INTRODUCTION

Getting to know Martial

Think back. It’s the mid-nineties. We are on the brink of a new century, and are living and breathing the ‘New Age’ people have been preaching about since the eighties. Thanks to more efficient communication, and the regularising machine of empire, the world seems to have got smaller, and more and more provincials are gravitating towards the sprawling, crowded metropolis, all manically networking to win the same few jobs (they all want to be ‘socialites’, or ‘artists’). Many of us are richer and more mobile than ever, but arguably have less freedom. Modern life is a struggle, it seems – it’s dog eat dog in the urban jungle, and those who can’t keep up the pace soon become victims (actually, being a ‘victim’ is the in thing). ‘Reality’ is the hottest show in town: we’re done with drama and fantasy, as amateur theatrics and seeing people actually suffer is such a blast (as well as being a really ‘ironic’ creative experiment). This is a culture that has long realised Warhol’s prophecy, where everyone wants their bite of the fame cherry, but where fame itself is a dirty shadow of what it used to be.¹ The young recall nothing but peace, yet fierce wars still bristle at the world’s edges, and even as the concrete keeps rising, a smog of instability and malaise lingers.

A cynical, middle-class sketch of 1990s Manhattan or London, or a summary of Martial’s Rome at the peak of his career under Domitian? While in real terms, Flavian Rome may have little in common with the capitals of the most recent Western empire, it’s also true that the vision of

¹ I have used Lindsay’s Oxford Classical Text of Martial throughout. All translations to follow are my own.
² American artist Andy Warhol famously predicted in 1968 that in the future everyone would be world-famous for fifteen minutes.
high urbanity that we find in Martial’s Epigrams looks more ‘contemporary’ than ever. Martial’s wicked commentary on literary fame, for example, the major obsession of Augustan success-stories like Vergil and Horace, is a fascinating one in a world where identikit pop-idols reach their sell-by dates in months and celeb-rags vie to dethrone and replace yesterday’s heroes with today’s. His ultra-commodified culture, where even poetry is reduced to thing, where books mean profits, writers must cater to Attention Deficit Disorder, and where the city appears as a live web of ideas and interactions, can feel very familiar to an on-line, iPod generation – the children of an urbanised, post-modern West.

Romanisation can find its parallels in globalisation, and at the beginning of the third millennium we are as obsessed as Martial is about conceptualising urban space and empire as (evolving) ideas. So too, in an intellectual climate in which rubbish can be high art, and soap operas are studied alongside Shakespeare, we are almost bound to warm to the wry, populist cheek of Martial’s project, which sets up throwaway, bargain-basement epigram as the new (alternative to) epic. And just as the boom in Ovidian criticism in the 1980s and 1990s coincided, not entirely by accident, with the popular digesting of post-structuralist and post-modernist thought in the humanities, so Martial seems to suit an academe grappling with what comes after the post-modern. For (if we simplify things for a second), Martial sells himself not just as a virtuoso post-Ovidian trickster, but as an anti-Ovid looking back on a past era, giving us the real, the succinct, the deadpan, where Ovid offered illusion, make-believe and luscious description. This is poetry about getting real, even though it often presents ‘the real’ as more fantastic than your wildest dreams.

So is Martial, as Fitzgerald puts it, ‘a poet of our time’ – a time defined by the soundbite, the headline, the paparazzi shot, by surfing, browsing, shuffling and fast food? Well yes, for sure. It’s certainly curious that it is now, in the first decade of the third millennium, that Martial is again being rehabilitated – bearing in mind that he had already almost single-handedly defined epigram for the Western tradition. By the second century AD, the emperor Hadrian’s adoptive son Aelius Verus was calling him his ‘Vergil’; the persistence of epigram-writing in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was largely due to him, and he reached dizzying heights of fame between the sixteenth and nineteenth century in Europe, imitated by a long list of important poets and wits, including Donne, Ben Jonson, Pope and

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Goethe. *Ep.* 10.47, for example, his poem on friendship and the Happy Life, is ‘perhaps the most frequently translated poem in English literature’. But after a long period of relative obscurity (he is probably the last of the post-Augustan poets to remain ‘trash’), the last few years have seen a rush of new commentaries, translations, books and articles. As scholars (a bit like Martial himself) move to grab the few remaining undervalued genres and authors for themselves, branding Martial as seductively ‘modern’ is a predictable move, reflecting a more general pressure on Classics to pronounce its relevance, to be more about sex, gladiators and Russell Crowe than dusty books, ‘dead’ languages and philological queries.

