

Poverty Transcending Time:
A Case Study of Four Ancient Greek and Latin
Texts Discussing Poverty

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Those who have resources write the history books. They have time to take up less practical professions such as politicians, writers, and thinkers. Those who do not have resources do not write the history books, nor are they featured in them. They only have time to have practical professions, whether that be farming and herding or skilled or unskilled labor. The rich do not like to talk about or associate themselves with the poor. The poor are looked down upon and isolated from the rich. This is an issue modern society struggles with, but we are not the first to have this problem. As long as man has had social and economic institutions, there has been a divide between those who have goods and those who do not. Before the industrial revolution, it can be argued the divide between the classes were much greater. There were fewer types of jobs and fewer jobs in general. There was little, if any, room for social or economic mobility.

Webster's Dictionary defines poverty as "the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions". Oxford's Dictionary defines poverty as "the state of being inferior in quality or insufficient in amount". Though these definitions are helpful in directing us towards an understanding of poverty, they do not take us all the way. Poverty, in the modern sense, encompasses not only economic deprivation but also physical and emotional deprivation. An impoverished individual may display poverty in or all of these areas and the effects on the individual differ greatly from person to person, state to state, and country to country. For the purposes of this paper, we will define poverty in the Classical World as a deprivation of goods and the marginalization of those lacking by those who are socially empowered.

Education was, and remains to this day, an expensive endeavor. In the Classical World, education was paid for on an individual basis, allowing only the wealthiest to receive an education of any sort. This means that not only were the poor unable to devote their time to writing about themselves and their time, they were incapable of doing so as they had never been taught the skills. We have no accounts written by impoverished or poor people in the Classical World, and so we have to take the word of the rich to describe the types of poverty in their world. One key aspect of poverty in the Classical World was slavery; however this paper will only deal with free people and citizens¹.

This paper will serve as a case study into four different times through four different authors. Solon of Athens wrote poetry through much of his life, which spanned from roughly 638-558 BCE. Aristophanes was a playwright who wrote his play “Πλουτος” translated “Wealth” around the year 388 BCE, also in Athens. Over three hundred years later lived the lyric poet Catullus who, though born and raised in the northern Italian town of Verona, lived the latter years of his life writing poetry in Rome until his death around 54 BCE. Then came Juvenal, another man born and raised in a province but came to Rome in his later life and wrote 16 satires from the beginning of the second century CE. Through examining their writings about poverty in each of their times, a portrait of the ideas about poverty will be painted.

Solon of Athens is heralded today as the “Father of Democracy”. What most modern people do not know is that this one man was able to unite the excessively

¹ For further reading on slavery in Greece, see Nicholas Jones’ Ancient Greece: State and Society chapter *Citizens, Resident Aliens, and Slaves*. For Rome, see Keith Bradley’s Slavery and Society in Rome

stratified society in 6th century BCE Athens that eventually led to the founding of the first true democratic state in that city². Solon was born of a noble (read wealthy and politically powerful) family, though he did not consider himself to be a noble or rich in his adult years. He was first and foremost a lyric poet, who wrote mostly about the political times in which he lived. His poetry was originally performed in public accompanied by musical instruments (mainly the lyre and tibia). The public performance of his poetry would help to spread his ideas to the populace and gain him access to political office.

In 594/593 BCE the *eupatridai* (“good fathered men”, the richest men who then held the highest political offices) and the rest of the powerful nobles in Athens feared that the massive inequality in land distribution and ownership would result in civil strife and a revolt led by the poor. They chose to appoint Solon sole *archon* (the highest political office for which [usually] nine men were chosen annually and shared the governing of the city-state) for the year to allow him to change the structure of their society, however he thought best to avoid the feared uprisings. He changed the system in three main ways: abolished debt bondage and released enslaved citizens, created a four class system based on yearly earnings rather than birth status, and allowed even the lowest of the four classes to vote in the assembly (which had never been done before). In order to not be persuaded to amend his new constitution, he left the city for ten years and the people promised to abide by the new system for that time. Though the Athenians did not keep their word and before the end of the ten years they had fallen back into civil strife and were under the rule

² Nicholas Jones, 1996. *The Development of Athenian Democracy*

of a dictator, future generations looked back to the Solonian Reforms as the Ancestral Constitution that paved the way for the rise of a new government.

