

A SELECTION OF MARTIAL'S EPIGRAM

Translated with a short Introduction by Peter Valente

MARTIAL: THE BOHEMIAN EPIGRAMMATIST

In AD 64, Martial left his home in the Spanish countryside, and moved to Rome to become a poet; he was in his early 20s. In the beginning, he had a difficult time adjusting to city life, and he often had to curry favor with a patron in order to eat or even clothe himself. The times had changed. The old relationship between a free man and his patron, such as Virgil and Horace enjoyed under Maecenas, wherein a poet could return the favor with his verses, was no longer possible under Augustus and Domitian. But as Martial's fame grew, he began to enter the literary circles in Rome; there, he befriended Juvenal and Pliny the Younger. He admired the poetry of Catullus but had no use for Statius' *Thebaid*, which was the representative epic poem of the time, and Statius felt the same about Martial's epigrams. Martial was certainly prolific and yet he was also aware of his poetic misfires, the jokes that didn't come off, the poems that just weren't good, but he shows his wit in remarking that even if half the poems in a book were good then the book was good! Martial was not a precocious poet. The first two books of epigrams, on which his sterling reputation is based, appeared when he was in his mid to late 40s. From these first two books, to the time when he returned to the Spanish countryside, in 98 AD, he released a book virtually every year; he was close to 60 years old at the time. His final book appeared in 102 AD, shortly before his death, which happened between 102 and 104 AD.

In the following epigrams, Martial pokes fun at the vanity, insecurity, and downright foolishness of poets. He devotes many epigrams to satirizing what we would today call

the poetry scene. He assures his friend, Flaccus, that any man who pans his work “doesn’t even know what an epigram is!” He criticizes the themes of epic poetry: “...I would say the trifles are, in fact, those writings that concern themselves / with Thyestes’ gruesome banquet, or with Daedalus fitting those artificial wings” etc.; he writes that, “These are the subjects that fascinate those wannabe epic poets / who all ape the high style so pleasing to stuffy academics!” After a reading, Martial writes of the featured poet, who had worn a scarf: “Better if we used that scarf to cover our ears, / so we didn’t have to hear such nonsense / masquerading as poetry!” And lest anyone criticize his own poems for being obscene, Martial offers these lines, in his defense, from Caesar himself:

Antonia has fucked Glaphyra and as a result Flavia
commands me to fuck her. What? Why do I have to fuck Flavia?
If Manius bent over and begged me to fuck him, I wouldn’t.
I’d have to be crazy to do such a thing.
Flavia responds, “Either you fuck me or there’s going to be a war!”
Well, I value my dick more than life itself. Sound the battle cry!

Finally, Martial tells the poet Cosconius that his Latin is “squeaky clean,” and “perfect for the innocent minds of virgins and boys” and that he, Martial, has a very different readership in mind: “...let my poems be read by horny young men, by sluts, / by dirty old men and also by that man whose lover is a sadist.”

And so Martial, in this light, emerges as our contemporary, a poet and a critic of the Roman literary world. When Pliny the Younger received the news of Martial’s death, he

wrote, “I am saddened by the passing of Martial. He was a brilliant man, a genius, with a quick wit and piercing intelligence, who was always fair in his assessment of the social scenes in Rome. It is thought that his writings will not last. Perhaps they will not, but it must be said, that Martial believed they would.”

And thankfully for us, his readers, they have survived.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION:

The following versions of Martial are, like Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, “interpretive translation[s]” and do not follow traditional practices of translation. Some sections of the poems are literally translated, others are not, and in the latter cases, I have felt free to invent. But in these instances I did not deliberately depart from the spirit of the original. My purpose, finally, was to create the best poem in English, one that had all the vitality, immediacy, and energy of the original. Jerome Rothenberg once remarked that my versions were at once “commentary,” “extension,” and “a legitimate form of othering.”¹

¹ Jerome Rothenberg, personal correspondence. 24 May, 2013

BOOK IV: 49 TO HIS FRIEND, FLACCUS

I assure you, Flaccus, that man who says my epigrams are frivolous
and mere scribbles on parchment, not worth a single leaf,
doesn't even know what an epigram is!

Hah! I would say what is truly worthless are those writings
that concern themselves with Thyestes' gruesome banquet,
or with Daedalus, fitting those artificial wings
to his son's body, or Polyphemus, feeding his Sicilian flocks out in the field.

These are the subjects that fascinate those wannabe epic poets
who all ape the high style so pleasing to stuffy academics!

My verses contain no such pretenses, are not a series of pompous effusions!

Nor does my Muse puff herself up with the garb of Tragedy.

He will respond by saying, "That is all very well but the works that are praised
by everyone, and adored, and respected, are those in the high style."

I admit that is true. Those who use such a style are respected, indeed,
and praised to no end. Perhaps my own books are not lauded in such terms
but at least people read them! And those who do are not only poets
but the common people, everyone except those stuffy pendants
who pore over ancient dusty tomes!

BOOK III: 9 CINNA'S CRITICISMS

I read one of Cinna's hateful poems about me in a journal of criticism.

He thinks he's a writer but no one reads his poems anymore.

The journal he writes for is a rag.

And he's old news.

BOOK XIV: 196 CALVUS' WATERY POEM

This poem that lists the names of springs and praises their waters,
and goes on and on about this and that river,
is so ridiculous it deserves to be tossed into the ocean,
and set afloat on the very waters it speaks of!

BOOK IV: 33 SOSIBIANUS' MANUSCRIPTS

Sosibianus, your desk is full of manuscripts,
and they're piled high to the ceiling,
all of them unpublished. Why is that?
You tell me your heirs will publish all the work posthumously.
When will that be?
Are you sick or planning to kill yourself any time soon?
Your work should be read now.
There is no reason to keep it hidden.
Or is there?

BOOK I: 91 TO A CRITIC WHO HATES MY BOOKS

Your reviews of my books are consistently negative.

I know you get pleasure from panning my works,
in all the major journals.

Why don't you put down your critic's pen
and write some poems yourself, if you're so smart,
or do you think so little of your own work
that you refuse to publish it?

BOOK III: 69 DIRTY LATIN

Cosconius, your epigrams contain no obscene language or offensive subject matter.

Your Latin is squeaky clean and so I congratulate you. You are chaste
if not impotent, and so your epigrams accurately reflect who you are.

My poems, by comparison, are filthy; no page is without some turn of phrase
that might offend someone.

So let my poems be read by horny young men, by sluts,
by dirty old men and also by that man whose lover is a sadist.

Cosconius, your epigrams are worthy of the highest respect
and perfect for the innocent minds of virgins and boys.

BOOK IV: 41 LISTENING TO YOU AT A READING

Why do you always wear a heavy scarf around your throat

when you're reciting your newest poems?

Better if we used that scarf to cover our ears,

so we didn't have to hear such nonsense

masquerading as poetry!

BOOK IV: 72 TO QUINTUS

Quintus, you're always nagging me about my new book,
telling me how much you want to read it and asking me for a copy.

I told you I don't have one myself but my bookseller Trypho has one.

Then you said, "Martial, you don't think I'd actually pay for your book,
for a bunch of those epigrams. Perhaps, Homer or Virgil....but no way
am I spending any money on your book. It wouldn't make sense!"

Well, Quintus, if you must know, I have even less interest in your work,
which I believe hasn't even been published. Am I right?

Where are you hiding your own masterpieces?

BOOK XI: 20 CAESAR'S VERSE PROVES A POINT

You who read my Latin with your nose upturned,
and with a critical eye that is spiteful and malicious,
feast your eyes on these verses from Caesar's hand:

“Antonia has fucked Glaphyra and as a result Flavia
commands me to fuck her. What? Why do I have to fuck Flavia?

If Manius bent over and begged me to fuck him, I wouldn't.

I'd have to be crazy to do such a thing.

But Flavia responds, “Either you fuck me or there's going to be a war!”

Well, I value my dick more than life itself. Sound the battle cry!”

Augustus, you don't reproach me for my little books.

You know, when speaking the Roman language, how to be plain and direct.

BOOK XI: 2 TO THE TIGHT-ASSED READER

You people, with your sad, wrinkled brows, and your severe looks,
are just like a bunch of Catos, like farm girls
and daughters of rustic Fabricii, and you, with your proud airs,
and your moral law, with your idiotic prejudices,
who cannot understand the pleasures of the night,
get out of my way! My verses proclaim to the world:
“Io Saturnalia!” because we are free under Nerva,
and it’s so much fun, and we rejoice like silly children!
And you, tight-assed and gloomy readers, get out of my sight,
go waste your precious hours laboring over the asinine poems of Santra.
We have nothing in common.
This book here is mine and I’m proud of it!