

BELLARIA (XX)



No image of Martial exists. We shall therefore content ourselves with this wonderful 'Fayum mummy portrait', 2nd c AD, Object #ECM.1473-2010, Myers Collection, Eton College – the wood painted portraits were discovered in the Roman Egyptian Al Fayyum Oasis, buried with their mummified subjects.

MARTIAL (5)

Apologies in advance for the doggerel (per)versions. Prose translations of Martial don't do it for me.

Metre

Martial's poems are predominantly composed in elegiac couplets.

The second most common is the hendecasyllable, which I give here in a brief, simplified, rhythmical version (x ['blank'] = long or short):

x x / — U U — U — / U — — (blank blank / tum ti ti tum ti tum / ti tum tum)

e.g. 'Oh you / chorus of indolent / reviewers'

Pliny the Younger on Martial

The only solid evidence for Martial's life and character is to be found in a letter written by Pliny to his friend Cornelius Priscus:

'I hear Valerius Martial is dead and I am very upset. He was talented (*ingeniosus*), penetrating (*acutus*) and sharp (*acer*), a man who, in his writings, displayed a great deal of both wit (*sal*) and sarcasm (*fel*), but just as much desire to please (*candor*). I presented him with his travel expenses when he was going into retirement; this was a recognition of our friendship, but also a recognition of the unassuming verses he composed about me.'

Pliny then quoted the epigram that Martial wrote when presenting Pliny with his latest volume. In it he instructed Thalia, the muse of light verse, not to be drunk when she delivered it because Pliny 'will be working hard writing speeches on private cases which future years will be able to compare with Cicero' (10.20). This was high praise indeed, and Pliny went on:

'Surely the author of these lines merited the friendliest of farewells when I sent him off, and merits now my grief for the loss of a very dear friend. He gave me the best he could, and he would have given more if he could have. And yet what greater gifts can be given a man than glory, praise, and immortality? It may be said that his writings will not be immortal: perhaps not, but he wrote them as though they would be.'

Letters 3.21

Martial on his poetry

Martial certainly hoped for future glory, as his very first epigram amusingly implies:

He unto whom thou art so partial,
o reader, is the well-known Martial,
the epigrammatist: while living,
give him the fame thou wouldst be giving
so shall he hear, and feel, and know it: 5
post-obits rarely reach a poet.
hic est quem legis ille, quem requiris,
toto notus in orbe Martialis
argutis epigrammaton libellis:
cui, lector studiose, quod dedisti
uiuenti decus atque sentienti, 5
rari post cineres habent poetae.

1.1

Lord Byron

It was a theme he came back to:

Only the poets of old you admire,
The living get no accolade.
Please spare me your praises, Vacerra:
That's too high a price to be paid.

*miraris ueteres, Vacerra, solos
nec laudas nisi mortuos poetas.
ignoscas petimus, Vacerra: tanti
non est, ut placeam tibi, perire.*

8.69

Martial certainly did not lack confidence. Here he attacks tragic poets:

Believe me, he has no idea what epigrams, Flaccus, are,
Who calls them just a wordplay or a tease.
No, rather he's the tease who pens cruel Tereus' luncheon treat,
Or the dinner that you ate, cruel Thyestes, †
Or Daedalus who put his son in wings that soon would melt, 5
Or Cyclops feeding his Sicilian flock.

Such bombast is a long way from my books, nor does my
[Muse

Swell with the tragic Muse's flowing frock.
'Yet all the world loves, praises and admires such stuff.

[Agreed.

They certainly all praise it. But mine is what they read. 10

†Both Tereus and Thyestes were deceived into eating their own children

*nescit, crede mihi, quid sint epigrammata, Flacce,
qui tantum lusus illa iocosque uocat.*

ille magis ludit qui scribit prandia saeui

Tereos aut cenam, crude Thyesta, tuam,

aut puero liquidas aptantem Daedalon alas, 5

pascentem Siculas aut Polyphemon ouis.

a nostris procul est omnis uesica libellis,

Musa nec insano syrmate nostra tumet.