Yet it is not just this that leads us to draw comparisons between Martial’s world and our own. The question ‘why Martial now?’ is one I have found myself asking throughout the writing of this book, in part because the *Epigrams* demand we recognise how historically specific and how personal our perspectives on the world (always, *our world*) really are. Of all classical authors, Martial makes us most aware of what kind of readers we are, or want to be. What’s more, he stresses that we are the ones that make this poetry – it lives on in us, and changes shape according to our moods and preferences: ‘if anything is not to your taste, just pass it by’, he reassures us at the beginning of the *Xenia*, for example, his pick-and-mix collection for the Saturnalia, and instructions at the start of Book 10 read: ‘Make me as short for yourself as you like.’ In fantasising about what different kinds of consumers want and experience, Martial actively invites intimacy, imagining well-thumbed codex copies of his books held in avid hands, and developing the kind of love affair or (often) love–hate relationship with his audience that Roman elegists enjoyed with their favourite mistresses. (Incidentally, this might be the *only* romance you find in Martial.) He writes for our pleasure: ‘you’re my inspiration, lector amice,’ he flutters at poem 16 of Book 5, a naughtily chaste book dedicated to housewives, boys and virgins, ‘you who read and sing my verses all over Rome’. If it wasn’t for us, the easily bored, sophisticated but tabloid-hungry masses, he’d be a...

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5 Despite this, a few poets have continued to translate and get inspiration from Martial throughout the twentieth century. See e.g. the work of Tony Harrison and Fiona Pitt-Kethley collected in Sullivan and Boyle (1996).


7 Although critics still feel the need to apologise for how ‘boring’ and ‘repetitive’ Martial looks: see e.g. Watson and Watson (2003) 10 (‘it must be said that there is a good deal of justice in the poet’s assessment of his work as uneven in quality. Many of M.’s epigrams will strike the reader as feeble, forced, frigid, or downright tedious’); cf. Fitzgerald (2007) 1.
serious bard making a decent living. But one has to suffer for love (amor, 5.16.4). The Flavian metropolis, his darling mea Roma, adores its favourite poet. As he tells us at 6.60, ‘I am in every pocket, every hand.’ And for every fan that laudat, amat, cantat (‘praises, loves, sings’) these epigrams, there is one who blushes, turns pale, yawns, is stunned, or just disgusted. Much to Martial’s delight (6.60.3–4).

Like one of his first-century groupies, I’ve often carried Martial around today’s Rome, which thanks to Domitian is mostly a Flavian, not an Augustan, capital. You feel you can see, hear and smell the city in Martial – he is, and has been, brilliant fodder for all those ‘everyday life’ books about ancient Rome, helping us imagine what really went on in dark taverns, in brothels, baths, theatres and public lavs, among prostitutes and pickpockets, lawyers and gladiators, undertakers, artists and cooks. But more than that, to read Martial is to plunge into a new world, the fractured, tightly sprung and metamorphic universe of epigram. After a while (and his surviving corpus is huge, bigger than it first appears), his ongoing, mock-affectionate dialogue with readers seems almost to become a metaphor for just how much epigram’s Weltanschauung gets to you. For one thing, at a time when classics like Vergil’s Aeneid and Horace’s Odes have become school texts and are on sale in multiple copies in Rome’s many bookshops, the Epigrams sum up and rework what seems like the whole of ancient literary history, especially Augustan poetry. So much so that when you get into Martial’s cosmos, Latin literature will never be the same again. And you’ll both love and hate him (back) for it.