The part of this history that concerns this paper the most is his introduction of the idea that the poor citizens have a greater role in society than as just laborers. Before Solon, the poorest class of people in Athens were treated similarly to slaves and often enslaved by the rich. The reforms gave these people freedom from servitude and rights of citizenship. As a relatively large group of people, their votes in the assembly impacted the actions of the whole populace and for the first time, their interests were represented. Later politicians realized the importance of the *thetes* (the lowest of the four classes of citizens introduced by Solon) and often would use support of these people to win political gains.

Solon wrote many poems, but only a few fragments have survived the two and a half thousand years to reach us today. The two fragments I have chosen for this project are Fragment 15 and Fragment 24 in M.L. West's numbering system (6 and 18 respectively in Bergks' numbering system).³ The texts and accompanying translations are as follow:

πολλοὶ γὰρ πλουτεῦσι κακοί, ἀγαθοὶ δὲ πένονται:
ἀλλ' ἡμεῖς αὐτοῖς οὐ διαμειψόμεθα
τῆς ἀρετῆς τὸν πλοῦτον: ἐπεὶ τὸ μὲν ἔμπεδον αἰεὶ,
χρήματα δ' ἀνθρώπων ἄλλοτε ἄλλος ἔχει.

For many wealthy men are bad, and many good men are poor but we will not exchange virtue for their wealth, since the one (virtue) holds fast, while one man then another has wealth.

Ἴσον τοι πλουτουσιν ὅτω πολὺς ἀργυρὸς ἐστὶ καὶ χρυσοῦ καὶ γῆς
πυροφωροῦ πεδία

³ The first text is taken from Tufts University's website entitled the Perseus Project, the second I transcribed from the Loeb Classical Collection

ἵπποι θ' ἡμιονοὶ τε, καὶ ὦ μόνῃ ταῦτα παρεστί, γαστρὶ τε καὶ πλευρῆς
καὶ ποσὶν ἀβρα παθεῖν.
παῖδος τ' ἠδὲ γυναικὸς, ἐπὶν καὶ ταῦτ ἀφικηταὶ ὠρη; σὺν δ' ἠβῆ
γίγνεται ἀρμοδιῇ
ταῦτ' ἀφενὸς θνητοῖσι τὰ γὰρ περιώσια πάντα χρηματ' ἔχων οὐδεὶς
ἐρχεται εἰς Ἄϊδεω.
οἴθδ' ἂν ἀποῖνα δίδους θάνατον φύγοι οὐδὲ βάρειας νοσοῦς οὐδὲ
κακὸν γῆρας ἐπερχομένον.

There is the same wealth for him who has much silver and gold and fields bearing wheat, horses and mules, and to him who has only this, he has stomach and side and feet which feel good. This man by and by enjoys a child and woman as they mature well. For the same riches befitting mortals holding countless wealth, nothing comes into Hades. Not even paying Death ransom can he flee while as he is weighed down by sickness and the wicked onset of old age.

As a man born of a wealthy, high-class family, Solon's view of poverty is not one from experience, but one from an outsider looking in. His view and discussion of poverty is unique compared to many other classical authors. Even though Solon never experienced poverty first hand, his poetry tries to convey the feelings of the impoverished at his time. It can be expected that the rich at his time would look down upon the poor, who were considered just as cheap laborers and then as the ignorant pests of the newly constructed government. Wealthy people at this time did not have a good opinion of the poor and the poor did not have a good opinion of the wealthy. Poverty was not idealized, as it was later, as the only true way to tell a person's virtue, but rather it was seen as a burden and problem for those who were wealthy. Likewise, the poor, no doubt, loathed the upper classes in Athens as they restricted their freedom by enslaving them and limited their rights.

In these fragments, we can see Solon speaking of both groups differently than either would talk about themselves or how the opposite group would talk about them. He is trying to give voice to both groups without belittling the other. It is

implausible to think that the rich in Athens would think that the poor, who could not read, write, or even obtain their own freedom, would be more virtuous than they themselves, who had the resources to be educated and participate in politics.

Similarly, the poor, who often could not even feed themselves or their families and thus became indentured to the wealthy, would not consider poverty to be a good thing, even if it did mean that they were better prepared to face the underworld.