'illa tamen laudant omnes, mirantur, adorant'.

confiteor: laudant illa, sed ista legunt. 10

4.49

Martial's 'other voice'

It would be unfair to Martial to give the impression that his epigrams are all cynicism, sarcasm and outright bile. It is clear he put considerable effort into ensuring that each of his books demonstrated a huge variety of subjects, styles and moods. The following epigrams illustrate him in a mellower mood, one of relaxed moralising on the good life and death, but no less witty:

Live for the day

O Julius, first, bar none, of my old mates
 (if lengthy faith and old oaths still mean much)
twice thirty consuls—nearly—close on you, †
 and you can count scarce few days left, as such.
You're wrong to put off what may be denied you, 5
 and you should count as yours just what is past.
Troubles and long chains of toil await you,
 Joys, taking wing, fly off: they do not last.
Seize them with both hands, then, and hug them to you;
 even so, they slip too easily away. 10
It's no wise man, trust me, who says 'I shall live'.
 Tomorrow's life's too late: live for today.

†i.e. you are nearly sixty

*o mihi post nullos, luli, memorande sodales,
 si quid longa fides canaque iura ualent,
bis iam paene tibi consul tricensimus instat,
 et numerat paucos uix tua uita dies.
non bene distuleris uideas quae posse negari, 5
 et solum hoc ducas, quod fuit, esse tuum.
exspectant curaeque catenatique labores,
 gaudia non remanent, sed fugitiua uolant.
haec utraque manu complexuque adsere toto:
 saepe fluunt imo sic quoque lapsa sinu. 10
non est, crede mihi, sapientis dicere 'uiuam'
 sera nimis uita est crastina: uiue hodie.*

1.15

Live for yesterday

Tomorrow you will live, you say, tomorrow, all the time.

Tell me, then, Postumus, when will that time come, or

[no?

How far off is it? And where is it? Or where can it be sought?

Is it hiding among the Armenians? In Parthia, lying low?

That 'tomorrow' of yours is now as old as Nestor or Troy's

king. [5

For that tomorrow, you tell me, how much you'd have to

[pay?

You'll live tomorrow? Today, my friend, is late enough to live.

That man is really wise, Postumus, who lived yesterday.

cras te uicturum, cras dicis, Postume, semper:

dic mihi, cras istud, Postume, quando uenit?

quam longe cras istud! ubi est? aut unde petendum?

numquid apud Parthos Armeniosque latet?

iam cras istud habet Priami uel Nestoris annos.

5

cras istud quanti, dic mihi, possit emi?

cras uiues? hodie iam uiuere, Postume, serum est:

ille sapit quisquis, Postume, uixit heri.

5.58

Live twice over

Antonius Primus numbers years in Olympiad† (fifteen),

spending a life, the happy man, in calm tranquillity,

looking back at days gone by and years all safely passed,

fearing not the slow advance of the waters of Lethe.

No day, as he recalls it, was unwelcome or a trial,

5

nor any would he wish to be unable to recover.

A good man amplifies his life: that way he can enjoy

The life he has already spent, and so live it twice over.

†An Olympiad was a four-year period

iam numerat placido felix Antonius aeuo

quindecies actas Primus Olympiadas,

praeteritosque dies et tutos respicit annos

nec metuit Lethes iam propioris aquas.

nulla recordanti lux est ingrata grauisque;

5

nulla fuit, cuius non meminisse uelit.

ampliat aetatis spatium sibi uir bonus: hoc est

uiuere bis, uita posse priore frui.

10.23

Martial's choice: town and country?

If you briefly want to know your Marcus' wishes,
Fronto, star of battle and the bar,
he asks to plough his own estate, a small one,
and loves plain, humble pleasures, as they are.
Who's fool enough to worship frigid, gaudy, 5
green Spartan stonework all about the place?
And plod about each morning crying 'Greetings', †
when he could happily enjoy the space
of woods and countryside and all their spoils,
laying out full nets before the family snug?
And catch, on trembling line, the leaping fish,
and ladle honey from the earthen jug, 10
while a stout farm-help wife loads teetering tables,
and ash (all free!) cooks eggs that are home grown?
May him who loves me not, not love this life,
But pass wan years, obliging all—in Rome.

†The stonework is luxurious green porphyry—it takes a fine polish—and probably from a newly opened site. 'Spartan' (rather than 'Laconian') adds to the coldness of the scene. 'Greetings' signals the tedious duty of the client calling every day on his patron, cf. l.14—a thankless task.