 **SUMMING UP MARTIAL**

‘Realist’ Martial fixates on facts and figures, so that when critics size him up, they’re almost bound to do so on his terms. Later in this book (chapter 3) I’ll be showing just how much this poet counts on (us) counting, but for the moment, here are the basics:

Marcus Valerius Martialis was born in the Spanish hill-town of Bilbilis in northern Aragon between AD 38 and 41. He is only one of a handful of well-known Roman authors who were Spanish in origin – including Seneca the Younger, his nephew Lucan, Quintilian and Columella, the first-century writer on agriculture. As a young man, Martial followed the

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8 About four kilometres north-east of the modern Calatayud, an area now known as El cerro de Bambola on the River Jalón in Aragon. The population of the Roman municipium, known officially as Augusta Bilbilis, has been estimated at 50,000.
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usual path of the son of well-to-do parents, and headed for the capital in 64 to complete his education: he was quickly taken under the wing of the most conspicuous Spanish family in Rome, that of Seneca. We don’t know much about his early writing, but it’s clear he had already established a reputation when he published the first anthology of poems we have, the Liber de Spectaculis, written (most think) to inaugurate Titus’ games in the amazing new Colosseum in ad 80.9 His surviving oeuvre includes over 1,500 epigrams, adding up to around 10,000 verses (the poems vary quite a lot in length, from a single couplet or even a single verse to thirty or forty lines). Although the Xenia (‘guest gifts’) and Apophoreta (‘take-aways’) are now numbered Books 13 and 14, they were published first, between 81 and 86. Martial himself numbered the collections that followed, Books 1–12, and turned out roughly one book per year from ad 86 onwards. As we hear at the end of Book 10 (which, as we have it, is presented as a second edition after the death and damnatio memoriae of Domitian), he retired to Spain in 98, and died at Bilbilis around ad 104.

The main body of work, then, is made up of the twelve numbered books which are each around 100 epigrams long, written with a few exceptions in three metres – the elegiac couplet, the Phalaecean hendecasyllable, and the scason, or limping iambic. The Xenia and Apophoreta have 127 and 223 poems respectively, all of which are single elegiac couplets, while the De Spectaculis survives in a mutilated and probably much truncated form: only 35 or 36 poems are left, again all written in elegiacs. Each collection has its own distinct character which is made more or less explicit in opening poems or prose prefaces (beginning Books 1, 2, 8, 9 and 12), and most books also end with obviously closural pieces which give a sense of overall structure. For example, Book 1 is presented as a theatrical show for the kind of audience that enjoys the Ludi Florales, the annual spring games which included obscene mimes; Book 11’s ‘theme’ is the new liberty to be enjoyed under Nerva – the setting is the Saturnalia, the December carnival which is also the stage for books 4, 5, 7, 13 and 14, as I discuss in chapter 5; Book 12 (after Book 3, written from Gaul) is (half-)Spanish, exploring what it is for urbano-centric epigram to extend its reach and view the city from a distance, as I investigate in chapter 6; Book 8, addressed directly to Domitian, is uncharacteristically restrained (Martial reassures the emperor: ‘I have not allowed these epigrams to talk as wantonly as usual’, Pref. 13–14), while Book 3 is split into two, the first 68 poems

9 On the notion that the book may have been written for Domitian, see K. Coleman (2006).
designed to please the chaste *matrona*, and the remaining 32 letting loose to cater for randy young men and ‘easy’ girls (69.3–5). Within the depths of each long-short book, as I discuss throughout but especially in chapter 1, what is traditionally described as Martial’s exemplary display of two basic principles of poetic arrangement — *variatio* (‘variation’) and juxtaposition — is immensely colourful and intricate. In terms of subject matter, we might, within the space of a few codex pages, move from philosophies on life and death and reflections on what it is to be a poor client-poet in Rome, to poems about money, physical deformities, adultery, plagiarism, friendship, real estate, retirement, murder, architectural wonders, military victories, gardening or travel.

Thanks to Martial, ‘epigram’, for us, means a short, usually satirical poem with a punchy ending. Yet although famous Hellenistic epigrammatists (among them Asclepiades, Posidippus and Callimachus) used the term *epigramma* and discussed it as a genre in its own right, the term is still quite vague in first-century Rome. Sitting at the bottom of the literary hierarchy, it covers all kinds of occasional verse, especially the sort that lubricated relationships between Greek poet-clients and Roman patrons.  

