Lindsay C. Watson and Patricia Watson

MARTIAL

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS

I.B. TAURIS

Marcus Valerius Martialis, or Martial (born between 38 and 41 CE, died probably in 104 CE) is celebrated for his droll, frequently salacious portrayal of Roman high and low society during the first-century rule of the emperors Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. Considered the 'inventor' of the modern epigram, Martial was a native of Hispania, who came to Rome in the hope of securing both patronage and advancement. From the bathhouses, taverns and gymnasia to the sculleries and slave markets of the capital, Martial in his famous *Epigrams* sheds merciless light on the hypocrisies and sexual mores of rich and poor alike. Lindsay C. and Patricia Watson provide an attractive overview – for students of classics and ancient history, as well as comparative literature – of the chief themes of his sardonic writings. They show that Martial is of continuing and special interest because of his rediscovery in the Renaissance, when writers viewed him as an incisive commentator on failings similar to those of their own day. The later reception of Martial, by Juvenal and others, forms a major part of this informative survey.

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Lindsay and Patricia Watson, two of the foremost Martial scholars, provide the perfect introduction to this important poet in their up-to-date and readable survey. While they cover the full range of issues raised by Martial's epigrams, particular attention is paid to Martial's humour and artistry, illustrated by acute readings of selected (and unexpurgated) epigrams. The trends and controversies of Martial's scholarship are judiciously discussed and the Watsons have new things to say even to the specialist.

– William Fitzgerald, Professor of Latin Language & Literature, King's College London, author of *Martial: The World of the Epigram*

UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS

EDITOR: RICHARD STONEMAN (UNIVERSITY OF EXETER)

When the great Roman poets of the Augustan Age – Ovid, Virgil and Horace – composed their odes, love poetry and lyrical verse, could they have imagined that their works would one day form a cornerstone of Western civilization, or serve as the basis of study for generations of schoolchildren learning Latin? Could Aeschylus or Euripides have envisaged the remarkable popularity of contemporary stagings of their tragedies? The legacy and continuing resonance of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – Greek poetical epics written many millennia ago – again testify to the capacity of the classics to cross the divide of thousands of years and speak powerfully and relevantly to audiences quite different from those to which they were originally addressed.

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UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS SERIES EDITOR:
RICHARD STONEMAN

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2015 by
I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd
London · New York
www.ibtauris.com

References to websites were correct at the time of writing.

ISBN: 978 1 78076 636 2 (HB)
978 1 78076 637 9 (PB)
eISBN: 978 0 85773 893 6
ePDF: 978 0 85772 740 4

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Text design, typesetting and eBook versions by Tetragon, London

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Preface

THIS SMALL VOLUME is aimed at two constituencies: the undergraduate coming to Martial for the first time, and the general reader with an interest in the epigrammatist and in Latin poetry more broadly. Its brief is above all to convey the enjoyment to be had from reading Martial, to proselytise for a writer who is beyond question the wittiest of the Roman poets. In that sense, Chapters 3 and 4, which analyse by means of selected instances a number of the devices whereby Martial attempts to surprise and amuse his audience, are at the core of the book. At the same time, as we stress, Martial is an *important* author and his poems far more than a mere repository of wit. His importance resides in two particular characteristics: first, he conveys a wealth of information about Roman social attitudes and practices – which does not mean of course that such information is to be read in a straightforwardly literal way – and furthermore, he conveys it in a highly amusing and accessible fashion; second, he is the founder of epigram as all subsequent eras have come to conceive of it, that is, a short, witty, pungent poem with a sting or paradox in its tail. These two dimensions of the poet have been addressed respectively in Chapters 1 and 2, and in Chapter 6. Chapter 5 charts the reception, literary, cultural and scholarly, of the poet over the centuries. The second half of this chapter attempts to orientate readers new to the poet by providing an overview of critical approaches to him over the last

50 years, and by flagging those aspects of his *oeuvre* which have engaged the attention of specialists during that time. Since a good deal of the most significant scholarship on Martial is written in the major European languages, the contents of some works which seem to us particularly important or innovative have been synthesised for the convenience of readers to whom they might not otherwise be accessible.

