MARTIAL ON HIS CRAFT

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Few poets have been as articulate about their fame, talents and aspirations as Martial was about his. While his statements are seldom likely to help or sway the modern literary critic, a synthetic review of them, scattered as they are throughout his poems, enables one to form a many-sided, even fascinating, picture of the man generally regarded as the epigrammatist par excellence.

It would be rewarding to be able to gauge the measure of hyperbole which presumably underlies Martial’s early poem

Hic est quem legis ille, quem requiris,
toto notus in orbe Martialis
argutis epigrammaton libellis:
cui, lector studiose, quod dedisti
uuienti decus atque sentienti
rari post cineres habent poetae. (1.1)

Perhaps the most significant feature is the choice of the versatile epithet argutus, with its overtones of ‘brightness’, ‘sharpness’, ‘wit’ to characterise the spirit of his work and to account for its fame. Martial expresses pride in his achievement in more muted tones and with greater accuracy in 1. 61, where, after listing the places of origin of other important literary figures, he ends with the litotes nec me tacebit Bilbilis, words aptly conveying the satisfaction of a small town boy who has made good. For another change of mood one may turn to the almost rhapsodic (in the modern sense) outburst of 7. 97, addressed to the book itself:

O quantum tibi nominis paratur!
o quae gloria! quam frequens amator!
te conuiuia, te forum sonabit,
aedes, compita, porticus, tabernae,
uni mitteris, omnibus legeris. (9-13)

More dispassionate is Martial’s survey in 7.88 of his own popularity, which is said to transcend frontiers and possible barriers of age and sex, though the poem ends on an ironic note with Martial pretending to agree with one of his detractors. An imaginary address by the Muse Thalia is, also, used to confirm Martial’s pre-eminence:

angusta cantare licet uidearis auena,
dum tua multorum uincaat auena tubas. (8.3. 21-2)

(The preceding lines specify the genre appropriate to his talents — lepidus
sal is his true métier — and when his conception of the actual nature of his poetry is examined, the importance of this passage will be clearer.)

Further light is cast on Martial’s standing by his touching tribute to Camonius Rufus, the dead connoisseur who knew whole epigrams of his by heart (6. 85), and by the humorous poem about the fanatic Pomponius Auctus, whom Martial actually equates with his works, as he can and does recite them for ten hours at a stretch (7. 51). Since Pomponius Auctus supports Martial’s fame rather than claiming authorship for himself, he earns special commendation for forbearance. If the situation in 7. 11 is a genuine one, then Pudens honoured Martial to the extent of insisting that copyist’s errors be corrected by him in his own hand.

In a number of epigrams Martial sees himself as a conferrer of immortality. Although it is a humorous poem about the difficulty of making some names fit into verse, 4.31 shows that Martial was sought after by people wishing to be celebrated in his writings and that they appreciated it as an honour bestowed by him. He goes further in 5.15:

\[ \text{gaudet honorato sed multus nomine lector,} \\
\text{cui uictura meo munere fama datur.} \]  

(3-4),

while in 10.2 he compares the transience of the plastic arts with the permanence of literature. On a related theme is 5.25, an appeal for the type of good deed that could be immortalised in his pages. Sometimes Martial betrays a proud exclusiveness or detachment: in 12. 61 Ligurra is contemptuously rejected as a fit subject even for attack in a poem, and in 12.78 Martial says he would rather in fact write an offensive epigram against Bithynicus than be forced by him to swear that he had not already done so.

Fame for Martial was not attended by unalloyed pleasure. Tinges of bitterness appear in a number of epigrams. Money is to be made in the forum, but loving approbation brings poets no material rewards:

\[ \text{illic aera sonant: at circum pulpita nostra} \\
\text{et steriles cathedras basia sola crepant.} \]  

(1. 76. 13-4)

Martial says more specifically that he needs a literary patron in 11.3, where his world-wide popularity is starkly contrasted with the emptiness of his purse:

\[ \text{Non urbana mea tantum Pimpleide gaudent} \\
\text{otia, nec uacuis auribus ista damus,} \\
\text{sed meus in Geticis ad Martia signa pruinis} \\
\text{a rigido teritur centurione liber,} \\
\text{dicitur et nostros cantare Britannia versus.} \\
\text{quid prodest? nescit sacculus ista meus.} \]  

(1-6)

The niggardliness of adoring readers who pretend not to understand Martial’s needs is highlighted in 5.16 and he concludes wryly that he will be driven to take up the law.
Another complaint of Martial’s was that fame bred envy, a theme treated in contrasting ways in 9. 97 and 10. 9. Every line of the former contains *rumpitur inuidia* until Martial breaks off with the final curse *rumpatur quis-quis rumpitur inuidia* (12). In the latter poem Martial uses deflation to placate the envious: he is, for all his fame, less well known than the racehorse Andraemon!

Sometimes Martial reveals modesty about his literary gifts. It may be tongue-in-cheek in 7. 42, where he equates his sending of poems to a superior poet like Castricus to sending apples to Alcinous, but in 8. 18 he states with apparent seriousness that Cerrinius refrains from publishing his own epigrams out of respect for their friendship, since he may eclipse Martial’s fame, and in 9. 26 Martial seems genuinely to defer to the future emperor Nerva’s judgement in his string of comparisons and eventual self-justification:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Audet facundo qui carmina mittere Nervae,} \\
\text{pallida donabit glaucina, Cosme, tibi,} \\
\text{Paestano violas et cana ligustra colono,} \\
\text{Hyblaeis apibus Corsica mella dabit.} \\
\text{sed tamen et paruae nonnulla est gratia Musae.} \\
\text{appetitur posito uilis oliua lupo. (1-6)}
\end{align*}
\]

One may go so far as to see a hint of insecurity on Martial’s part when one considers his need for appreciation, particularly at court. He appeals to Crispinus for special commendation to Domitian, instructing him to say that as a literary descendant of Catullus and Marsus he contributes something worthwhile to the age (7. 99); in 12. 5 he expresses the hope that Nerva, now emperor, will read the tenth and eleventh books in full rather than in mere selections, but 12. 11 implies that he would be happy enough if the shortened form alone were read. Finally, Martial’s own suggested inscription for a bust of himself makes a distinction between being popular with readers and being actually admired by them:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ille ego sum nulli nugarum laude secundus,} \\
\text{quem non miraris sed, puto, lector, amas.} \\
\text{maiores maiora sonent: mihi parua locuto} \\
\text{sufficit in uestras saepe redire manus. (9. Pref.)}
\end{align*}
\]

These lines, lapidary in both senses, belie Martial’s occasional extravagance on paper and reveal, after all, a man aware of his limitations.

Consciousness of fame undoubtedly accounts for Martial’s extreme sensitivity to plagiarism of his works, but as the majority of references to the practice are early, one may assume that it gradually lost its importance for him. In 1. 63 a mere request from Celer to hear Martial’s works provokes the suspicion that his real motive is to steal them, and Fidentinus’ plagiarism in 1. 72 is likened to a string of pathetic physical pretences.
Sometimes Martial appeals to the plagiarist to desist: in 1. 29 he is asked either to acknowledge the real authorship of the works or — and here one assumes flippancy on Martial’s part — to pay for the right to pass them off as his own; Martial’s attempt in 1. 52 to shame a plagiarist through the agency of Quintianus personifies the books as slaves in an admirably sustained metaphor which exploits the double meaning of *manu mittere* (to free a slave, to publish a book):

\[
\text{si de seruitio graui queruntur,}
\]
\[
\text{adsertor uenias satisque praestes,}
\]
\[
\text{et, cum se dominum uocabit ille,}
\]
\[
\text{dicas esse meos manuque missos.} \quad (4-7)
\]

An easy-going attitude is affected by Martial in his ironic advice that only unpublished and unknown works should be stolen and in his offer of such works in return for a bribe (1. 66); in a similar vein Paulus is represented as merely following standard commercial practice:

\[
\text{Carmina Paulus emit, recitat sua carmina Paulus.}
\]
\[
\text{nam quod emas possis iure uocare tuum.} \quad (2. 20)
\]

However, Martial occasionally launches more direct attacks:

\[
\text{Quem recitas meus est, o Fidentine, libellus:}
\]
\[
\text{sed male cum recitas, incipit esse tuus.} \quad (1. 38)
\]

In 1. 53 Fidentinus’ medley of Martial’s poems and his own gives rise to a series of glaring contrasts between the refined and the coarse in texture and sound before the final accusation from the page itself:

\[
\text{stat contra dicitque tibi tua pagina “Fur es.”}
\]

Martial complains in 12. 63 that he cannot repay a plagiarist in kind, since his poems are so bad. Using the apt analogy of a naked robber, he concludes

\[
\text{nil securius est malo poeta.}
\]