*Suetonius’ Lives of the Caesars* is full of anonymous epigrams or references to epigrams directed at the emperors, and we know that Augustus himself dabbled in the form (see *Ep.* 11.20). Following on the heels of Neronian Lucillius who (we gather from the 150 or so of his poems that survive) wrote satirical, spiky epigrams, Martial has big ambitions to lay claim to epigram and give it a brand-new, Roman identity. Although he is much influenced by a long Greek history of epigram writing, which we know about mainly through the tenth-century *Palatine Anthology*, Martial is

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10 As Fitzgerald puts it (2007, 27), ‘by the time of Philip’s *Garland*, Greek epigram and epigrammatists were firmly embedded in the world of client and patron at Rome, with important mutual effects.’ As we see in Martial, epigrams were often composed to accompany, or to function as, social invitations, gifts, requests, celebrations of birthdays, weddings, deaths, etc. Well-known Greek epigrammatists in the Roman court include Crinagoras, a client of Octavia, and Leonidas of Alexandria, who wrote for Nero and Vespasian.

11 Nearly all Lucillius’ epigrams, collected in Book 11 of the Greek Anthology, are satiric. As Watson and Watson (2003, 12–3) summarise, scoptic epigram becomes a recognised sub-category of the genre for the first time with Lucilius, and ‘some 17 of Martial’s epigrams trace their parentage to a Lucillian model’ (see Burnikel 1980). The most obvious way in which Lucilius anticipates Martial is in the way he attacks satiric types instead of individuals, often with a touch of surreal hyperbole. Watson and Watson (2002) find Lucilius ‘less emotionally engaged’, ‘less mordant’ and ‘a great deal less amusing’ than Martial.

12 Also known as the Greek Anthology, put together by Cephalas in the early tenth century. This includes earlier anthologies, most significantly the Garland of Meleager, put together about 100 BC, and arranged according to four categories (erotic, epithaphic, dedicatory and epideictic or descriptive), and the Garland of Philip of Thessalonica, presented to the consul Camillus during Nero’s reign, around 150 years later, which collected together writers of epigram active after 100 BC. Since the
Getting to know Martial largely silent about the Greeks, while engaging in close and obvious ways with his Roman predecessors. So, as I explore at length in chapter 2, although the Epigrams play on the idea that epigramma means ‘inscription’ (‘epigrams’, in this sense, survive on objects and monuments from as early as the archaic period), and on epitaphic formulae often used in Hellenistic epigram, Martial is most interested in how Flavian epigram can comment on the trope of monumentality in Latin literature – from Ennius to Horace, Ovid to Petronius. Martial wants to be ‘second to’ Callimachus at Ep. 4.23, yet in the Preface to Book 1, he likens himself to the Roman writers Catullus, (Domitius) Marsus, (Albinovanus) Pedo and (Cn. Cornelius Lentulus) Gaetulicus (Pref. 11). For us, the last two are little more than names, but we know that Marsus produced a collection of apparently satirical epigrams called Cicuta (‘Hemlock’) and a prose work, ‘On wit’ (De Urbanitate), a sentence from which is preserved in Quintilian (Inst. 6.3.104). Catullus, meanwhile (along with Ovid), has the most visible presence in the Epigrams of any poet, and at points throughout this book, I’ll be looking closely at where Martial’s multiple echoes and parodies of his poems take us.13 In Book 14 (the Apophoreta), where from 183 to 196 Martial flaunts his penchant for distilling and dumbing down the whole of classical literature, we read two couplets on Homer (182, 183), and one on Menander’s first comedy (187), mixed in with all the Roman greats – Vergil, Cicero, Propertius, Livy, Sallust, Ovid, Tibullus, Lucan and Catullus. We’ll be seeing in the course of this book how deeply indebted Martial is to the Roman satiric tradition, to Roman epic and pastoral, to Petronius’ novel, Statius’ court poetry, and perhaps most overtly, to the erotic elegiac tradition leading up to Ovid’s Metamorphoses and letters from exile. The cheap labels at Apophoreta 183–96 come to exemplify the Epigrams’ push to cram everything in, to chop up, reduce and remake Rome as and through its literary production.

