

**Joe Broderick, *Martial and his Rome: Lived Experience of the Imperial City***

University of Lincoln, jbroderick@lincoln.ac.uk

**Introduction**

Marcus Valerius Martialis, known to us as Martial, was born in Bilbilis, Spain, in approximately AD 40, before moving to Rome in around AD 64, where he remained for most of his life.<sup>1</sup> It was in the imperial capital where Martial sought his fame and fortune, writing over 1,000 (largely) short poems, called epigrams, as he made his way in the city as a client of influential and affluent patrons.<sup>2</sup> An epigram is broadly defined as a short, witty poem culminating in a striking thought or expression, although the initial definition in Greek points to an inscription of some kind, often dedicatory in tone, but also sometimes representing the creator or donor.<sup>3</sup> Pierre Laurens offered a more representative definition, of epigram as ‘a brief, tightly structured poem, written for preference in the elegiac distich, tied to an object or a particular circumstance, the interpretation of which is shaped by a powerful controlling intellect.’<sup>4</sup> The essential, specific features of what constitutes an epigram, particularly a Latin epigram in its development from Hellenistic forms, has been widely debated, but overall, the genre’s most characteristic features are

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<sup>1</sup> Nisbet 2015: i.

<sup>2</sup> Nisbet 2015: viii.

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan 1991: 78.

<sup>4</sup> Laurens 1989: 25.

brevity, a bipartite structure, a pointed twist in the conclusion achieved by wit or humour, and the foregrounding of the authorial persona.<sup>5</sup>

For a significant period, Martial's epigrams have been mined as a source of social history for the Rome of the Flavian dynasty, since so much of Martial's poetry focuses on the everyday events and occurrences of Rome and her people, a concept largely absent from the more elevated forms of Latin literature such as epic. However, as numerous historians have begun to argue, Martial's epigrams comprise light and witty verse, focusing on humour and jokes, meaning Martial's work throws at best an intermittent light on Flavian Rome, as well as the assertions that realist writers such as Martial, in their offering of images of Roman life, are also likely to be consciously constructing a reality that sets up central aspects of their self-representation, rendering any study of historical fact troublesome.<sup>6</sup> With that said, with such an abundance of repeated references made to the city of Rome and the people within, as well as Martial's own insistence that his epigrams are tied to living reality,<sup>7</sup> it is feasible that certain elements of authenticity would be conveyed. It is within this argument that this article will be couched, that of a writer whose work can be suitably examined for a lived experience of everyday Rome.

### **Martial as the tour guide *par excellence***

Inside the very first of the twelve books of epigrams, Martial gives his reader an insight into the Rome in which he both lives and operates. In 1.70, this takes the form of his book standing in for Martial at the morning greeting

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<sup>5</sup> Lausberg 1982: 20-9; Citroni 2019: 39-40; Watson 2005: 201.

<sup>6</sup> Roman 2010: 88; Woolf 1993: 203-21; Fitzgerald 2007: 7.

<sup>7</sup> Martial *Epigrams*: Rome 10.4.

of patrons. Here, Martial directs the book through the streets of Rome, the reader witnessing the grandeur and size of the city's monuments. Martial highlights a temple and the house of the Virgins, before *inde sacro ueneranda petes Palatia cliuo, plurima qua summi fulget imago ducis* ('from there, make for the holy Palatine by way of the Sacred Way, where glistens many a portrait of our Commander-in-Chief').<sup>8</sup> Martial then reminds his book not to linger at the sun-rayed Colossus, a gigantic wonder which apparently surpasses the famous masterwork at Rhodes. Further in the same book, Martial gives out directions for finding the nearest bookshop with copies of his work, somewhere *contra Caesaris est forum taberna scriptis postibus hinc et inde totis, omnis ut cito perlegas poetas* ('Opposite Caesar's Forum there's a shop with its doorposts entirely covered in writing, front and back, so you can quickly skim through all the poets').<sup>9</sup> Both of these epigrams highlight the sheer scale and size of Flavian Rome, not to mention its apparent beauty, but we also receive a sense of a shared writing community, of a popular shopping street for bibliophiles. Martial utilises this technique expertly throughout his corpus, that of magnifying the architectural brilliance of Rome through the lens of simple directions, as though given in passing to a stranger. This is used in a similar vein in the third book, where Martial is wondering aloud as to the whereabouts of an associate, Canius Rufus, which allows Martial to artfully sketch a vision of Rome's opulence and opportunities for relaxation for his reader. Martial questions whether Rufus ambles along the colonnaded walks of the Argonauts, is washing in many of Rome's bathhouses, or even *rure*

