

Martial on his Poetry

Latin Advanced: 2

The Epigrams

- All Books of the Epigrams (but 4 + 7) open with a metapoetic / programmatic preface (verse or prose)
- Book 1:
 - ‘I hope that in these little books of mine I have such due proportion that no man [...] can complain about them [...].’
 - Callimachean style

Preface Book 1

[...] that no man [...] can complain about them, seeing that their sportive mood preserves, even towards the meanest individuals, that decent respect in which authors of old were so lacking that they not only made wrongful use of real names, but even did this in the case of the great. For myself I would seek reputation at a lower price than that, and the last thing for which I desire to be commended is mere smartness. May the malicious commentator abstain from meddling with the plain meaning of my jokes [...]

Continued...

I would make no apology for immodest unreserve in word - that is, for the language of epigram - were I the first to use it, but this is the manner in which *Catullus* writes [...] and every other author whose works are read right through; yet even if there be any man so ostentatiously prim, that one may not, even on a single page, speak plain Latin to him, he need not go further than this preface - or rather no further than the title. Epigrams are [...] for those who are used to look on at the games of Flora; therefore, let no Cato come to my playhouse; or if he come, let him watch the show [...]

The Preface to Book 1

- Martial will write scoptic epigrams, but (unlike Catullus) he won't mention names - type characters and fictitious names
- He will use obscene language as appropriate to his subject and genre, because...
- That is what the genre of epigram entails, cf. 'no further than the title'

The Preface to Book 1

- The association with the theatre and the audience of the games of Flora underlines the impression of the narrator as someone acting on a stage - i.e. with a mask, a persona
 - The reference to Cato the Elder - the theatre a proper place to relax one's moral standards
 - Cf. Wiseman on the need for us to know more about non-literary entertainment (*Catullus and His World*, 1985)
- The narrator overly assiduous => a potentially comical character

The Preface to Book One, Continued

- Also note...
 - The claim that this is ‘plain Latin’, that Martial’s jokes have a ‘plain meaning’ - compare this to Horace’s claim in the *Satires* to not to be writing poetry but to be more close to real conversation
=> another link between satire and epigram
 - There is some truth in this - aspects of Martial’s language are foreign to highly stylised literary texts

Martial's audience

- Martial claims his poems are read 'by everyone' (6.60.1f); the audience important for the shaping of the poems
- Martial's claim in the preface to 'speak plain Latin' may also refer to his style
 - Parallel to Horace's statement about not writing 'real' poetry in *Satire* 1.4
- Does this mean his texts are accessible to little-read people as well?

Literacy at Rome

- Likely widespread illiteracy
- Books a luxury
- => Martial is exaggerating, even lying?
- Lower classes access to literature through recitation and dramatic performance? Cf. mime and comedy
- Yet... ...epigram, both in Martial and in Catullus, are highly stylised literary texts, with complex references to other (often higher) literary genres and texts

Who are the implied readers?

- When 'Martial' speaks about his popularity, it is in the context of reading
- 'Everybody' is 'everybody of the upper classes' – the phrase implies a blinkered perspective – and they are expected to be well read!
 - Mind: The epigrams presuppose both male and female readers – as indeed much Roman (love) poetry does
- ...his, in short, is a readership with Callimachean tastes