From the time of his re-emergence in the Renaissance almost up to the present day, Martial has been attacked on the grounds of obscenity, mendicancy and flattery of a tyrant. In defending him against these charges (Chapter 2), we attempt to show that these criticisms are fundamentally misconceived. They are conditioned by religious and ethical preconceptions operative at the time when they were penned, but hardly applicable to Martial. Or, to put it another way, they are essentially ahistorical, since they take no account of the cultural situatedness of the poet: Martial wrote at a time when attitudes to matters such as sexuality, bodily deformity, old age, ethnicity, women and a host of other issues were radically different from those prevailing nowadays and certainly from those of the Victorian era, which took particular umbrage at Martial, one writer of the time famously describing his epigrams as 'nauseous'.

The present volume is by way of being a 'taster', and is in no sense intended as a comprehensive introduction to Martial. Readers looking for the latter are directed to John Sullivan's valuable *Martial: The Unexpected Classic* of 1991, which attempts complete coverage of all aspects of the epigrammatist's work and his literary and cultural afterlife. Also calling for mention here is Sven Lorenz's immensely useful bibliographical survey of work on Martial during the years 1970–2003 – a period when approaches to the poet gained immeasurably in sophistication. Details of this two-volume survey are found in the bibliography.

All translations of Latin are our own unless otherwise specified. In almost every case the relevant Latin text has been quoted either in our text or in a footnote. We have tried to keep the translations as literal as possible, hopefully without sacrificing Martial's wit and panache in the process. For, in the end, this book seeks primarily, in a modest way, to help others share the enjoyment which its authors continue to derive

from Martial even after multiple rereadings: an enjoyment which, if we are to believe the author, his Roman audience gained in large measure. For, as he said himself, in reply to a critic who exalted mythic themes over the slighter genre of epigram, 'people *praise* such writings, but *I'm* the one they read'.[1]

I

Why Read Martial?

MARCUS VALERIUS MARTIALIS was born between 38 and 41 CE, and like many of the important Roman literary figures of the first century, such as Seneca the Younger, Quintilian and Lucan, he was a native Spaniard. His parents, well-to-do residents of the town of Bilbilis who had taken Roman citizenship, gave him the cognomen Martialis (literally 'belonging to Mars'), because he was born in the god's month of March, but the name was also a happy omen, since Mars was the father of Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, and it was in the city of Rome, to which the poet headed in his mid-twenties, that Martial discovered the source of poetic inspiration which was eventually to lead to fame and material success.

Although it was more than 20 years after his arrival in the City before Martial published the first of the 12 books of epigrams for which he is best known, he was an established poet for some years before that. Settling in Rome in 64, the budding poet honed his skills as an epigrammatist, and as was usual in an age when royalties were unknown, he sought material support by circulating examples of his work among potential patrons, which would later be included in his first two books of *Epigrams*. During this time he also

published his first book of poetry, *On the Spectacles*, usually thought to have been composed for Titus' inauguration of the Flavian amphitheatre in 80.[1] In December 85 or thereabouts he issued the *Xenia* and *Apophoreta* (Books 13 and 14 in modern editions): books of (mostly) elegiac couplets designed to accompany Saturnalian gifts of food and various other commodities. The 12 books of *Epigrams* were published at the rate of roughly one a year from 85 onwards. In 98 he retired to his native town,[2] dying (probably) in 104.