In these two fragments, it is clear that Solon separated himself from both groups of people while trying to identify with both. The wealthy were not used to others of their class praising a life of *penia* (poverty) and would not have liked his saying they were less virtuous than these people. The poor, who lost many basic rights in order to feed themselves and their families, would not have liked an outsider praising their status. However, over the course of time, Solon's ideas and reforms have become less radical and more standard, especially in modern America.

Approximately two hundred years after Solon's year as archon, Aristophanes wrote his comedy *Wealth* during the height of "Radical" Democracy in Athens. Little is known about the life of the author. His first play was published in 427 BCE, which would put his birth sometime between 450 and 444 BCE⁴. Aristophanes was a citizen of Athens where he wrote and had his plays performed. Of his forty-four known titles, only eleven have survived, the last of which was first written around 408 BCE but comes to us from an edition performed in 388 BCE⁵. Although the first copy of *Wealth* was written during the Peloponnesian War, we are going to treat the

⁴ Quinn, M.T., ed. *The Plutus of Aristophanes*. London: G. Bell, 1896. Print.

⁵ Quinn, 1896.

text we have as separate from the original. In this case, the text was written after the democracy had been restored.

The Athenians fell to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian war in 404 BCE and were put under the rule of thirty men who ruled as an extreme and oppressive oligarchy. The people of Athens detested this harsh new government so much that within nine months of their institution, they were kicked out of Athens and the truest form of democracy was installed in their place. In this government, there was no property or birth restrictions on citizenship. Most officials were selected by lot and each position was filled at the beginning of the year. There were several people appointed for most positions, and the politicians had to show the people what they had done throughout the year. The main authority of this government lay with the assembly and jury-courts, both of which provided pay for service. Taxes were only paid by the wealthy (presumably in a sliding scale based on wealth) and foreign residents (as had always been the case). These taxes allowed the poor to attend religious festivals and some even received income and food from the government if they were physically unable to work. This “radical” democracy lasted all the way until the invasion of the Macedonians under Alexander.

According to Nicholas Jones, the population of the citizens of Athens is thought to have dropped roughly 30% from the start of the Peloponnesian War, when the population was close to 30,000, to the end of the fourth century BCE, when the population was 21,000. This massive decline in population would have opened up opportunities for the lowest of Solon’s classes as well as foreign residents and some slaves. However, all of the *thetes* would now have to be employed in some

other fashion, as their paid job as rowers in the navy was less significant. Though the Athenian democracy did not allow for poverty in the modern sense of a completely destitute, barely able to survive group of people⁶, the poor in Athens at this time are still important in our construction of the poor in the Classical World.

The following are three selections from Aristophanes' comedy *Plutus* (in English, *Wealth*). The first selection is a singular quote from the supporting character Blepsidemus in lines 442-443. The second is part of a speech given by the main protagonist Chremylos in lines 490-498. The final is also from a speech of Chremylos in lines 500-506.⁷

Πενία γάρ ἐστιν ὧ πόνηρ', ἧς οὐδαμοῦ οὐδὲν πέφυκε ζῶον
ἐξωλέστερον.

For she is Poverty, you devil, nowhere no living creature arises that is more destructive than her.

(ὅτι) τοὺς χρηστοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων εὖ πράττειν ἐστὶ δίκαιον, τοὺς δὲ πονηροὺς καὶ τοὺς ἀθέους τούτων τάναντία δήπου... ἦν γὰρ ὁ Πλοῦτος νυνὶ βλέψη καὶ μὴ τυφλὸς ὢν περινοστή, ὡς τοὺς ἀγαθοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων βαδιεῖται κούκ ἀπολείψει, τοὺς δὲ πονηροὺς καὶ τοὺς ἀθέους φευξεῖται: κᾶτα ποιήσει πάντας χρηστοὺς καὶ πλουτοῦντας δήπου τὰ τε θεῖα σέβοντας.

Wealth should be accomplished by the good just men, and the wicked and godless display the opposite. For if Wealth will see now and no longer being blind he will go around visiting the good leaving behind the wicked and godless to escape, he will make down from all the wealthy and show wealth to those fearing the gods.

ὡς μὲν γὰρ νῦν ἡμῖν ὁ βίος τοῖς ἀνθρώποις διάκειται, τίς ἂν οὐχ ἠγοίτ' εἶναι μανίαν κακοδαιμονίαν τ' ἔτι μάλλον; πολλοὶ μὲν γὰρ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὄντες πλουτοῦσι πονηροί, ἀδίκως αὐτὰ ξυλλεξάμενοι:

⁶ Jones, N. 1996.