THE WHOLE WORLD IN OUR HANDS

Martial makes epigram define and perform a Zeitgeist: his poetry is Rome, both the city itself (a mass of streets, buildings, monuments and people) discovery of the Milan papyrus, a third-century manuscript containing 100 epigrams of Posidippus, we have evidence that Hellenistic poets published books of epigrams before the Garland of Melager (see Austin and Bastianini 2002, and Gutzwiller 2005); Gutzwiller (1998) argues that other poets from as early as 300 BC also composed their own collections. For lengthier discussion of the history of ancient epigram and Martial’s place in it, see e.g. Sullivan (1991) 78–114, Laurens (1965, 1989).

Martial’s Rome

and Rome as concept and dream – the epicentre and embodiment of a vast, complex empire. All ‘reality’ is in here, and nothing is left out. In an era most famous for the long-haul, ornate epics of Statius, Valerius Flaccus and Silius Italicus, Martial elects, in a contrary, almost surreal career move, to devote his entire life to the most humble and little of poetic forms. Yet, as he is fond of stressing, many tiny poems can make a big book, and the main, twelve-book corpus is a post-Callimachean, daedalean feat par excellence, rivalling the Aeneid, and Ovid’s fabulous Metamorphoses. In the wake of the great Roman epics, whose claims to totality are far more strident than anything in the Greek tradition, Martial’s feat marks, in a twisted way, the boldest kind of poetic expansionism yet. Through the Epigrams, even more than through Pliny’s Natural History or Tacitus’ Agricola, we visualise the Roman empire as a known and summarisable entity that spins around and is synthesized in the glitzy microcosm of Rome. Martial’s writing life, from the late 70s to the beginning of the second century AD, itself spans the entire Flavian dynasty, as well as Domitian’s damnatio memoriae after his death in 96, followed by the rise to power of senator Nerva and then his adopted son Trajan; spatially, too, we see epigram conquering the globe, a consciously Roman kind of colonisation. These libelli are thumbed by Roman soldiers in what was the wilderness of Ovidian exile, and in the once mysterious realms of northern Britain, exported by tourists and carried in travellers’ pockets to all four corners of the world. In an empire as successful, far-reaching and evolved as this one, Martial imagines, the Ovidian opposition in the Tristia and Ex Ponto between Rome and not-Rome, between the civilized and barbarous, centre and margin, is outdated. Epigram’s world is both inconceivably immense, diverse, fractured, and at the same time unified, collapsible, homogeneous. In the right company, Martial jokes at 10.13, even the deserts of Carthage or the hamlets of Scythia can be Rome, while the city itself is a multicultural giant drawing wannabes and consumers not only from the provinces, but from the furthest reaches of the globe. You can almost feel ‘in exile’ without going anywhere, just as today we can visit Chinatown or Little Italy in New York, or eat out Philippino, Algerian or Iraqi in London. This idea is probably captured best in poem 3 of the De Spectaculis, where the inaugural games at the microcosmic Colosseum attract Arabs, Egyptians, the wild Sarmatian ‘fed on draughts of horses’ blood’, even the Northern Britons and afro-haired Ethiopians:

14 The Aeneid is 12 books, Ovid’s Metamorphoses 15 books (Martial published twelve books numbered 1–12, but 15 in all if you count the De Spectaculis, Xenia and Apotheorata).
15 As P. Hardie (1993, 2) puts it of the Aeneid.
‘what race is so remote, so barbarous’, Martial asks, ‘that no spectator from it is in your city? . . . the crowd rings with different languages, and yet it is one’ (3.1–2, 11–12).