Epigram occupied the lowest place in the ancient generic hierarchy, both in terms of its subject matter (everyday life as opposed to elevated mythological or military themes) and in its correspondingly less elevated language and style, which included the widespread use of basic obscenities. Moreover, these were the sort of poems that educated men might toss off casually in a sympotic setting.[3] Consequently, Martial has often been regarded as a minor talent, an assessment which began directly after his death in a famous obituary by one of his patrons, Pliny the Younger, himself an epigrammatic poetaster; in this, praise for Martial's satirical wit and charm is tempered with allusions to the modesty of his chosen genre: 'he gave me the very best he was able to give, and he would have given more had he been able [...] You may object that his verses will not be immortal; perhaps not, but he wrote them as if they will' (*Ep.* 3.21).[4]

Martial himself, though paying lip service to the humbleness of his genre, was accustomed to elevate its importance, claiming for his everyday subject matter a relevance and attractiveness surpassing that of the hackneyed themes of mythological poetry (cf. 10.4). He also pointed to the popularity of his work: a claim no doubt with some validity, even if his assertion at the beginning of Book 1 that he was 'known all over the world for his witty little books of epigrams' (1.1.2–3) might have been something of an exaggeration.

Two thousand years on, Pliny would be gratified at the survival of his *Epistles*, but he would also be astonished that the epigrams he regarded as ephemeral are still read and studied. It seems that Martial's self-assessment may have been more accurate: in fact, it can be argued that, from our perspective, he is one of the most rewarding of Roman poets.

One reason for this is the presence in his work of elements which are perfectly accommodated to the modern experience, in particular his aggressively

urbanised poetics of the metropolis. Martial fills his epigrams with all the sights, sounds, smells, trades, merchandise,[5] nuisances and inconveniences of city life. No other Roman poet can match him for the richness and density of his cityscape, for – as a recent writer puts it – the 'degree of topographical explicitness [...] [his] sheer accumulation of urban scenes, objects, monuments, persons'.[6] For all that Martial likes to vaunt his Celtiberian origins, his epigrams are firmly rooted in the city. *This* is the source of his inspiration and subject matter: a point made explicitly in the epistolary preface to Book 12, written following his retirement to Spain, where he laments that his new-found provincial solitude has deprived him of the intellectual stimulus and themes which Rome used routinely to provide. Particularly indicative of Martial's citified focus is the presence in the supposedly Spanish Book 12, composed in the poet's homeland and sent onwards from there to Rome, of a large number of vividly realised scenes of metropolitan life.[7] Cases in point are the ruthlessly detailed account of the eviction from his lodgings of Vacerra, a failed Celtic immigrant to Rome, for defaulting on his rent (12.32),[8] or the densely peopled, panoptic urbanism of 12.57:

Cur saepe sicci parva rura Nomenti
laremque villae sordidum petam, quaeris?
nec cogitandi, Sparse, nec quiescendi
in urbe locus est pauperi. negant vitam
ludi magistri mane, nocte pistores,
aerariorum marculi die toto;
hinc otiosus sordidam quatit mensam
Neroniana nummularius massa,
illinc balucis malleator Hispanae
tritum nitenti fuste verberat saxum;
nec turba cessat entheata Bellonae,
nec fasciato naufragus loquax trunco,
a matre doctus nec rogare Iudaeus,
nec sulphuratae lippus institor mercis.
numerare pigri damna quis potest somni?
dicet quot aera verberent manus urbis,

cum secta Colcho luna vapulat rhombo.
tu, Sparse, nescis ista nec potes scire,
Petilianis delicatus in regnis,
cui plana summos despicit domus montis,
et rus in urbe est [...]
et in profundo somnus et quies nullis
offensa linguis, nec dies nisi admissus.
nos transeuntis nisus excitat turbae,
et ad cubile est Roma. taedio fessis
dormire quotiens libuit, imus ad villam. (ll. 1–21, 24–8)