⁷ I translated these selections with help from the Loeb Classical Library text and retrieved the diacritical Greek from Tufts University's website entitled the Perseus Project.

πολλοὶ δ' ὄντες πάνυ χρηστοὶ πράττουσι κακῶς καὶ πεινῶσιν μετὰ σοῦ τε τὰ πλεῖστα σύνεισιν. οὐκ οὖν εἶναί φημ', εἰ παύσει ταύτην βλέψας ποθ' ὁ Πλούτος, ὁδὸν ἦντιν' ἰὼν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἀγάθ' ἄν μείζω πορίσειεν.

For now our current state of life for men, who would not think it to be mad or more than wickedness? For many of the men being wealthy are wretched, having collected wealth unjustly display evilness, while those linked with you, who are worthy (of wealth), are hungry. Therefore I say, if Wealth were ever to see, that he would stop her (Poverty), there would be a better way for men brought about.

Given that the genre of his work is comedy, one has to be careful when analyzing the social constructs in Aristophanes. On the same note, as is true today, comedy is most funny when there is a grain of truth in it. For that reason, we are able to take the works of Aristophanes as relatively truthful, if just exaggerated. Typically in Greek art and myth, the god Plutus (the god of wealth) is depicted as a child. In his comedy of the same name, Aristophanes chose to depict Plutus as an old man who is first seen as a blind beggar on the side of the road. He also chose to portray the goddess Penia (goddess of poverty) as a younger woman even though she is typically portrayed in the same way Plutus appears in this work. This contrast heightens the audience's distaste for the blinding of Plutus by Zeus and Penia's apparently selfish desire to keep herself and thus her craft in Greece.

As poor farmers, though still able to support their family at subsistence levels and keep slaves, Blepsidemos and Chremylos are good examples of the average poor farmer at the time the play was written. Blepsidemos' complete revulsion of the character, and thus the state, of Poverty in line 442-443 shows us the general Athenian conception of poverty. From this, it is clear that they had a sense of what our modern view of poverty may look like and did everything in their power to keep

their citizens from falling into such a state (at least in the radical democracy after the Peloponnesian War). Even though Blepsidemus' reaction to the woman may be a dramatically exaggerated expression of the people at this time, the reaction would not have had the same weight on the audience if they did not think it to be at least partly true.

According to Chremylos throughout the whole play, but stated expressly in the second selection, wealth should be given to those who are good people rather than to the people who at this time possessed wealth and were bad people. He fears that the Athenian wealthy do not obtain their riches through good but rather bad deeds and do not use their money well. In the eyes of Aristophanes, Chremylos is a man who has never had much money and thus he does not realize that when someone has wealth, he does not have a need to be good person as his actions bear few true consequences.

The third selection explicitly shows that Chremylos feels the current state of man in Athens allows the selfish and wicked to prosper while the selfless and good suffer. Despite what some modern scholars say about the existence of the destitute impoverished, Chremylos shows us here that there were people in Athens in the beginning of the fourth century BCE that were unable to fully feed themselves or their family. Although it can be argued that, again, the author is exaggerating the state for comic effect, the inclusion of this statement indicates that the Athenians at least knew of such a state and thus it would not have been too foreign of a concept for them.

As a “domi nobiles”⁸, a noble from a northern Italian family, Catullus’ view of the Roman poor when he was living in Rome is an exceptionally biased perspective. Though his dates are still contested amongst modern historians, most agree that he was born around the year 82 BCE and died around 52 BCE, making him a contemporary of Julius Caesar. Catullus moved to “The City” at some point, probably in the early 50s, and referred to it as his home in a few of his poems. Rome, at his time, was in a state of great civic unrest and both the wealthy and the poor alike were not overly fond of the way in which the falling republic was run. Julia Gaisser describes Rome as a “large, dirty, rich, exciting city” that was learning how to rule and manage such a large, emerging empire effectively for both its citizens and its new territories⁹. Amid all of the political change in the city, most of its people did not feel as though they were being taken care of by the government and that the government was not working for the people, but rather the individual desires of the leading politicians, such as Caesar himself.

