

MARTIAL
(M. VALERIUS MARTIALIS)

MEA ROMA

SAMPLER

TRANSLATED FROM LATIN BY

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SHEARSMAN BOOKS

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I. WHY?

Anyone hoping to lure a reader into yet another new version of an old chestnut should be expected to address that simple question. Martial, particularly warrants this kind of prefatory discussion because he's left us over 1,500 extant poems. There are two complete Loeb, prose versions, but the size of the canon pretty well precludes a complete verse attempt by any one poet. So selection choice becomes in itself an aesthetic of translation.

This selection began a few years ago when I decided to try translating Martial's *Liber Spectaculorum*. I, initially, thought that 37-poem sequence set in the Roman Colosseum might make an interesting chapbook-sized volume. Aside from the Loeb versions and a scholarly treatise by the Harvard classicist Kathleen Coleman, I'm not aware of any modern English translation of the sequence as a whole. And the Loeb and Coleman translations are in prose that doesn't particularly serve, and, for me, rather actually works against the poems.

But more on that aspect and on the *Liber Spectaculorum* later. At this point, it serves the reader just to know that my reading of the *Liber Spectaculorum* dissents from the frequent dismissal of this sequence as a simplistic Imperial presentation piece lauding the blood sports of the Colosseum and shamelessly flattering the Flavian dynasty.

Contrarily, I found myself reading a sophisticated sequence whose Latin allows ironies, double-entendres, and – especially – a deeply sardonic voice beneath Martial's surface adulation of the games-presiding "Caesar".

Those who have spent any time with Martial will chime in and say, "of course, that kind of thing is what Martial's all about." I fully agree, and realizing this, I realized that the best – perhaps the only – way to present my "rescued" version of the *Book of the Spectacles* was to frame it in the context of Martial's larger canon. Thus began an extended foray into the "twelve numbered books" of epigrams and a relaxed sampling of the *apophoreta* and *xenia* gift tag couplets. Along with a good deal of peripatetic browsing of often conflicting academic viewpoints on Martial and his literary and political contemporaries.

I also browsed some of the available poetic selections. Particularly those published since the mid-twentieth century relaxation of obscenity laws allowed translators to render Martial's frequent indecencies in English.

And (no surprise to anyone who translates) came to the, obviously opinionated, conclusion that there wasn't any I'd feel enthused to refer a friend to. Each of the small volumes had its merits, but in general, the poet being translated seemed too large and multi-faceted to be that easily captured.

Martial has been highly popular since the Renaissance, but largely in Latin. His short poems are accessible to even a beginning Latin student (and particularly attractive to sophomores in search of smut). So it wasn't until the early 20th century, when Latin left the basic curriculum, that Martial needed to be translated if he was going to be widely read. A perceived priority in the post-1960s translations was to fill the gap left by previously bowdlerized selections. Martial was ideal for those newly liberated times, but I think this also caused less attention to be paid to less salacious poems perceived as already done, resulting in less balanced selections.

The same rush of post-'60s freedom that opened English to Martial also liberated translators to enter into some lively, time-travelling repartee with a poet who seemed as *simpatico* to their brave new era as he was to his own. In his rollicking 1995 selection, entitled *The Mortal City*, William Matthews "enthusiastically aped for anachronisms...", in one case renaming "a greedy Roman mogul Donald Trump, whom I imagine Martial would have delighted to know about." But while Matthews took Martial on an enjoyable tour of 20th century New York, it was at the expense of depriving the reader of Martial's Rome.

In this century, I'm aware of two larger selections: Garry Wills' 2007, highly stylized adaptations, and Susan McLean's 2014 University of Wisconsin volume. Wills' witty readings are in the venerable tradition of "Englishing" that, for Martial, began in the 1600s with Tom Brown's 'Doctor Fell'. But Wills' verse model, not unintentionally, transports the reader more to the aesthetic of 17th and 18th century English epigram, than 1st century C.E. Rome. McLean takes a more literal approach and the volume is informatively notated, but her jaunty, mostly rhyming verse also often has a, decidedly un-Latinate, quasi-limerick feel.