Do you ask why I often make for my little rural place at dry Nomentum and the dingy house of my villa [country estate]? In the city, Sparsus, a poor man has no room either to think or to rest. Schoolmasters deny you life in the morning, bakers at night, the mallets of the coppersmiths all day long. On one side the lazy banker makes his grubby table vibrate with Nero's metal, on the other the hammerer of Spanish gold dust beats the worn stone with gleaming mallet; neither does the frenzied throng of Bellona give it a rest, nor the talkative survivor of shipwreck with his bandaged trunk, nor the Jew taught to beg by his mother, nor the bleary-eyed pedlar of sulphurated wares. Who can tot up the losses of sleep that makes the limbs sluggish? Such a one will tell how many bronze vessels the hands of the city pound when the moon, cut in two, is beaten by the magic wheel of Colchis. You, Sparsus, know nothing of those things, nor can you know of them, coddled as you are in your Petilian realm, you whose house, built on a levelled terrace, looks down upon the tops of the hills [of Rome], who have country in the town [...] and there is deepest slumber and quiet troubled by no tongues, and no day unless deliberately admitted. But *I* am aroused by the thrusting of the passing throng and Rome is at my bedside. Whenever I'm worn out and weary of this and want to get some sleep, I go to my villa.

Writing the *Urbs Roma* into text,[9] Martial offers his reader in 12.57 a long, characteristically circumstantial account of the various noisy individuals

who disturb his sleep, much as 12.59 (only two poems later) is populated with a galaxy of smelly, banausic, unwholesome types – hirsute farmers, weavers, fullers, cobblers, the facially diseased, the lame, the blear-eyed, the practitioners of oral sex – who press so-called social kisses on one recently returned to Rome, or 7.61 is thronged with an army of tradesmen of different kinds who have encroached on Rome's already crowded thoroughfares.[10] The negative tenor of these crowded snapshots is palpable, and yet so is the fascination which this rich urban tapestry holds for the poet, so that it is possible to discern in him – in terms eminently familiar to modern urban dwellers – a kind of love–hate relationship towards the city, at once the wellspring of his inspiration and a source of appalled fascination. Perhaps nowhere in Martial's corpus is the sense of isolation and alienation which urban living can provoke better captured than in 1.86:

Vicinus meus est manuque tangi
de nostris Novius potest fenestris.
quis non invideat mihi putetque
horis omnibus esse me beatum,
iuncto cui liceat frui sodale?
tam longe est mihi quam Terentianus,
qui nunc Niliacam regit Syenen.
non convivere, non videre saltem,
non audire licet, nec urbe tota
quisquam est tam prope tam proculque nobis.
migrandum est mihi longius vel illi.
vicinus Novio vel inquilinus
sit, si quis Novium videre non vult.

Novius is my neighbour and can be touched by hand from my windows. Who would not envy me and think me happy all the hours of the day, when I can enjoy having my friend so close to me? But he is as far away from me as Terentianus, who is currently governing Syene on the Nile. I cannot dine with him, even see him or hear him, nor in the whole city is there anyone so near to and so distant from me. I must change

> my lodgings, or he must. If anyone doesn't want to see Novius, let him be Novius' neighbour or lodger.

Martial's focus on the City, then, will resonate with modern readers who either live in, or have experience of, urban life. What other factors make the poet especially worthy of our attention? We would like to isolate three. First, a large number of the epigrams can be shown to be exemplary poetic compositions in their own right – provided they are approached without the prejudice arising from the ancient concept of a hierarchy of genres. Second, Martial is of prime importance as a source for our knowledge of Roman social history in the late first century CE. Of course, a good deal of the information which he relays can be found in other sources too, but Martial presents this in a particularly lively and accessible way. Third, the poet was not only founder of an epigrammatic tradition which has continued to our own time, but he also exercised a profound influence on subsequent poets, both in epigram and other genres as well. To cite John Sullivan:

> I judge a classic, not just by his survival but by his literary reverberations. An author of short, generally witty poems who could inspire vernacular writers such as Boileau, Quevedo, Ben Jonson, Herrick and many others in their own work, provide a foundation for the critical theories of Scaliger and Gracian, and prompt a biting defence of his uncensored text by John Donne, surely deserves a place in T. S. Eliot's *Musée imaginaire*.[11]

Martial's epigrams as poetry

The first of these points – that Martial's epigrams are worthy of attention for their own sake – will be discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4, but we give one example here by way of illustration.

10.63 is a mock epitaph for an exemplary Roman matron, using the conventional fiction of a speech from the tomb by the deceased: