INTRODUCTION

1 LIFE OF MARTIAL

Our knowledge of M.’s life is derived mostly from the information provided by the poet. Only for his retirement to Spain and his death there do we have independent evidence in the form of the Younger Pliny’s well-known obituary (Ep. 3.21). In drawing inferences about the poet from the epigrams, one must be careful to distinguish between ‘facts’ which there is no reason to doubt, such as M.’s Spanish provenance, and comments which are either not meant to be taken as autobiographical (e.g. allusions to a ‘wife’) or which are susceptible of more than one interpretation (e.g. M.’s reasons for leaving Rome). The point needs stressing, since modern descriptions of M.’s life are based largely on a strictly biographical reading of the epigrams.

Marcus Valerius Martialis¹ was born in the Roman municipium of Bilbilis in Spain (19.9n.) between ad 38 and 41.² His birth occurred in the month of March: hence the name Martialis.³ By nationality he was Celtiberian, a racial mix of Celts and Iberians of Libyan origin which had long been dominant in that part of Spain (10.65.3–4 ex Hiberis | et Celtis genitus). It is clear from his name and those of his parents, Fronto and Flaccilla (83.1n.), that he came from a Spanish family which had attained Roman citizenship. M.’s parents must have been comfortably off, at least by local standards, for they provided him with a good education (57.8n.) and, if he enjoyed the patronage of the Senecan circle (see below), he may have exploited some sort of family connection, suggesting that the household was among the ruling aristocracy of Bilbilis.⁴

Like all ambitious provincials, M. headed for Rome. It attests to the high premium put on education in Spain that, when M. arrived in the city in 64, many of the leading writers were of Spanish origin: Seneca the Younger, his

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¹ Pliny refers to Valerius Martialis; for M.’s praenomen, cf. 1.5.2.
² The tenth book, of which we have the second edition, published in 98, contains a poem for M.’s 57th birthday (10.24). It is uncertain whether this epigram also appeared in the first edition of 95.
³ As was customary, M. celebrated his birthday on the Kalends of his natal month: cf. 9.52, 10.24, 12.60, H. Lucas, CQ 32 (1938) 5–6.
⁴ Bilbilis received municipium status under Augustus, which meant that all the magistrates and their families were full Roman citizens (L. A. Curchin, Roman Spain (London/New York 1991) 66); it is likely that M.’s family fell into this category.

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nephew Lucan, Quintilian and Columella. It is possible that M. was taken into the Senecan circle, though this has recently been called into question.\(^5\) The location of M.’s farm at Nomentum, where Seneca and his family owned property, has sometimes been adduced in support of Senecan patronage, but it cannot be proved that M. obtained the property from them.\(^6\)

It seems certain that M. was honing his skills as an epigrammatist between the date of his arrival in Rome and the appearance of his first published work, the *Liber de spectaculis*, written for the opening of the Colosseum in 80.\(^7\) In all likelihood he circulated individual poems or small collections privately among potential patrons over a number of years, including them in the first two books of epigrams when these were published in 86–7.\(^8\) This would explain M.’s introduction of himself in the first poem of book 1 as *toto notus in orbe Martialis | argulis epigrammaton libellis.*\(^9\)

M. continued to live mostly\(^10\) in Rome, where he published at regular intervals books 2–11, as well as a second edition of 10.\(^11\) Various details of his life during these years can be regarded as certain. That he owned a house in Rome (11.2n.) and an estate at Nomentum (14.1n.) is indisputable fact, though these residences were clearly not as humble as he claims. The townhouse is first mentioned in book 9, dated to 94; in earlier years he tells us that he occupied a modest flat (1.117.7 *scalis habito tribus sed altis; 108.3 mea Vipsanas spectant cenacula laurus*). There is no reason to question the reality

\(^5\) By M. Kleijwegt, *AC* 42 (1999) 105–19, who demonstrates the flimsiness of the evidence that M. enjoyed the patronage of Seneca.

\(^6\) Sullivan (1991) 4, Saller (1983) 251, and Howell on 1.105, hold that M.’s farm was a gift from Seneca.

\(^7\) This widely assumed date for the publication of the *Liber de spectaculis* has been questioned by Holzberg (2002) 40.

\(^8\) In between the *De spectaculis* and the epigrams (books 1–12) he also published two books of short mottoes (books 13 and 14), the *Xenia* and the *Apophoreta*: cf. T. J. Leary, *Martial book XIV* (London 1996) 9–13.