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<sup>8</sup> Martial 1.70. 5-6. Translated by Gideon Nisbet.

<sup>9</sup> Martial 1.117. 10-2.

*Tulli fruitur atque Lucani?* ('partying at the country villa of Tullus and Lucanus?')<sup>10</sup> Finally, in an epigram from the fifth book, Martial highlights how one can enjoy life in Rome if freed from the constraints of business, informing his friend of the ideal spots for leisure: *sed gestation, fabulae, libelli, campus, porticus, umbra, Virgo, thermae, haec essent loca semper* ('Instead, going out for a drive, some plays, some little books, the Campus, the portico, a bit of shade, the Virgo, the baths. That's where we'd be, that's what we'd work at').<sup>11</sup> The key setting of this epigram is the Campus Martius, where so many of the city's public amenities, including porticoes, baths, and temples, were situated.<sup>12</sup>

While Martial can certainly conjure spectacular images of Rome to the audience's mind's eye, the epigrammatist is also adept at highlighting the smells of the city. In an epigram from the fourth book, Martial composes a humorous and satiric ditty on the wicked odour of a woman he knows, building on a *cumulatio* of similes which evoke her horrific stench.<sup>13</sup> The reader is treated to comparisons of the fumes rising from the polluted Tiber, a weary veteran's boot, exhalations of wretched defendants, and wrestlers out of the Sabines. The smell of the exhalations of the defendants has been interpreted to mean that their bad breath has been caused by a bad diet, on account of being poor, their distress stemming from being unable to afford a lawyer.<sup>14</sup> From Martial's lived experience in the imperial city, while Rome is presented as rather striking and beatific in places, the smells do not echo this.

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<sup>10</sup> Martial 3.20. 16

<sup>11</sup> Martial 5.20. 8-10; Howell 1995: 99-101.

<sup>12</sup> Howell 1995: 100.

<sup>13</sup> Soldevila 2006: 114.

<sup>14</sup> Lilja 1972: 129

Akin to so many other large cities, Rome is afflicted with numerous bad smells, on account of the diverse population and pollution caused to the waterways.

Along with the smells predicative of a sizeable city, there is also the issue of noise, something which Martial brings to life in the most vivid way. 9.68 gives us Martial bemoaning a schoolteacher for keeping him awake: *nondum cristate rupere silentia galli: murmure iam saeuo ueberibusque tonas* ('The crested cockerels have not yet shattered the silence, and you're already laying down a backbeat of furious mutters and smacks'); it is sunrise and already the lessons have begun.<sup>15</sup> In an exaggerated method of humour, Martial claims the lauding of the crowds in the Flavian Amphitheatre is less deafening, chastising the schoolmaster for keeping him awake all night.<sup>16</sup> This is enhanced by epigram 12.57, where Martial justifies to a friend his retreat from Rome, detailing all the diverse professions in Rome in a small space, a picture of the multitudes crammed in together. It is an assault on the senses for the reader, Martial describing the rattle of the moneylender's grubby table, the shouts of the disciples of Bellona, and someone hammering gold-dust, driving the speaker to distracted exhaustion.<sup>17</sup> Once again, Martial cannot sleep because of this cacophony, exaggerating this effect for the reader in the final lines of the epigram where Rome itself is at his bedside, continuously jostling him awake. Also present in the epigram is how the themes of sleep, urban space, and money are tightly linked. Martial voices to

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<sup>15</sup> Henriksen 2012: 285-7.

