsewhere, Juvenal imports the taint of Greek culture. Maenads, known for their transformation by the wine god Bacchus,[[2]](#footnote-2) have brought their frenzy into the Roman scene. And the excesses of the women of Rome are now so great that they could stir to desire even the revered old (and dead) men of Homer’s epic, Nestor, the elderly Greek hero and advice giver, and Priam, the father of the Trojan hero Hector. What should be a ritual to honor tradition becomes a destruction of tradition. Juvenal intensifies his charge against women by contrasting their excesses with the ancient values of Rome. King Numa, whose desires were so moderate that he contented himself with “earthenware bowls, black pots, and brittle platters of Vatican clay,” represents Rome’s past, which measures and exposes the cultural losses of the present. Juvenal’s ending the section with “Clodius in drag” (an actual event, for which Clodius was legally charged)[[3]](#footnote-3) makes the criticism of women even greater. As unnaturally sexualized as the women are, Clodius, a man who sneaks in to the ceremonies disguised as a woman, furthers the degradation of female sexuality. Nothing, in Juvenal’s view, no cultural sign, is worse than the confusion of male and female.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. See translator’s note on Bona Dea. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I happen to know about the Maenads, but anyone can find it out by looking it up. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See translator’s note and any historical write-up of Clodius. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I didn’t refer to But every Moor and Hindu knows well which ‘lady’-harpist it was/brought a tool as long as both those anti-Catonian/ pamphlets of Caesar into the sanctuary . . . . because I don’t understand it. I understand the reference to “anti-Catonian pamphlets” (and the note tells us), but I don’t understand “the lady harpist” or the reference to Moor and Hindu. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)