Lastly, it is worth observing that Martial could be seriously embarrassed when the harmless tone of his own verse was changed to a venomous one by the pens of others (7. 12). The solemnity with which he disowns such barbs betokens very strong feelings indeed:

\[
\text{ludimus innocui: scis hoc bene: iuro potentis}
\]
\[
\text{per genium Famae Castaliumque gregem}
\]
\[
\text{perque tuas aures, magni mihi numinis instar,}
\]
\[
\text{lector inhumana liber ab inuidia.} \quad (9-12)
\]

Another facet of Martial’s pride in his achievement is his wish to appeal to discriminating readers and critics. He is very conscious that his work will have to attain a certain standard if it is to pass muster. The reflection *non cuicumque datum est habere nasum* (1. 41. 18), applied to Caecilius, who cannot distinguish between true *urbanitas* and *stolida procacitas*, may be apparent in Martial’s appeal for criticism of his own works by accomplished
poets and astute littérateurs alone, e.g. 1. 91, or 3. 2. 12, where Martial obviously desires the approval of the famous grammarian and stern critic Marcus Valerius Probus. In 4. 86 he pays a generous tribute to the scholarship, precision and fairness of Domitius Apollinaris, whose commendation would save his book from envious sneers and the fate of serving as wrapping paper for fish. But should Apollinaris disapprove, then Martial himself would, he claims, wish it to suffer that fate or be used as scrap paper for pupils. In a similar vein he states his ideal quite specifically:

me raris iuuat auribus placere (2. 86. 12 and cf. 6. 64. 8-15)

The above is Martial’s conclusion of a poem in which he says that he disdains to engage in fashionable metrical tours de force:

quod nec carmine glorior supino
nec retro lego Sotaden cinaedum,
nusquam Graeca quod recantat echo
nec dictat mihi luculentus Attis
mollae debilitate galliambon,
non sum, Classice, tam malus poeta. (1-6)

Ineptiae like those listed may appeal to circuli, the public at large (10-11). Although Martial pretends in a more playful mood that it may be an ordeal for Severus to read his book with a critical eye (5. 80), there is an obvious underlying seriousness in the poem. We may believe Martial when he states that he wants both a genuine improvement of his work and freedom from anxiety on the grounds of its worth. Comparable deference is paid to the judgement of Celer in 7. 52. 5-6.

Martial was, in addition, constantly evaluating his own work. That he disparaged his juvenilia, which appear to have been on sale somewhat against his will, indicates awareness of his development as an artist (1. 113). Little should be deduced from occasional playful self-deprecation:

Cui legisse satis non est epigrammata centum,
nil illi satis est, Caediciane, mali. (1. 118 and cf. 1. 5; 1. 117; 2. 8; 4. 10; 11. 1. 14; 11. 106).

But 13.2 contains what is perhaps a more significant evaluation of himself by Martial. After dismissing his poems as being of no account he corrects himself by saying that, if approached in the right spirit, they are not altogether of no account. There is a similar, also undeveloped (to one’s regret) hint of depth in

nescio quid plus est, quod donat saecula chartis:
uicturus genium debet habere liber. (6. 61. 9-10)

Martial is writing about the insufficiency of ingenium to ensure immortality, which recalls probetur in me nouissimum ingenium, in his prose preface to the first book. Yet this apparent rejection of ‘cleverness’ is hard to reconcile with the final twists of hundreds of Martial’s epigrams.
Martial's advice to Matho that his work should be a mixture of the good, the bad and the indifferent (10. 46) is in keeping with his familiar verdict on his own poems:

*Sunt bona, sunt quaedam mediocria, sunt mala plura quae legis hic. aliter non fit, Auite, liber.* (1. 16 and cf. 7. 81; 7. 90)

Lastly, it is worth considering how Martial characterises his epigrams and what he thinks is suitable subject matter for them. The commonest labels he gives them are those of *nugae* (e.g. 1. 113. 6), *ioci* (e.g. 4. 10. 8) and *lusus* (e.g. 1. 4. 7). Consonant with this notion of triviality is Martial’s resolve to use padding and repetition to increase the size and the popularity of his works:

*Edita ne breuibus pereat mihi cura libellis, dicatur potius Τὸν ὄ ἀπαμειβόμενος.* (1. 45)