<sup>16</sup> Martial 9.68

<sup>17</sup> Boehrer 2013: 62.

his friend that *nec cogitandi, Sparse, nec quiescendi in urbe locus est pauperi* ('Sparsus, there's no space at Rome for a poor man to think in peace and quiet'), before detailing how his companion's broad driveway and vineyard at his large townhouse renders him incapable of recognising Martial's plight.<sup>18</sup> Here, sleep and space are treated as commodities as something which one can purchase, where two friends can have wholly separate lives based purely on money. The satire of Martial conveys an image of noisy inner cities against the quiet of the outskirts, an image which still rings true some 2000 years later. This epigram in particular serves as a wonderful contrast to the poems discussed earlier; this is the real city living, this is the real Rome for so many, a chaotic, cramped, and unrelenting urban suffocation. Martial's experience is one of someone both trapped in a confined environment and yet fully immersed in Rome's vastness.<sup>19</sup>

These streets in Rome, however, do provide Martial with an abundance of easy targets to lampoon in his epigrams, including hypocrites (5.8), false friends (4.40), perverts (3.80), undesirable guests and inept hosts (3.82), legacy hunters (9.8), and an almost interminable procession of social climbers (3.59). Rome is full, to almost a bursting point, of undesirable people and characters who inspire so much of Martial's material. The epigrammatist may perhaps exaggerate their frequency for humorous purposes, but a city such as Rome must necessarily have possessed a certain amount of such personages, so that these lampoons would maintain relevance for the reader.<sup>20</sup> That is, if the personages and circumstances were entirely the poet's own

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<sup>18</sup> Martial 12.57. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Rimell 2008: 26.

<sup>20</sup> Sullivan 1991: xxiii, 113.

creation, unknown to the audience and Roman society at large, the joke would fall flat.

### **Domitian as Rome's rebuilder**

Martial wrote many epigrams on the diversity of people and professions mixed in together on Rome's streets, but some of them move away from the ideas discussed above, highlighting the positive changes brought to Rome by the emperor Domitian (r. 81-96). Praise poems were very common to epigram, particularly to an influential figure within the context of hopeful expectation of gifts or patronage, so we must remain cautious taking Martial literally. Nevertheless, Martial's focus on Domitian as a great rebuilder of Rome and restoring it to its rightful grandeur is a frequent theme throughout the books, and with Domitian as one of Martial's key expected readers, it would have made sense for these praise poems to reflect reality, at least to an extent. In 7.61, Martial praises Domitian on his urban legislation, whereby hawkers and their obtrusive booths have been moved off Rome's streets and back into their own doorways: *nunc Roma est, nuper magna taberna fuit* ('Now it is Rome; not long ago it was one huge stall').<sup>21</sup> Before Domitian's reforms, rude street vendors had taken the city away from the people, commanding the lanes, but now the emperor has restored Rome, so to Martial's lived experience, he feels as if the majesty of the imperial city is now returned, as well as being provided with a modicum of space. As mentioned, this theme is continued throughout Martial's corpus, with a *Nova*

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<sup>21</sup> Martial 7.61. 10.

*Roma* rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the great fires of Nero's apparent fiddling; never has Rome been more beautiful or architecturally impressive than under Domitian, with a seemingly endless list of constructed or restored landmarks for all to admire and appreciate.<sup>22</sup>