Catullus’ poetry falls into the genre of lyric, meaning it was most likely sung and accompanied by a lyre or other musical instrument for the enjoyment of large groups of mainly males. He is classified amongst others in an emerging class of poets called the “neoterics”, young men who were wealthy on their own and did not need to make money like the generations before them. These poets adopted Greek poetic styles to the Roman tradition and poetic needs¹⁰. Catullus and his friends spent most of their time concerned with their personal lives and little concerned with their

⁸ Gaisser, Julia Haig. "Introduction: The Young Poet in Rome." *Catullus*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

⁹ Gaisser, 2007.

¹⁰ Gaisser, 2007.

public lives. They lived for themselves and their own enjoyment rather than for the public or republic.

In poem 23, Catullus addresses his friend, yet rival, Furius, another of the “novi poetae” who we will see is described as being economically poor¹¹. This poem is hendecasyllabic, meaning there are eleven syllables per line and each line is pretty regular throughout¹². This type of meter sounds much more vernacular and has a more joking tone than a meter that has more long syllables than short. Catullus tends to start these lines off with three long syllables, which further emphasizes the jovial tone of the poem. These literary devices make the poem seem comic, which in turn makes it harder for the reader to take any of his statements as facts. Therefore there is some issue with gleaning any clear portrait of the subject. However, the view he portrays of what it meant to be a poor man in Rome at this time clearly shows what the Romans like Catullus thought of the poor amongst them, even if it is dramatized at the expense of the subject.¹³

Furi, cui neque servus est neque arca
nec cimex neque araneus neque ignis,
verum est et pater et noverca, quorum
dentes vel silicem comesse possunt:
est pulcre tibi cum tuo parente
et cum coniunge lignea parentis.
Nec mirum: bene nam valetis omnes,
pulcre concoquitis, nihil timetis,
non incendia, non graves ruinas,
non facta impia, non dolos veneni,

¹¹ Garrison, Daniel H. *Student's Catullus*. 4th ed. Norman: Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture, 2012. Print.

¹² The meter scans as $_ u _ u u _ u _ u _ x$ (with substitutions allowed in the first two syllables).

¹³ The poem below has been transcribed from Daniel H. Garrison's The Student's Catullus and translated with help from Garrison's commentary

non casus alios periculorum.
Atqui corpora sicciora cornu
aut siquid magis aridum est habetis
sole et frigore et esuritione.
Quare non tibi sit bene ac beate?
A te sudor abest, abest saliva,
mucusque et mala pituita nasi.
Hanc ad munditiem adde mundiozem,
quod culus tibi purior salillo est,
nec toto decies cacas in anno,
atque id durius est faba et lapillis,
quod tu si manibus teras friesque,
non unquam digitum inquinare posses.
Haec tu commoda tam beata, Furi,
noli spernere nec putare parvi,
et sestertia quae soles precari
centum desine: nam sat es beatus.

Furius, who has neither slave nor cashbox
nor bedbug nor spider nor fire,
in fact you have both a father and stepmother,
whose teeth are able to chomp stone:
(you live) excellently with your father
and with the wooden wife of your father.
Is it no wonder: for all of you fare well,
you digest well, you fear nothing,
there is (nothing) burning, no heavy falls,
no impious deeds, no tricks of poison,
no other accidents of danger.
What's more you all have bodies dry as a bone
or whatever is more arid
from the sun and the cold and hunger.
Why is it not good and blessed for you?
Sweat is absent from you, saliva is absent,
and mucus and bad cough from your nose.
Add to this cleanliness something cleaner,
that your butt is cleaner than a salt shaker,
nor do you defecate ten times in the whole year,
and it is harder than beans and pebbles,
which if you grind and rub with your hands
you could never dirty a finger.
These conveniences are so fortunate, Furius,
do not despise them nor think little of them,
and leave off the 100,000 sesterces
which you are accustomed to beg for:
for you are blessed enough.