More significantly, both these volumes lack the Latin text. For me, this seems essential if the reader is going to enjoy the sense of illusion that a good *en-face* presentation can afford. Something akin, perhaps, to surtitles in opera. So yes, there is a need for more Martial translation and especially for a balanced selection that has some ambitions toward transporting the reader to Martial's world rather than resurrecting him in an 18th, 19th or 20th century mode.

This selection, I hope, makes some small headway in that direction. But, as I mentioned above, my original aim was to present the *Liber Spectaculorum* Arena poems in the context of Martial's broader poetics. At some point, that limits the size of the selection if the focus on the 37 poem arena sequence is to be maintained. So, the reader shouldn't presume this selection is by any means exhaustive, or – to use that questionable marketing term – an “essential Martial”. If anything, it might be characterized as a sort of “essay in poems” on Martial, an extended meditation on epigram's protean patron saint and the eternal City he won't let us forget. The reader should also note that, contrary to the usual placement of the *Spectacles* poems at the beginning of Martial's books, I've integrated them in segments between the “numbered books” to give both a sense of trips to the Arena, and of an ongoing work in process. That latter aspect and the uncertain dating of the *Liber Spectaculorum* is discussed at more length in my afterword.

I've also transported my *Xenia* and *Apophoreta* selections from their usual ‘Book XIII’ and ‘Book XIV’ placement to “first” place, preceding the selections from the “twelve numbered books” of epigrams. One reason for this is the consensus that these two books appeared in the years prior to *Epigrams, Book I*. More pertinently, these light couplets make a natural appetizer for the fare that follows.

II: SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Martial was born around 40 C.E., probably during Caligula's reign, and died around 104. If we accept (as Martial did) that Claudius was indeed poisoned by his wife, Agrippina, to hasten her Nero's succession, we might ponder that the first six “Caesars” in Martial's lifetime were violently usurped, with “normalcy” coming only after 69 C.E. “the year of the four emperors”.

The first three of these claimants came to violent ends. The last one standing was Vespasian, a grizzled, pragmatic general, with a noted sense of humor. He reigned for ten years and died of natural causes in 79 AD. For the purposes of this selection, it's noteworthy that he built the Colosseum and (as recorded by Suetonius) quipped on his deathbed: *Vae puto, deus fio*. Given Vespasian's involvement in the sacking and destruction of the Jerusalem temple, this might be perversely rendered “Oy, I think I'm becoming a god.”

Vespasian's elder son, Titus, succeeded him, but reigned for only two years; beloved by all according to Suetonius, and dying of a fever at the age of 41 in 81. Then came Domitian, his brother. He figures widely in Martial's poems, a somewhat patron, sometimes benefactor, always appropriately flattered. In the "numbered books", the flattery is sometimes obsequious, sometimes playful and subversive. Domitian, the forbearing "lion" to Martial's "hare", someone to be very cautious of while kissing up to. But still teasable as the Emperor / *Censor* who restored (good luck to that!) chastity to Rome.

The level of flattery to the arena games-presiding "Caesar" in the *Spectacles* poems is of another order. More on that later, but as an example of how dangerous Domitian could be, Suetonius notes an incident in the Colosseum when a spectator paid him a compliment he quirkily took as an insult. Domitian had the spectator "dragged from his seat and – with a placard tied around his neck... torn to pieces by dogs in the arena."

Domitian was assassinated in a palace coup in 96, when Martial was 56. Contemporary and near contemporary historians – Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio – describe a petty, cruel, greedy, and increasingly megalomaniac ruler. Suspicious and manipulative, almost Stalin-like, he cultivated informers to manufacture charges against anyone he might perceive as a threat. Then, routinely did away with the informer, who knew too much. Unlike his father, he was unwilling to wait for *apotheosis* in an afterlife, but came to insist on being addressed while living as "Our Lord and God." In his hubris he renamed the month of September after himself so that he could follow his iconic forbears, Julius Caesar and Augustus, on the calendar.

In time, no one felt safe from Domitian. Especially his closest associates. Finally, his tangled spider web of terror proved too much even for his wife, who joined in the coup. The Senate celebrated his assassination and, instead of the *apotheosis* he anticipated, declared him *damnatio memoriae* rescinding all honorifics bestowed on him. The heads on his statues were replaced with those of others. Even coins bearing his image were recalled and reminted. He was the last of the short Flavian line that began with Vespasian.

Tacitus famously described the rebirth from Domitian's reign in the opening to his *Agricola*: "...as a former age had witnessed the extreme of liberty, so we witnessed the extreme of servitude, when the informer robbed us of the interchange of speech and hearing. We should have lost memory as well as voice, had it been as easy to forget as to keep silence. Now at last our spirit is returning."

Domitian was succeeded by Nerva, the first of the “Five Good Emperors”, initiating a period of “imperial meritocracy” marked by nearly a century of stability, growth and prosperity that culminated with Marcus Aurelius. Although Martial managed to survive Domitian, he didn’t seem to prosper under the new regime and retired to his native Spain around 98 C.E. He lived another handful of years, missing Rome but claiming to be happy in the country.

III. TRANSLATING THE INCORRECTNESS OF MARTIAL

One question is: How can we ethically enjoy the poetry of a homophobic pederast with a bent for foul language, heartless mockery, blood sports, and animal fights?

We never ask why we enjoy reading and watching dramatizations about Caligula, Nero and the wickedness and intrigues of the early Roman Empire. So what makes the poetry of an exemplar poet – and in some ways an exemplary moralist – of those times any different?

The answer is: It’s not different and we do enjoy reading Martial, even when he makes us cringe. We enjoy him in large part because he speaks so directly to us; timelessly honest as it were.

And there’s a second level of enjoyment in reading a large enough and varied enough selection of his epigrams. The treat – or *illusion* if you will – of being taken for a stroll around the mean streets and posh villas of Martial’s *mea Roma*. A pleasure akin to historical fiction, or more properly, the historical resonance of a unique, primary source voice.

Martial was a younger contemporary of Saint Paul in the Rome that Anthony Burgess characterized, in his 1985 period novel, as *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. But since the Renaissance, literary imagination has been drawn as much, if not more, to Martial’s impious Rome than to the Acts of the Apostles. And I think it’s that “historical fiction” illusion which has to be pursued if we’re going to make peace with Martial’s wickedness.

Translated literature endures by mutating across time and cultures. And translated poetry only persists as transplanted poetry, drawing on the soil of a new language, reinventing itself as any immigrant must. Every successful translation is a duet between translator and translatee, an essentially re-authored work. That said (and at the risk of belaboring a point made earlier), I think the wicked banalities of Martial’s time particularly resist anachronism whether in images or verse forms.

Their culture's venial sins become, not only mortal, but unforgiveable in our culture. Other than, perhaps, the decried practices of some Afghan warlords, we have no societal model for the routine sexploitation of slave boys, which was seemingly lauded by all, from the Emperor on down. Or for the blood sports, mock-battle slaughters and elaborately staged executions of the Roman Arena, presided over by a munificent Caesar. Beyond that, Martial was also consciously pushing the already indulgent boundaries of 1st century C.E. mores and taste.

But one of the unique beauties of Martial is his ability to forge sinuous, elegant elegiacs from crude, often violent street language and offensive imagery. And from the teeming Roman intersection of sex and economics. Despite his enthusiasm for pederasty, he never lets us forget that he was playing a coercive game enabled by slavery. These poems lose much of their subtlety and too easily turn trivial when they try to emigrate into the classic English epigram model which Martial, ironically, inspired. Their esthetic and, dare I say, ethos are only accessible to us to the extent we can imagine we're reading Latin.

So it's a balancing act. Martial and equally explicit contemporaries like Petronius and Juvenal need to be translated in all their plainspoken up close nakedness. Yet their nudity has to remain exotic. When readers, or translators, try to reimagine them as current day figures, their edginess crosses into transgression, their sinuous satire brays vulgarity.

But why not prose? Can't that be a plain-speaking translator's solution? There are, after all, the Shackleton-Bailey and Walter Ker Loeb complete editions, and a recent prose translation selection by Gideon Nisbet. I'd offer that while prose can be translated poetically, poetry, and particularly the Latin epigram doesn't translate into prose. And, I'll ask Domitian to help me explain.

To wit, Domitian's quip as quoted by Suetonius: *Princeps qui delatores non castigat, irritat*. The correct and usual prose translation is "the prince who does not punish informers, encourages them." But the epigrammatic translation, I think is: "The *princeps* who doesn't whip his informers, spurs them on". This from a ruler routinely depicted on horseback, who was ultimately "thrown" by his subjects.

IV: FORMALITY AND ILLUSION

No one now alive really knows how 1st century Latin was pronounced. And while translators sometimes try to replicate the long and short

patterns of Latin verse, the result in English can seem forced and rarely sings. But even for those with minimal Latin, Martial's short poems on the page can convey a transparent sense of musicality and flow. They often innovatively use both internal and end-line rhyme as embellishment, and some even evoke the present day list poem. All this is easy to pick up in the Latin. So my strategy, as I touched on above, is to try to provide a sort of "eye-metric", superscript accompaniment to the Latin, *en-face* lyric, with the hope of enabling rather than supplanting Martial's voice. This isn't to say the translations are line by line, even when they may look that way. Or that I haven't made liberal use of invisible footnotes and what I think are English equivalent idioms and obscenities.

And of course, that voice remains an imagined voice. The translations I've offered may be somewhat informed, but they're still an imaginative exercise. Compared to modern English with 2,000 more years' worth of words, Martial's Latin vocabulary is a compressed shorthand. Numerous words allow for shades of meaning that allow wide English choices. Beyond that, Martial can be the prince of harmonic polyvalence. My poetic choices are ultimately driven by my own sense of what makes the poem a poem. And some of these will inescapably skew Martial, because the Rome I'm reading is my own imagined Rome.

Scholarship can only assist in imagining, not knowing Rome. And, if it's to be read for pleasure, historical fiction requires liberties cautious scholarship can't allow. I just hope this selection won't inspire the kind of response Robert Burns gave to a contemporary translator:

O Thou whom Poetry abhors,
Whom Prose has turned out of doors,
Heard'st thou yon groan? – proceed no further,
'Twas laurel'd Martial calling murder.

V: TWO CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

Martial came to Rome in his twenties, during Nero's notorious reign. Despite Nero's malicious madness, Rome was a thriving, vibrant capitol and a culture on the cusp of its greatest accomplishments. Rome forced Nero to suicide, Nero didn't destroy Rome. Nero, of course, did manage to destroy Martial's fellow Spaniards and putative sponsors, Seneca and

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BOOK XIII "XENIA"
Saturnalia 83/84 c.e.

XIII, 4 *Tus*

Serus ut aetheriae Germanicus imperet aulae
utque diu terris da pia tura Iovi.

XIII, 29 *Vas Damascenorum*

Pruna peregrinae carie rugosa senectae
sume: solent duri solvere ventris onus.

XIII, 34 *Bulbi*

Cum sit anus coniunx et sint tibi mortua membra,
nil aliud bulbis quam satur esse potes.

XIII, 48 *Boleti*

Argentum atque aurum facile est laenamque togamque
mittere: boletos mittere difficile est.

XIII, 92 *Lepores*

Inter aves turdus, si quid me iudice certum est
inter quadripedes mattea prima lepus.

XIII, 4 *Incense*

So that *Germanicus* may eventually rule in heavenly halls,
and on earth for many days, offer holy incense to Jove.

(*Germanicus* here refers to a soubriquet assumed by Domitian after defeating a minor German tribe. He also renamed the month of September *Germanicus* to honor himself.)

XIII, 29 *Jar of Damask Prunes*

Accept these wrinkled, dried, old exotic plums. They
have a way of loosening the load of a stopped up gut.

XIII, 34 *Onions*

When your wife is old and your member wilts,
satisfaction only comes from gobbling onions.

XIII, *Mushrooms*

It's easy to send silver, or gold, or a nice cloak, or
a toga: but mushrooms are difficult to part with.