\(^9\) See esp. White (1974) and (1990), where he defends his case against Fowler, (1995). White thought that M. continued the practice of pre-circulation throughout his career, though Citroni (1988) 34 argues that, after M. began formal publication, the latter became the main means of circulating the epigrams.

\(^10\) Apart from a stay in Gaul, whence book 3 was sent, and periods of respite at his Nomentan farm.

of this flat or its location; on the other hand, it must have been reasonably roomy, since he has a number of slaves, assuming that some, if not all, of those mentioned are real. Ownership of slaves and (after 94) an urban house suggests that he was comparatively well off: he had obtained a tribunate and equestrian status (3.95.9–10), as well as the ius trium liberorum (see below), which allowed him to accept legacies from friends and patrons; income from poetry came via gifts from patrons rather than through royalties. M.’s financial position has been the subject of controversy: White argued that the equestrian census was sufficient for a decent existence, patronage being needed more as general support and for publicising his poetry; Saller that it was only a bare minimum and that M. relied on patronage to maintain his lifestyle.

One question which has provoked extensive discussion is the poet’s marital status. Frequent allusions to a ‘wife’ have given rise to much speculation about whether or not M. was married at any stage. Despite a recent tendency to regard the poet as a confirmed bachelor, it seems clear that in his early years he had one or more marriages: this is shown by his petition to the emperor for the ius trium liberorum on the basis that Fortune had not granted him offspring (9a.5), which suggests an infertile marriage, rather than a deliberate decision to remain single. M.’s marital status during the period after he began to publish his poems is less clear. Mutually contradictory allusions to a wife (e.g. 9b.3, 69.7) and to the absence thereof (11.19) and grossly insulting allusions to an uxor (e.g. 11.104) which would have been insupportable to a real person, suggest that the wife of the epigrams is a literary construct.

The broad outline of M.’s later years is certain. After 34 years in Rome (10.103.7–8), he retired in 98 to Spain, where he lived in Bilbilis in a villa provided by a patroness, Marcella (17); he died there, probably in 104 (Plin. Ep. 3.21). In 101 he had produced a book for the arrival in Spain of his fellow countryman and patron Terentius Priscus (book 12 praef.). This may not have been book 12 as we have it, but a shorter version

12 Sullivan (1991) 27. The reality of all the slaves who appear in M. is assumed by Garrido-Horry (1981 b); some, like Diadumenus (52), might be literary constructs, but no one doubts the factual existence of those for whom he writes epitaphs, like Erotion (83) or his secretary Demetrius (1.101).


which was filled out later, partly from earlier unpublished work, either by M. himself or by editors after his death.\textsuperscript{16} So much for the basic facts, but accounts of M.’s last years usually include other details, based on a literal interpretation of certain epigrams in books 10 and 12. According to such accounts M., becoming increasingly tired of the client's life in Rome (cf. 10.70, 74), planned permanent retirement in Bilbilis, for which he had long felt a nostalgic attraction (cf. 1.49). Once there, his ideal of happiness was initially translated into reality (19), but he soon became disillusioned and missed the advantages of Rome which he had previously taken for granted (cf. 25, 12 praef). Ironically, the country, far from being a haven of tranquillity conducive to writing, came to represent a small-town lack of urban sophistication which was antithetical to poetic production. M. only began to compose again at the urging of his patron Priscus. Death prevented his returning to Rome, but this was not a realistic prospect in any case.

The above, canonised as the official version of M.’s final years, should not be accepted without reservation. For instance, M.’s real reason for returning to Spain could have been that he was so closely associated with Domitian’s regime that he could not expect patronage from Nerva and Trajan, despite attempts to ingratiate himself (cf. 11.1–5, 12.4, 12 intro.). In that case, the epigrams expressing dissatisfaction with life in Rome and the delights of rural retirement would have been inserted into the second edition of book 10 as a front for the real situation.\textsuperscript{17} Again, the conventional assumption of a period of beatitude upon M.’s return to Spain followed by a gradually supervening disillusionment is called into question by 19, which is written in so parodic and at times unrealistic a spirit as to rule out any such sharp demarcation between the earlier and later stages of M.’s retirement (see 19.18 intro.). The fact that book 12 contains many poems set in Rome and few with a distinctively Spanish setting, might bear out M.’s complaints in the Preface that the provincial atmosphere of Bilbilis stifled poetic composition, yet, as archaeological remains demonstrate, Bilbilis was a highly Romanised town, with a theatre and a bath complex. The Roman character of the book could be interpreted differently, i.e. that M. was planning to return to Rome: it would explain his intention to send his book to patrons there after its presentation to Priscus (cf. 12.2), as well as his anxiety that the book should not appear to be tainted with Spanishness.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17} For this view, see for instance Sullivan (1991); \textit{contra}, Howell (1998) 184–5.