Catullus opens the poem by listing, through the poetic device of metonymy, all the common grievances of the poor at his time. He uses *servus*, *arca*, *cimex*, *araneus*, and *ignis* to show Furius' lack of money, bed, roof, and hearth, all the things that make for what a Roman would consider a comfortable house. It does not matter that Furius is not able to afford a slave, because he is on good terms with his father. Catullus then contrasts Furius' dearth with his affluence. This contrast is used to highlight his poverty by showing how even though he lacks the conventional necessities to live comfortably, he, in fact, has good fortune because he is poor. Furius is able to go an entire year only defecating ten times, his father and stepmother can avoid starvation by eating stone because their teeth are strong enough to break them, and there is nothing for them to be afraid of as they have nothing to lose, except each other. The dryness of their bodies in the last century before Common Era would indicate that Furius and his family were free from the diseases and illnesses that typically plagued the city's poorest. The argument the poet is making is that if you have nothing to lose, are free from illness, and have a loving family, what more could one want? The reader is meant to take this rather sarcastically. Here Catullus is making a jab at Stoicism.

According to Garrison, the Stoics believed that poverty was good because no one would be able to rob the poor as there was nothing they could steal from them and therefore the poor were free from anxiety as they did not have to watch out for people who would bring them harm either physically or otherwise. Catullus brings light to all these quintessential Stoic ideals in terms of Furius' personal life. The

meter and use of metonymy in his descriptions clearly indicate to the reader that though Catullus was using the Stoic ideals, they are not meant to be taken seriously. The ultimate goal of this poem is to deny a request for a loan that Furius has supposedly made to Catullus, which he does by showing to the world the depressing state Furius is in and then using the contemporarily common philosophy of Stoicism to bring light to his supposed happiness and lack of need, even though he should be amongst the city's most needy.

This poem shows us many things about the Roman view of poverty in the first half of the first century before Common Era. The poem draws a philosophical distinction between the wealthy, like Catullus, and the poor, like Furius, and indicates a great dichotomy between the classes. The poor were disenfranchised and had no one to look out for their needs. The rich were able to look out for their own personal interests and the interests of their supporters. The rich, who had much more political power and influence in Rome and elsewhere, believed that the key to happiness was having belongings and influence. The poor (or at least the ones who employed the Stoic mentality) on the other hand thought themselves to be happier than the rich because they were free from anxiety and stress. Having nothing truly to contribute to society, they were free from all of the commitments that the rich had. The poor did not have to attend the forums with their patrons, as they had no need for patrons. The rich had to attend the forums. The poor, who were dehydrated and both undernourished and malnourished, did not have to worry about getting sick (according to Catullus) because their bodies were so dry. The rich did get sick, because their bodies were over saturated by their gluttony and

excess. The poor did not have to worry that their house would burn, or collapse in the frequent earthquakes, or be robbed as they did not have houses. The rich did have to worry as they did have houses. The poor made no political enemies as they could not participate in the political world and thus did not have to fear assassination. The rich did participate and thus did have political enemies to fear.

True poverty in the 50s BCE in Rome meant life or death for those who fell into it, but simply a nuisance for the rest of society. The poor, as shown above, were unable to own property and thus make enough food for themselves and their families. They also had no way of making money or moving up in society. Merchants were the only true jobholders, other than farmers. To be a merchant, one had to have money and a way of transporting goods great distances; resources the poor had no access to. Although more money and food was coming into the city from the new territories than had been in recent generations, the political turmoil and civic unrest prevented the goods from being distributed in an effective way to those who needed it most. Instead it went to those who could afford it, like the Catullus' of the world. The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer, yet there was no one in power who could or wanted to do anything about the situation.

Although Juvenal's exact dates are unclear, we do know that he was born around the third quarter of the first century CE and died in the second half of the second century CE. This puts him at roughly two hundred years closer to our time than Catullus. Catullus lived through the end of the Republic while Juvenal lived in the Empire. Juvenal's childhood, probably in the province of Aquinum as the son of a rich freedman, saw many changes of power that both led to and was influenced by

great civil strife and unrest¹⁴. Although raised in the provinces, there is evidence that his father was wealthy enough to give him a good education and his rhetorical style reflects this education¹⁴. If we are to believe an inscription found in Aquinum, he was a priest under the emperor Vespasian, the first emperor in the past four to hold office for over a year, and he held it for ten¹⁴.

Book I of Juvenal's satires almost certainly was written under and takes place during the rule of Domitian¹⁴. Domitian inherited the empire in 81 CE after the deaths of his father and then brother and held power until his assassination fifteen years later. In this time, he looked to better the economy by strictly regulating currency, increasing the wage of soldiers, and commencing a great building program in the city¹⁵. To pay for the increased wages and the building program, he imposed harsh taxes on the provinces and was quick to regulate from where and how many resources were coming into Italy¹⁵. He lost favor with the wealthy quickly through his conscription of their lands and later executing those who could be thought as his rivals. Even though he tried to accommodate the growing empire by increasing cereal production, he failed to feed his people and was both hated and feared by most¹⁵.