Martial’s epigram doesn’t just represent the city, it creates it. Rome arises out of it. Reading the Epigrams is a crash course in living in Rome, but also vice versa: in understanding the nuances of poetic interaction, we get to grips with social and political manoeuvring, as well as the other way around. Throughout this book, I will be exploring different perspectives on Martial’s radical vision of the relationship between poet, art, language, and the ‘outside’ world. What Martial does with this relationship, I shall stress, is fascinating and unprecedented, and goes far beyond what has traditionally been perceived as ‘realism’, or as Sullivan puts it, ‘a denigration of the real’. At the heart of his project, as I discuss in depth in chapter 5, is an exciting reconceptualisation of space, a rethink of poetry’s (and poet’s) place and scope. Martial sees epigram as historically apt, his only option in a literary culture sucked dry of otium and nostalgic for the idealised patronage of figures like Maecenas, who supported and protected the Augustan greats. It is the absence of a single rich patron, and hence the chronic lack of separation, of a protective intermediary figure between poet and world, and between poet and emperor, that provides the impulse, as Martial envisages it, for his project in merging poetry with world. Without a ‘Maecenas’, the poet and his personified book are immersed in a cruel and unforgiving landscape, in which physical integrity and originality are threatened. They face plagiarism, are hounded by soiled fingers and sweaty, contagious bodies, and menaced by the sharp noses of merciless critics. The libellus-as-slave, as scholars have noted, is a key ongoing metaphor for poetry’s/poet’s penetrability and lack of autonomy, jarring with the more confident imagery of book as cocksure bully and hardened survivor. It all happens on the streets in Martial, and even inside spaces (echoing Horace’s angulus and recessus, or Persius’ intense, dark study) are turned inside-out in the mind: at 12.57, for example, Martial can’t sleep in his town apartment, complaining, ‘the laughter of the passing crowd awakes me, and Rome is at my bedside, ad cubile est Roma’ (26–7). Conversely, outside spaces and rural havens are swallowed up by the city, especially by Titus’ microcosm, the arena of the Colosseum: who needs to write an epic about travelling to the ends of the world and cosmos, when it’s all here in Rome itself?

Cleverly, Martial turns what he sees as the death of poetic independence and seclusion to his own ends. The social determination and ‘cheapening’ of literary activity inspires a new, comic take on neo-Callimachean aesthetics, so that smallness is motivated by pragmatic concerns, poverty is harsh and real, not a lifestyle choice, and tiny, intricate poems are not necessarily perfect and polished. While Domitian (whose reign spans a large chunk of Martial’s career) styles himself, after Augustus, as avant-garde imperial architect, so Martial presents himself as writing in the shadow of, and over, his predecessors – along with dozens of other frost-bitten clients claiming to be ‘the next Ovid’, ‘the new Vergil’ (see 3,38). Yet at the same time his project aggressively rejects an aesthetic, and a set of moral ideals, that belong to a lost era, and hacks out new poetic territory in a changed world. In Martial, ambition and insecurity, the big-time and the small-time, go hand in hand. As we will be seeing in each chapter, he exploits an energising tension between the imperialistic, terrain-gobbling aspect of his project, which allows this tiny form to puff up arrogantly and take over the globe, and the painful constraints germane to full immersion: the epigrams strain against their own limits, aware of never quite escaping (a dependency on) the claustrophobia and dirt of urban life.

Indeed, one of the most interesting and difficult features of Martial’s poetry is its reliance on paradox. The epigrams constantly manipulate and distort space and scale, twist hierarchies, and build up edifices only to make them splinter. Martial draws on all the tropes and ironies of neo-Callimacheanism and Roman satire, as well as the complex history of epigram as a poetic form, to rebrand epigram for posterity as a jigsaw of contrasts and contradictions – a product, he imagines, of a literary and social world neurotic about its relationship with the past and highly conscious of its identity in the present. As critics have emphasised, epigram is vaunted as simultaneously speech and writing, conversation and text, as humble, occasional poetry that is at the same time monumental, a guarantor of fame and immortality; it is both free and closeted, autonomous and dependent, chaste and obscene, both spectacular and repressed, raucous and silent, or silenced; at once a genre of established, fixed qualities, and a chameleonic form out to expose the ignorance of anyone who tries to pin it down. So Martial is a populist writing for ‘all of Rome’, yet he also requires a discerning studiosus lector. It may be easy to write one epigram,

18 On this see especially Roman (2001).