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. 12 praef. 25–7.
Nor should it be assumed that a come-back was impossible: despite the often-made assumption that M. sold his townhouse, it is just as likely that he rented it out to keep his options open should he change his mind about retirement.¹⁹

2 THE USE OF THE FIRST PERSON IN THE EPIGRAMS

M.’s poems are frequently written in the first person. Often this contributes to the building up of a persona which is part literary creation, part based on reality. On other occasions, the poet speaks with different voices which are temporarily adopted for purposes of individual epigrams. It is not always easy to distinguish between the various ‘I’s.

Of all M.’s character creations, the most successful is that of Martial himself. The persona can be summarised as follows. He is a poet of equestrian status whose officia as a client of rich patrons are so onerous that at times he scarcely has the leisure to pursue his craft. Since he does not receive from this ‘job’ sufficient rewards, his circumstances are impoverished; all he owns is a poor farm, to which he escapes periodically, and a modest town house in a noisy area of Rome. In a modicum of epigrams M. is himself a patron, issuing dinner invitations and subject to the not always welcome attentions of clients. To offset these disadvantages, there are pleasures: he enjoys dinner parties, friendships, sexual encounters, especially with young slave boys, and he revels in the fame which his poetry brings. He does not seek to harm individuals through his satire, but delights in holding up to ridicule the foibles and vices of society. His dream is of a simple lifestyle in the country, free from the burdens of the client and other disadvantages of the city.

The extent to which this persona resembles the real Martial cannot be known, but the question needs addressing because of a tendency among scholars to talk as if the two can be equated. Though most show healthy scepticism about such details as the poet’s poverty, opinions and preferences expressed via the persona are often assumed to be the poet’s own. For example, the frequent satirical attacks on women betray, according to Sullivan,

¹⁹ The proceeds from the farm at Nomentum, which he did sell (10.92), along with Marcella’s gift of an estate at Bilbilis (17) and the patronage of Terentius Priscus (12.3), could have provided M. with sufficient means to live, and his house in Rome would return a good rental income (64.3n.).
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a deep-seated misogyny on the part of M. himself. But these may be explained partly in terms of the scoptic tradition directed against women, and partly as demonstrating that the predominantly male audience for whom M. wrote appreciated anti-feminist humour. The clear sexual preference of the persona for boy slaves, on the other hand, may reflect that of the ‘real’ M., not so much because of the number of erotic poems addressed to these, as because of the lack of corresponding poems to women; as an epigrammatist he might have been expected to include both.

Of greater interest is the extent to which the persona represents a consistent self-characterisation on M.’s part. Often, discrepancies are more apparent than real. For instance, although complaints about financial hardship do not cohere with M.’s often expressed wish to pursue a simple rural existence, it needs to be kept in mind that sustaining even a modest lifestyle in Rome was an expensive business: it is not inconsistent to imagine an idealised life in the country where pleasure costs little. Again, M.’s rôle as long-suffering client may be reconciled with his occasional pose as patron (e.g. 25), if it is recalled that many must have been both client and patron at once.

M.’s self-portrait is, then, coherent in a general way. There are however inconsistencies of other sorts. For example, the Nomentan farm is sometimes depicted as completely unproductive (e.g. 7.31.8), while at other times it yields a variety of edibles, enough to furnish a reasonable dinner party (10.48).

M.’s financial position as ‘poor’ client, too, is varied to suit the context. Sometimes he appears not as relatively poor, but as lacking the wherewithal for a meal (e.g. 1.59). On the other hand, in 6.5 M. asks a friend for a loan of 100,000 sesterces to help with the purchase of an expensive country property (rustica mercatus multis sum praedia nummis: | mutua des centum, Caeciliane, rogo 1–2).

M. likes to present different aspects of the same subject. For instance, the client/patron relationship is shown both from the client’s viewpoint and, less frequently, from the patron’s. This can lead to inconsistencies. Though M. frequently complains about patrons’ lack of generosity, regarding the standard dole of 100 quadrantes as a paltry reward, in 8.42, by contrast, a client is offered that very amount by M. himself in the rôle of patron. Whether we are meant to overlook the incongruity or whether a degree of irony is intended is unclear.