The Homeric allusion may appear to be a mere witticism, but Martial is as good as his word when it comes to repeating himself. Martial’s preference for spontaneity (see esp. *uersu ludere non laborioso* and *morosa sine cogitatione* at 11. 6. 3 and 8) accords with the composition of *nugae*, but despite his commitment to them he insists on his right to intersperse long hexameter poems (6. 65, a defence of 6. 64), and his laments for Erotion (e.g. 5. 34) also clearly stand apart. In 4. 49 Martial introduces the paradox that it is, after all, less frivolous to write epigrams than tragedies or epics which are remote from ordinary living (and cf. 9. 50; 10. 4), and his positive ideal of reproducing life starkly and realistically, as well as being apparent in his writings, is stated in Thalia’s speech:

*agnoscat mores uita legatque suos.* (8. 3. 20)

Martial rejects as inadequate epigrams which are merely sweet (*dulcia .../et cerussata candidiora cute* at 7. 25. 1-2). To win readers one must add *mica salis* and *amari fellis gutta* (ib. 3-4). The culinary metaphor is amplified by references to the need for biting vinegar in food and to the superiority of Chian figs with tang to insipid figs or honey apples, which may be suitable fare for infants. Martial compares an epigram without *sal* or *fel* also to a face without dimples. Thalia’s speech adds the point that *sal* should be *lepidus* (8. 3. 19), which would rule out an excess of *fel*; and Martial states his ideal again in *multo sale nec tamen protervo* (10. 9. 2). He realises that if his verses were malicious (*uiridi tinctos aerugine* at 10. 33. 5), attacking not generalised vices but real people by name, he would not enjoy his present popularity.

Spiciness in Martial plainly extends to downright obscenity. In his preface to the first book he cites as an excuse the precedents of Catullus, Marsus, Pedo and Gaetulicus, warning off those who disapprove. His appeal is to habitués of the Floralia! Martial’s creed

*lex haec carminibus data est iocosis,*
ne possint, nisi pruriant, iuuare (1. 35. 10-11)
echoes Catullus (16. 7-9) and it is introduced by a string of anomalies with appropriate sexual overtones: the impotent husband, the clad harlot etc. are as likely to satisfy as the clean epigrammatist. Such a one is Cosconius, the subject of ironic praise in 3. 69. His exceedingly proper epigrams could serve as school texts, and the implication is that they could give no one any pleasure. For all his enthusiasm, however, Martial is at pains to differentiate between his own morality and that of his poems.:
lasciua est nobis pagina, uita proba. (1. 4. 8)
Sometimes Martial signposts the obscene sections. In 3. 68 he ironically tells a matron to stop reading, though he divines she will not, and a little later (3. 86) when he gloats over her still being with him, he self-consciously alludes to his earlier warning and to mimes which equal his own indecency. The converse signpost appears at 5. 2, where reverence for the emperor has apparently caused Martial to moderate the filth, and readers who need it are directed to the four preceding books. However, Martial advertises that he will again cater for lower tastes in 11.2:
clamant ecce mei "Io Saturnalia" versus (5)
and in 11.15, after what is almost a paean to mentula, he concludes with another denial that the book reflects his personal morals. The following poem shows him again revelling in the excitement he will cause and imagining even chaste women reading the poems in secret:
erubuit posuitque meum Lucretia librum,
sed coram Bruto; Brute, recede: leget. (11. 16. 9-10)
Martial's obscene poems are his least witty, but if one accepts his adherence to a tradition and if one makes allowance for well attested Roman attitudes, his standing need not be much impaired. Almost two thousand years later his claims to fame may at times appear exaggerated, yet the fuss made to-day over some popular successes which are doomed to oblivion may cast light on his opinion of himself. He has at any rate survived, he is capable of joking at his own expense, he has a genuine respect for discerning critics and there is a measure of justice in his excuse that some tiresome faults are dictated by popular taste. Contemporary sources tend to confirm Martial's statement that he is mirroring life. It may be a relief to turn to him from the embittered Juvenal or the grim Tacitus. For all their worth, they are one-eyed compared with Martial, who judged aright in his proportions of sal and fel. The striking difference between the epigram in Catullus' hands and in Martial's, with the greater emphasis in Martial on the final twist, is clear to us, and the modern epigram is unmistakably descended from Martial, yet he does not pose as an innovator. If the immediate successors of Catullus were only extant, we might know why. As it is, we can but suspect that he failed to boast about his truest claim to fame.