

Advanced Latin Autumn 2011

Martial and the Epigrammatic Emperor

Background to Epigrams 9-12 (Watson)

Basics on Domitian

- ◉ The last of the Flavian emperors
- ◉ Reign: 81-96 AD
- ◉ Campaigns in Dacia (Agricola in Britain)
- ◉ Massive rebuilding program in Rome, restoration of Augustus' moral legislation

How Domitian Got a Bad Name

- ◉ Receives very bad press from contemporary historians: Pliny the younger, Tacitus and Suetonius
- ◉ Are our sources biased?
They represent the perspective of the senatorial class, who lost in influence under Domitian's reign.

The first cycle on Domitian

- ◎ The emperor is one of the key topics raised in a paradigmatic ‘parade’ of epigrams in Book 1 (Mart. 1.1-10)
- ◎ The Domitian first cycle includes 1.4 – 1.6, but the emperor and his power as a topic is foreshadowed already in 1.3: To the book: “[...] try your wings and flutter about Rome. Off you go, then! You’re safer, though, at home.”

The Ovidian Intertext

- In *Tristia* 1.1 – first poem from exile! – Ovid too addresses his book on its way to Rome
- Ovid envies his book for having access to Rome, but warns it not to offend the emperor (Augustus)
- The inference of the intertext: Must Martial fear the emperor like Ovid did?

Epigram 1.4

- ◉ Connects to the prose preface – justifies the obscenities and the explicit language of the collection
- ◉ Latinus and Thymeles famous mime actors
- ◉ The mime?
 - An explicit, often obscene, farce-like stage comedy, scripted or unscripted.
 - Very popular
- ◉ The implication: Domitian tolerates Martial's type of jokes well enough, in the right context.

*If you should chance, Caesar, to light upon
my books, lay aside that look which awes the
world. Even your triumphs have been
accustomed to endure jests, nor is it any
shame to a general to be a subject for
witticisms. Read my verses, I pray you, with
that brow with which you behold Thymeles
and Latinus the buffoon. The censorship may
tolerate innocent jokes: my page indulges in
freedoms, but my life is pure.*

Results

- ◉ With 1.4, Martial claims a context within which his language and his jokes are appropriate
- ◉ The final lines: “my life is strict, however lax my page”
 - Cf. introductory lecture on Martial – is the narrator a ridiculous character?
 - Places Martial within a tradition of slightly lascivious poetry – Catullus and Ovid.

Domitian's reaction: 1.5

“I give you a sea-fight, and you give me epigrams: you wish, I suppose, Marcus, to be set afloat with your book.”

- ◉ Domitian himself holds various types of games (here a sea-fight in the amphitheatre) – sets up a similarity between Martial and the emperor
 - Note the use of the first name here
- ◉ Writing epigrams (and jokes) is not without risks – but the ‘revenge’ is appropriately comedy-like.
 - Mart. 1.5 (read in the context of 1.4) continues to draw on Ov. *Trist.* 2.221ff

Imperial Allegory: 1.6

While through the air of heaven the eagle was carrying the youth, the burden unhurt clung to its anxious talons. From Caesar's lions their own prey now succeeds in obtaining mercy, and the hare plays safe in their huge jaws. Which miracle do you think is the greater? The author of each is a supreme being: the one is the work of Caesar; the other, of Jove.

On 1.6

- ◉ Connections to 1.5 – is this the game promised by Domitian in the earlier poem?
- ◉ The youth is Ganymede, a boy ‘kidnapped’ by Jupiter for his great beauty, later Jupiter’s boy lover and servant.
- ◉ By means of this comparison, Martial compliments / flatters the emperor.

Wider implications (1)

- Two diverging interpretations, both allegorical and metapoetic
- 1. Martial identifies with the hare, and feels constantly threatened by the 'lion' Domitian
- 1. In line with comments from historiographers about Domitian as a violent tyrant

On the possibility of a subtext

- Other epigrams on Domitian has been considered to have an equally subversive subtext
- However: “It defies credibility that Domitian, who was known to appreciate literature, could have been so obtuse as not to see what Martial was up to”
Watson, P. and L. 9 (2003) Martial. Select Epigrams, Cambridge, 10
- Remember: writing panegyric was the done thing!

The other reading (2)

● Emphasises...