21 As did Catullus; and the Palatine anthology contains love epigrams addressed both to women (book 5) and to boys (book 12).
A second example of inconsistency is the group of epigrams on legacy hunters. At 58, for instance, a captator is gleefully mocked for being taken in by a lady who fakes illness in order to encourage his attentions. Yet M. elsewhere adopts the persona of a captator, giving expensive gifts and complaining that the object of his attentions does not respond appropriately (e.g. 5.39). Again, M. sometimes criticises the captated for succumbing to the bribes of a captator (e.g. 11.44, 6.63). Elsewhere, however, he portrays himself as preyed upon by a legacy hunter whom he encourages to keep giving him gifts (9.88). And though he laughs at a man for desiring to marry a rich woman, attracted by her cough, which suggests terminal illness (1.10), he hints that he himself would not be unsusceptible to the charms of an old woman were she older (10.8 nubere Paula cupit nobis, ego ducere Paulam | nolo: anus est. uellem, si magis esset anus).

One way of interpreting the foregoing is to deny that there is a single persona, and to regard the persona as constantly changing to suit the context. But it is also possible to draw a distinction—though one that is not always clear—between M.’s self-characterisation in general and cases where a voice is momentarily adopted by the poet to suit an individual epigram. This explanation is applicable, for instance, in 10.8 just cited, where the I appears to be a fictitious construct extemporised for the purposes of the joke.

Sometimes the use of the first person as a temporary voice is more clear-cut; instances are 11.39 where the poet, speaking in the person of a young adult, complains to his interfering paedagogus that he is now fully grown, and 8.17, where the poet acts as an advocate. Defending a client’s case in court was one of the duties of the patron, but not, as here, for direct financial remuneration (see 25.3n.); M.’s voice is that of the professional advocate, the causidicus, a profession which he elsewhere rejects (e.g. 1.17, 5.16). In such cases, the use of the first person is no more than a rhetorical device, a more vivid and direct means of satire than a third-person narrative; it belongs to a longstanding tradition that stretches back to Archilochus.22

3 MARTIAL’S AUDIENCE

It is clear that the tastes and attitudes of his audience played a large rô le in the shaping of M.’s poems (cf. Sullivan (1991) xxii–xxiv). Somewhat less clear, however, is the composition of that audience.

22 For bibliography, see D. E. Gerber, ed. A companion to the Greek lyric poets (Leiden 1997) 6.
M. claims that everyone in Rome knows and appreciates his poetry:

\[ \textit{laudat, amat, cantat nostros mea Roma libellos, | meque sinus omnes, me manus omnis habet} \] (6.60. 1–2). As well, his fame spans the world: he is read in Britain (11.3.5) and Vindelicia (9.84.5), by centurions in Thrace (11.3.3–4) and by people of all age groups in Vienne (7.88).

Harris’s thesis\(^{23}\) of widespread illiteracy leads him to dismiss M.’s statements as mere convention. Moreover the relatively high cost of books would, he suggests, have put them out of range for the ‘average’ person.\(^{24}\) But what M. is saying – albeit exaggeratedly – is that his works were widely known, not to the public at large, but to the reading public, that is, those, predominantly from the senatorial and equestrian classes, who had the money and education to be consumers of poetry. Despite the conventionality of M.’s claim,\(^{25}\) there is no need to dismiss it as untrue.

Horsfall\(^{26}\) argued that the lower classes had access to literature through dramatic performances and recitations. It is unclear however to what extent ordinary people attended recitations of poetic works, and in any case M.’s poems were probably known primarily through the published books rather than recitations. M.’s addresses to his audience are to the reader, rather than the listener,\(^{27}\) and in the passages where he claims wide popularity for his poetry the context is that of reading rather than listening (e.g. 7.88.3 cited below).

The audience which M. has in view when composing his epigrams is primarily, then, the upper-class reader.\(^{28}\) His poetry is ‘popular’ in the sense that it is more widely read and enjoyed among the educated classes than pretentious tragedies and epics on hackneyed mythological themes.\(^{29}\)

It is worth pointing out that M.’s readers included both women and men. In Vienne, for instance, he claims that \[ me legit omnis... senior iuuenisque puerque | et coram tetrico casta puella uiro \] (7.88.3–4). In 3.86, the joke that matronae

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\(^{24}\) Harris (1989) 225.