In Juvenal's third satire (in Book I), a disgruntled Roman citizen, Umbricius, lists his complaints about living in the urban center of the empire to his friend as he heads out for a life without the problems of city life, but instead to make his way free from the scorn of the urbanites. This unhappiness with life in the city seems to have been a common feeling amongst not only the poorest in the city but also some of the

¹⁴ Wright, Henry Parks. *Juvenal*. Boston: Ginn, 1901. 297. Print.

¹⁵ Jones, Brian W. *The Emperor Domitian*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

richest. However, life in the city had become so expensive that the poor were unable to feed themselves with the same amount of money as they could live comfortably in the provinces and colonies throughout Italy and much of the rest of the empire.

The selections from the third satire that I selected clearly show the problems that the poor in the city were having to overcome at this time, and were struggling and often failing to do so. The first selection is lines 140-146 and the second selection is lines 164-170.

...protinus ad censum, de moribus ultima fiet
quaestio. 'quot pascit servos? quot possidet agri
iugera? quam multa magnaue paropside cenat?'
quantum quisque sua nummorum servat in arca,
tantum habet et fidei. iures licet et Samothracum
et nostrorum aras, contemnere fulmina pauper
creditor atque deos dis ignoscentibus ipsis.

The first question will be made about his wealth the last about his character. "How many slaves does he feed? How many measures of farmland does he possess? How great and how many are the dishes he eats?" As much money as he saves in his cash box is how much he is trusted*. Though you swear oaths both for the gods of Samothrace and of our own gods on the altars, the poor man does not believe in the thunderbolts and the gods, with the forgiveness of the gods themselves.

*people are believed in direct proportion to their wealth

"Haut facile emergunt quorum virtutibus opstat
res angusta domi, sed Romae durior illis
conatus: magno hospitium miserabile, magno
servorum ventres, et frugi cenula magno.
fictilibus cenare pudet, quod turpe negabis
translatus subito ad Marsos mensamque Sabellam
contentusque illic Veneto duroque cucullo.

In no way it is easy that they rise (out of) the thing which impeded virtue at the narrow (cramped) home, but also having tried those things which are harder in Rome: miserable hospitality is expensive, the stomachs of slaves are expensive, and frugal little dinners are expensive. He feels shame to eat off earthenware, but you will say is

not disgraceful if suddenly you are carried across to the Marsians and Sabine table and there contented by Venetian hood and hardship.

Juvenal displays the biggest problems plaguing the city that is trying to control much of the Eastern world clearly in both of these selections. In trying to keep hold of its immense empire, the city of Rome and its political leaders (namely Domitian) have let things get so bad in the city itself that life is nearly unbearable. Everything in the city is expensive and those without expansive means are unable to afford their lives. Another problem that is seen in both selections is the assumption of the Romans that an individual's worth is directly correlated with his wealth. To the Romans, it is better to live a comfortable life in the urban center than to live lavishly in the provinces. However, as seen in the second selection, it is much easier to live lavishly in many provinces than it is to live comfortably in the city of Rome, especially when living quarters are cramped, food is expensive, and one is expected to own slaves, yet is hardly able to feed himself.

The first selection deals more with the general Roman distrust of the poor while the second deals with the specific problems they are faced with. It was assumed that one's quality of life was directly correlated with his ability to maintain and feed slaves, how much land he owned, and how lavish his meals were. In reality, there was a great portion of society that was unable to afford food for their family, especially when a greater amount of the food produced was being redistributed to the provinces and territories. These people had no hope of ever owning slaves and thus their personal merit greatly suffered in the eyes of their fellow citizens. Many of these same people were confined to life within the city, where they could make money as merchants or craftsmen especially if they did not inherit any land, as land

was expensive (or impossible) to purchase and required a great number of laborers to maintain. Working in this way did not ensure a good lifestyle and was not as stable as farming typically was. The aristocrats were generally the only ones who were able to own land and they were able to afford many slaves to work it. The relatively steady income they received from their land only worked to increase their wealth and further separate them from those who struggled on a day-to-day basis. The highly gentrified city did not allow room for the “self-made man” and worked to alienate the lives of the poor from the rich.