- the connection with 1.4 and 1.5 – sees a relationship developing over three poems
 - that Martial speaks in the persona of an epigrammatist (=> straightforward biographical reading less likely)
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- Martial has presented himself as an epigrammatist, whose lascivious and explicit games the emperor by and large accepts (and to which he contributes)

Panegyric and Wit

- Also: possible obscene wit in 1.6: the hare is sometimes used as a phallus symbol
 - The epigrammatist is represented as the active dominating party, the emperor as the passive penetree
 - Reaction? What cheek, and what a comical, headless character the narrator of the epigrams is...
 - Cf. Horace chastising Maecenas in *Serm.* 2.8
- 1.6 shows that panegyric celebrations of the emperor will be given throughout in a tone specific to epigram and to wit... which the emperor is expected to understand and read appropriately

The Domitian Cycle in Book 5

- ◎ 5.1-20 a sequence telling the story of the narrator's developing relationship with the emperor
- ◎ A gradual approach to Domitian – a book being sent:
5.1.9f: “Do you but receive it; I will imagine that you have read it, and I proudly indulge in Gallic credulity.”
- ◎ Again, note the comical overconfidence of the epigrammatic narrator!

The Gradual Approach

- 5.5 – to Sextus, the librarian of the emperor
- 5.6 – to Parthenius, a servant very close to Domitian:

“Yet do not offer up these compositions in too forward a fashion; but hold them as if you were offering and contemplating nothing. If I know the votary of the nine sisters, he will of his own accord ask for the purple-covered book.”

Before the Emperor? 5.15

This is the fifth book, Augustus, of my sportive effusions, and no one complains of having been injured by my verse. But many a reader rejoices in an honoured name, to whom lasting fame is secured by my gift. "And yet of what use are these trifles, however much they respect personal character?" Granted that they are of no use to many, still they amuse me.

An Audience?

- Note the description of Martial's works as 'trifles' – cf. Cat. 1 and Horace's claim not to write real literature.
- The direct quote – is our narrator at an imperial audience? Is he cheekily (and comically?) shuffling his feet, admitting that he's not even able to feed himself through his verse?

5.19: [...] Under what ruler has Mars's Rome shown herself fairer or greater? Under what prince was there ever so much liberty? This vice, however, exists, and not a small one, although it be but one, that the poor man cultivates friends who simply treat him with ingratitude. [...] To have sent at the time of the Saturnalia a silver spoon of small weight, or a gaudy toga worth ten scruples, is extravagant liberality; and our proud patrons call such things presents. Perhaps there may be one, who will chink out a few gold pieces. But since these men are not our friends, be you, Caesar, a friend to us; no virtue in a prince can be more pleasing than generosity. But before you have read thus far, Germanicus, you will have been laughing at me to yourself for giving you advice which is for my own benefit.

Getting Down to Business

- 5.19 continues the theme from 5.16-18 of money, generosity and gifts.
- The narrator's plea for financial assistance here (be you, Caesar, a friend to us; no virtue in a prince can be more pleasing than generosity) stands in amusing contrast with the end of 5.15
- The narrator now so close to Domitian that he can see him laughing – but at what? The plea, or the epigram cycle itself? Staged reader response?

The End of the Line

- 5.20 – the narrator still has to worry about money
- Comical failure? Biographical interpretation: Martial continues to address epigrams to Domitian throughout his reign – must have some hope of success?
- Also much speculation about Martial's likely return to Spain after D's death

“The Epigrammatic Emperor”

- ◉ In the books where the emperor is a prominent character or addressee (like Book 5 and 8), immediate obscenities are generally avoided
- ◉ However, from the first epigrams in Book One, Domitian is depicted as a “competent reader”, understanding and accepting the rules of the genre

“The Epigrammatic Emperor”

Two influential studies on the portrayal of Domitian in Martial:

- Lorenz, S. (2002) *Erotik und Panegyrik: Martials epigrammatische Kaiser*, Tuebingen.
- Holzberg, N. (2002) *Martial und das antike Epigramm*, Darmstadt.

To Take Away from this Lecture

- Martial's epigrams on and to Domitian have been read in two different ways
- Current scholarship emphasises the presence of a narrator's persona and how the emperor is written into Martial's epigrammatic discourse
- These epigrams join together praise and wit, sometimes sexual, but rarely outright obscene