### **Martial as client**

Thus far, we have charted Martial's lived experience in Flavian Imperial Rome chiefly through his physical descriptions of the city, but we also need to discuss more of Martial's experience as a client poet in Rome, and his apparent struggles in succeeding as a writer. In his third book, Martial reveals to his reader the difficulties on surviving in Rome as a poet, specifically 3.38 in his rebuttal to an associate who aims to succeed in Rome by writing poetry: *insanis: omnes gelidis quicumque lacernis sunt tibi, Nasones Virgiliosque uides* ('Lunatic. See that lot in the ice-matted overcoats? Every last one of them is a Naso or a Virgil').<sup>23</sup> Martial is reminding the reader that the ability of the poet is of no consequence, the profession itself will provide little remuneration, certainly not a liveable income. This life of client poet in Rome is tough and wearisome, Martial detailing the routine in a separate epigram, where the first two hours of the day grind down the clients paying their respects to their patrons, then later commanded to make their way to a dinner at a different patron's home after some customary leisure activities.<sup>24</sup> This *cumulatio* once again builds on the hustle and bustle of Rome, to the extent that even outwardly pleasant

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<sup>22</sup> Sullivan 1991: 153-5.

<sup>23</sup> Martial 3.38. 9-10

<sup>24</sup> Martial 4.8



activities become tedious when they are compulsory for Martial.<sup>25</sup> This epigram also seeks to convey another complaint: that this strenuous routine does not allow Martial the time and *otium* for his writings, too busy is he as an attendant.

One may try and surmise that Martial's lived experience of Rome was a largely negative one if we use the epigrams from this discussion. However, the preface to the twelfth book, where Martial has now departed the chaos of Rome for the rustic quiet and simplicity of his former home Bilbilis, reverses this notion. Addressing his friend Priscus, Martial admits to missing Rome; Bilbilis lacks a ready audience for his work, his Spanish hometown providing limited opportunities for the showcasing of his wit and satirical observation. Rome is also the home of many cultural benefits Bilbilis does not possess: the libraries, the theatres, and literary parties and symposiums Martial thought he had been satiated by.<sup>26</sup> At the conclusion of the preface, Martial illuminates some of the anxieties over the level of quality this book, written away from Rome, has in comparison to his others. The poet worries that these epigrams may appear provincial and unsophisticated: *ne Romam, si ita decreueris, non Hispaniensem librum mittamus, sed Hispanum* ('so that I don't end up sending Rome a book that's not so much made in Spain as Spanish through and through').<sup>27</sup> Rome, therefore, is Martial's literary home, the place which provided him with the inspiration for his material, and his audience. For all Martial's protestations concerning the noise, the smell, and the people, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Soldevila 2006: pp. 138-9.

<sup>26</sup> Martial 12. Preface.

<sup>27</sup> Martial 12. Preface.

something he needed to produce his great work, his lived experience in the imperial city forging deep, unbreakable bonds within his literary psyche.

## **Conclusion**

Martial's Rome seems very real, almost hyper real, leaving the reader with a sense of their surroundings bordering on discombobulation, as the epigrammatist brings to life the streets of the imperial capital like no other author achieves, giving us a spectacular vista of regular people going about their business. This Rome is highly significant, because it is something normally neglected by other forms of ancient literature, who opt instead to focus on mythological figures and lives of the cultural and societal elite. Martial, however, possesses no such discrimination, shining a light through his epigrams on everyone and everything he can conjure for his reader, depicting scenes and figures from everyday life, ranging across the entire spectrum of literary and human existence.<sup>28</sup> As we have mentioned earlier, through Martial's genre and his manner of writing, we must charge extreme caution taking Martial at his word. These epigrams are not confessional poetry or travel writings, so they will not necessarily be striving for a totally realistic treatment of Rome. However, this does not mean that we cannot glean elements of truth and experience from Martial's epigrams, with his own protestations reinforcing this within an epigram in the tenth book, where Martial criticises the reading of the higher genres of literature as futile, containing nothing pertaining to real life: *hominem pagina nostra sapit*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dominik 2016: 413.

<sup>29</sup> Martial 10.4. 11.

Martial's page *smells* human, it is real life, and something the epigrammatist feels is tremendously relevant and worthwhile for people to read, rather than waste their time consuming more epic, mythological dross. Martial's lived experience, chiefly told by way of his bringing to life of Rome's streets through his epigrams, is something tangible we can learn from, and moreover, is something we should value as a worthwhile component of Flavian Rome's social history.

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