*uota tui breuiter si uis cognoscere Marci,
clarum militiae, Fronto, togaeque decus,
hoc petit, esse sui nec magni ruris arator,
sordidaque in paruis otia rebus amat.
quisquam picta colit Spartani frigora saxi 5
et matutinum portat ineptus 'haue',
cui licet exuuiis nemoris rurisque beato
ante focum plenas explicuisse plagas
et piscem tremula salientem ducere saeta
flauaque de rubro promere mella cado? 10
pinguis inaequales onerat cui uilica mensas
et sua non emptus praeparat oua cinis?
Non amet hanc uitam quisquis me non amat, opto,
uiuat et urbanis albus in officiis.*

1.55

The simple life

Quintilian, † master guide of wayward youth,
and glory of civic life, please now forgive
that I, being poor, not crippled by old age,
I'm keen—none can be keen enough—to live.
Defer life, if you want to out-earn dad, 5
Or fill your house with many a family mask.
For me, a smoking chimney, flowing stream,
and unmown grass are all the joys I ask.
Give me a well-fed slave, an unlearned wife,
A good night's sleep, and daytime without strife. 10

†A respected author and professor of education

*Quintiliane, uagae moderator summe iuuentae,
gloria Romanae, Quintiliane, togae,
uiuere quod propero pauper nec inutilis annis,
da ueniam: properat uiuere nemo satis.
differat hoc patrios optat qui uincere census 5
atriaque inmodicis artat imaginibus:
me focus et nigros non indignantia fumos
tectata iuuant et fons uiuus et herba rudis.
sit mihi uerna satur, sit non doctissima coniunx,
sit nox cum somno, sit sine lite dies. 10*

2.90

Martial's preferred life style (i)

If you and I, dear Martial, could
enjoy our days, secure from strife,
spending our leisure idly, both
at liberty to relish life,
we wouldn't know the halls and homes 5
of mighty men, no bitter courts,
no gloomy Forum, no proud busts,
but riding, chatting, books, and sports,
the portico, the shade, the baths,
the fountain†—daily, these would be 10
our haunts, our work. Now neither lives
his life. We feel our good days flee,
numbered and spent. ‡ Knowing the way
to live, why should a man delay?

†The Latin says *Virgo*, name of an aqueduct famed for the purity of its water. In its restructured form, it still serves e.g. the Trevi Fountain

‡The Latin *pereunt et imputantur* '(the days) perish and are ticked off on our account/entered as a debt' is often seen on clocks

si tecum mihi, care Martialis,

securis liceat frui diebus,

si disponere tempus otiosum

et uerae pariter uacare uitae:

nec nos atria nec domos potentum

5

nec litis tetricas forumque triste

nossemus nec imagines superbas;

sed gestatio, fabulae, libelli,

campus, porticus, umbra, Virgo, thermae,

haec essent loca semper, hi labores.

10

nunc uiuit necuter sibi, bonosque

soles effugere atque abire sentit,

qui nobis pereunt et inputantur.

quisquam uiuere cum sciat, moratur?

5.20

Susan McLeant

Martial's preferred life style (ii)

Most genial Martial, these things are the elements that make life blessed:

money inherited, not earned;

a fire year-round, a mind at rest,

productive land, no lawsuits, togas

5

rarely, friends of like degree,

a gentleman's physique, sound health,

shrewd innocence, good company,

plain fare, nights carefree, yet not drunk;

a bed that's decent, not austere;

10

sleep, to make darkness brief; desire

to be just what you are, no higher;

and death no cause for hope or fear.

*uitam quae faciant beatiorem,
iucundissime Martialis, haec sunt:
res non parta labore, sed relicta;
non ingratus ager, focus perennis;
lis numquam, toga rara, mens quieta; 5
uires ingenuae, salubre corpus;
prudens simplicitas, pares amici;
conuictus facilis, sine arte mensa;
nox non ebria, sed soluta curis;
non tristis torus, et tamen pudicus; 10
somnia, qui faciat breues tenebras:
quod sis, esse uelis nihilque malis;
summum nec metuas diem nec optes.*

10.47

Susan McLeant

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Next week: a final heady pot-pourri of assorted epigrams.



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