The first selection shows how little the Romans cared about one another as individuals, but simply their ability to contribute back to the society. Juvenal (through the voice of Umbricius) states plainly that people are trusted in direct proportion to their wealth. Despite knowing that this attitude can easily corrupt people in power, as seen in the turnover between emperors, the Romans evidently continue this practice. Not only does this lead to corruption and distrust, it further marginalizes the people who have been raised without these same corruptions and therefore, theoretically, would be better deserving of personal trust. At the end of the first selection, Juvenal shows how the distrust of the poor by the wealthy has led to what we would call an impoverished mind. The Roman religion was so deeply rooted in their lives that it was everywhere, and everyone knew the religion and (at least nominally) believed in the gods of the city. This apparently is not true of the poor, however, and even still they are forgiven by the gods. Here Juvenal is showing us that even though it is so unheard of for a person to not believe in the gods, the

gods are willing to forgive the poor as they have been so battered down in their lives that the gods understand their loss of faith.

As someone who was raised away from the pains of urban life in the province of Aquinum, Juvenal is no stranger of this attitude towards the provinces. In other satires he notes that he prefers his life in his hometown¹⁶. Although Juvenal himself was of the middle class (whether or not this was an existing social construct at the time will not be discussed. For our purposes “middle class” is directly equivalent to the modern American middle class) when he lived in Rome, he was relatively wealthy and accustomed to a way of life similar to that of a wealthy Roman, just in the provinces¹⁶. No doubt this satire is reflecting many of his own personal struggles with living in the city compared to his life in Aquinum. However, at the end of the satire the author (addressee) chooses to remain in Rome, despite all the problems listed by Umbricius.

As these four authors lived in different social, economic, and political times from one another, it is understandable that they would have different views on the poor and poverty. Two hundred years before any of the other writers we looked at Solon, who was tasked with reforming a system that encouraged the separation of the rich from the poor by using the poor as laborers and taking away their freedom and land. In Aristophanes’ time in Athens, the assistance to the poor was similar, if not better, than modern America’s assistance to the poor, thanks in part to Solon’s ideas and reforms. Yet another three hundred years later we get to Catullus, who lived in the one of the most disorderly times in all of Rome’s history, the fall of the

¹⁶ Wright, 1901.

Republic. Juvenal lived well past the fall of the Republic in the Empire whose mother city was so overrun with problems, some people (or at least Juvenal) could not understand how the leaders strived to further their rule when they could not even rule their own city.

As the old phrase goes, “history has a way of repeating itself”. The power that was held by the poor in the “radical” democracy of Athens in the fourth century BCE was essentially nonexistent in the failing Roman Republic in the first century BCE. The help provided by the empire in the first century CE was somewhat better than what was provided two hundred years prior. In fact, the Romans, with respect to empowering the poor, reverted more to the way things were before Solon’s reforms at Athens with two intensely separate (and growing more distant) groups of people. The rich looked down on the poor and the poor despised the wealthy. Neither wanted to be in the other’s shoes, or did they? In each of the selections above, we can see a thematic mindset that the poor, though they despised the wealthy envied their prosperity while the wealthy, though they looked down upon the poor admired the virtue poverty afforded them.

None of the views these four authors have of poverty is unsurprising to the modern person. Their views, in fact, are similar to many held today. Catullus, in his poem to Furius, nearly says the age-old (at least as old as Hesiod in the eighth century BCE) idea that lazy people deserve to not have as much as hard working people. The logic of this statement is sound. However, since this is a concept widely held, poverty has become synonymous with laziness, which is simply not the case. Not now, and clearly not in the Classical World either.

Today, we have booming cities like New York, London, and Rio de Janeiro that have taken over the skies and are home to some of the wealthiest people in their respective countries. But the poor live just around the corner. In our “advanced” society, the rich have the power to make real changes in the world, and they make those changes for people like them. The poor have few ways to help themselves out of their situation and are thrust further into poverty over time. We may think we have come a long way from nearly three thousand years ago, but we have not. In fact, we treat the poor the same, if not worse than the ancient Greeks and Romans. America today would benefit from incorporating some of the legislation about the poor from these times and create a more unified, fluid society.

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