XIII, 92

As far as birds, the thrush is surely, if I'm any judge,
the daintiest dish. But on four legs, it's rabbit.

BOOK XIV "APOPHORETA"

Saturnalia 84/85

XIV, 6 *Triplices*

Tunc triplices nostros non vilia dona putabis,
cum se venturam scribet amica tibi.

XIV, 39 *Lucerna cubicularis*

Dulcis conscia lectuli lucerna,
quidquid vis facias licet, tacebo.

XIV, 63 *Tibiae*

Ebria non madidis rumpit tibicina buccis;
saepe duas pariter; saepe monaulon habet.

XIV, 107 *Calathi.*

Nos Satyri, nos Bacchus amat, nos ebria tigris,
Perfusus domini lambere docta pedes.

XIV, 134 *Fascia pectoralis*

Fascia, crescentes dominae compesce papillas,
ut sit quod capiat nostra tegatque manus.

XIV, 165 *Cithara*

Reddidit Eurydicen vati: sed perdidit ipse,
dum sibi non credit nec patienter amat.

XIV, 6 *Three-leaved tablets*

You won't think this little notepad is such a cheap present
when your girlfriend writes you that she's on her way.

XIV, 39 *Bedroom Lamp*

I am an oil lamp, your sweet bed's accomplice.
You can do whatever you'd like, I won't talk.

XIV, 63 *Double Aulos Pipes*

The drunken flautist blows us with her dripping cheeks.
Sometimes she has two together, sometimes a single pipe.

XIV, 107 *Flaskets*

Satyrs love us, Bacchus loves us, as does the tipling
tigress trained to lick her master's sodden feet.

XIV, 134 *Breastband*

Sash, restrain my lady's swelling nipples,
so they can nestle in our hands.

XIV, 165 *Lyre*

It returned Eurydice to the great poet: but then he lost her.
Because he loved with neither trust nor patience

LIBER SPECTACULORUM
The Book of the Spectacles (dating uncertain)

Sp. 1.

Barbara pyramidum sileat miracula Memphis
Assyrius iactet nec Babylona labor,
nec Triviae templo molles laudentur Iones,
dissimulet Delon cornibus ara frequens;
aere nec vacuo pendentia Mausolea
laudibus immodicis Cares in astra ferant.
omnis Caesareo cedit labor Amphitheatro:
unum pro cunctis fama loquetur opus.

Sp. 2.

Hic ubi sidereus propius videtur astra colossus
et crescunt media pegmata celsa via,
invidiosa feri radiabant atria regis
unaque iam tota stabat in urbe domus.

hic ubi conspicui venerabilis Amphitheatri
ergitur moles, stagna Neronis erant.
hic ubi miramur, velocia munera thermas,
abstulerat miseris tecta superbus ager.

Claudia diffusas ubi porticus explicat umbras,
ultima pars aulae deficientis erat.
reditta Roma, sibi est et sunt te praeside, Caesar,
deliciae populi, quae fuerant domini.

Sp. 1.

Barbarous Memphis, bite your tongue about those
miraculous pyramids. Assyrians, stop glorifying
old Babylon's murmuring gardens. And you, effete
Ionians, enough gushing over Artemis' Temple.

The Altar of Many Horns lies overgrown on abandoned Delos,
and it's only a Mausoleum suspended in the empty air that
Halicarnassus insists on praising to the stars.

With Caesar's Amphitheater, all these efforts fade away:
One great work that brings everything else to fruition,
that's what history will say.

Sp. 2.

Here – where the Colossus peers with sparkling eyes right up
into the stars and tall scaffolds soar high over the concourse –
there once glowered the glittering mansion of a spiteful
king. In all of the City, only his house mattered.

Here – where the venerated amphitheater rises on its
pilings for all to see – Nero's pools once brooded.
Here – where we marvel at your gift of the public baths, so readily
bestowed – his arrogance razed the humble homesteads of the poor.

But that cruel palace never reached beyond the boundary
where the shady portico of the Claudian Colonnade ends.
Rome has been given back to herself and, under your charge,
Caesar, the people enjoy the pleasures of their former master.