\(^{25}\) See Kay on 11.3.3.

\(^{26}\) ‘Statistics or states of mind?’, in M. Beard et al., ed., Literacy in the Roman world (Ann Arbor 1991) 59–76.


\(^{28}\) For the exclusiveness of the Roman reading public see also E. J. Kenney in CHCL II 10.

\(^{29}\) Cf. 4.49.10 laudant illa (sc. bombastic poems on mythological topics), sed ista (sc. M.’s epigrams) legunt. Cf. Citroni (1968).
will eagerly peruse the second (obscene) section of the book depends on the assumption of a sizeable female readership. A similar assumption underlies 11.16, in which a covert female fascination with the sexual content of M.’s epigrams is again taken for granted.

4 MARTIAL AND DOMITIAN

Epigrams in praise of Domitian are found throughout books 1–9; the first edition of the tenth book must also have contained a number of poems addressed to him which were replaced in the second edition (book 10 as we have it), published after the emperor’s assassination. Apart from a number of poems thanking Domitian for his patronage or requesting further favours, the majority of the epigrams in which the emperor features are eulogistic. He is praised for his military successes, especially in book 8, dedicated to Domitian, where the centrality of the emperor reflects his renewed presence in the City after a period abroad.30 The social legislation which he introduced in keeping with his position as censor perpetuus is given due prominence (e.g. 43). Like Statius, M. played a rôle in promoting the imperial cult of Domitian: there are references to him as dominus et deus (see on 10), frequent comparisons between the emperor and the gods, especially Jupiter (12.10n.) and Hercules (15.15n.), and mention of the cult of the Flavian dynasty (15.16n.).

M.’s flattery of Domitian has always offered cause for concern. The main problem is not so much its exuberance – Pliny the Younger’s Panegyric of Trajan is no less extreme – but the fact that the emperor suffered a damnatio memoriae immediately after his assassination and has until fairly recently continued to receive a bad press. On the assumption that no one could really approve of such a monster, M. has been condemned as a grovelling hypocrite, this being borne out by the fact that in the books issued after Domitian’s death M. admits to having flattered Domitian (e.g. 10.72.1–3), and favourably compares the new regime with the old (e.g. 12).

In recent years two different arguments have been used in an attempt to rescue M.’s good name: (i) the traditionally unfavourable picture of Domitian derives from hostility on the part of the senatorial class, which suffered most under his reign.31 He was not, however, regarded in the same

light by the common people and by the equestrian class, to which the poet belonged; thus M.’s praise of him could have been sincere; (2) M.’s eulogies of Domitian are expressed in deliberately ambiguous terms: while appearing outwardly to approve of the emperor, they contain a subversive undercurrent. On this hypothesis M. is absolved from the charge of hypocritically flattering an unworthy subject because the poet takes the opportunity to offer criticism of the emperor for those who choose to read between the lines.32

The second line of argument cannot be sustained. It defies credibility that Domitian, who was known to appreciate literature, could have been so obtuse as not to see what M. was up to. And it is equally incredible that M., to whom imperial patronage was so important, was prepared to take such a risk, especially as others had suffered under Domitian for their writings. If however the first alternative, that M. might have genuinely approved of Domitian, is correct, the poet is still open to condemnation for insincerity because of the retraction of his praise of the emperor after Domitian’s death in an attempt to curry favour with Nerva and Trajan.

An important assumption of both arguments is that M.’s flattery of Domitian needs to be excused on moral grounds. But this is to impose an anachronistic viewpoint which ignores the workings of the patronage system in Rome. Under this system, anyone who desired favours from the emperor, or indeed any other patron, was obliged to flatter him. What the client really thought was irrelevant, nor was it relevant whether the patron believed what was said of himself. Both sides were simply playing a game, and to judge this by modern standards of morality is to condemn not M. himself, but the whole system of patronage which was an integral part of the fabric of Roman society.33

More interesting are two different questions: (1) Did M.’s flattery work, i.e. did he gain from the emperor the patronage that he desired? (2) How did he go about flattering the emperor, and are the results to be dismissed as lamentable, or are some at least of the epigrams about Domitian successful in their own right?

Opinion is divided on the first question.34 Certainly M. was never on such intimate terms with the emperor as to be invited to dinner (contrast

34 For arguments against M.’s receiving patronage from Domitian, see esp. Szelest (1974).