Mitch Pentzer, Ph.D. – “The *Usucapio* of High Literature in Martial’s Epigrams”

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Defining Epigram vs. Epic, Tragedy

4.49

*Nescit, crede mihi, quid sint epigrammata, Flacce,*

*qui tantum lusus illa iocosque vocat.*

*ille magis ludit qui scribit prandia saevi*

*Tereos aut cenam, crude Thyesta, tuam,*

*aut puero liquidas aptantem Daedalon alas,*  5

*pascentem Siculas aut Polyphemon ovis.*

*a nostris procul est omnis vesica libellis,*

*Musa nec insano syrmate nostra tumet.*

*‘illa tamen laudant omnes, mirantur, adorant.’*

*confiteor: laudant illa, sed ista legunt.*  10

8.3.13ff

*an iuvat ad tragicos soccum transferre cothurnos*

*aspera vel paribus bella tonare modis,*

*praelegat ut tumidus rauca te voce magister* 15

*oderit et grandis virgo bonusque puer?*

*scribant ista graves nimium nimiumque severi,*

*quos media miseros nocte lucerna videt.*

*at tu Romano lepidos sale tinge libellos:*

*agnoscat mores vita legatque suos.*  20

*angusta cantare licet videaris avena,*

*dum tua multorum vincat avena tubas.’*

10.4.1-10

*Qui legis Oedipoden caligantemque Thyesten,  
     Colchidas et Scyllas, quid nisi monstra legis?  
quid tibi raptus Hylas, quid Parthenopaeus et Attis,  
     quid tibi dormitor proderit Endymion?  
exutusve puer pinnis labentibus? aut qui* 5

*odit amatrices Hermaphroditus aquas?  
quid te vana iuvant miserae ludibria chartae?  
     hoc lege, quod possit dicere vita ‘meum est.’  
non hic Centauros, non Gorgonas Harpyiasque  
     invenies: hominem pagina nostra sapit.* 10

Inflating Epigram

7.2.1-4

*Invia Sarmaticis domini lorica sagittis*

*et Martis Getico tergore fida magis,*

*quam vel ad Aetolae securam cuspidis ictus*

*texuit innumeri lubricus unguis apri . . .*

4.49

Trust me, Flaccus: anybody who calls them mere frivolities and jokes doesn’t know what epigrams are. More frivolous is that poet who writes about cruel Tereus’ lunches or your dinner, ill Thyestes, or Daedalus putting melting wings onto his boy, or Polyphemus pasturing his Sicilian sheep. All bombast is far away from my little books, and neither does my Muse puff up in tragedy’s crazy robe. “Everyone praises those things, though, and admires them and worships them.” I’ll admit it: they do praise those, but they read these.

8.3.13ff

Or would you rather exchange your slipper for tragic buskins, or thunder out tough wars in level lines of verse, so that pompous teachers can dictate it in hoarse voices and grown girls and noble boys can hate it? Let the too-grave and the too-severe write such things, those whom the midnight oil watches in their misery. But you dip your witty little books in Roman salt: let life recognize and read of her own ways. So what if you seem to sing with a narrow pipe, so long as your pipe conquers the masses’ trumpets.

10.4.1-10

You who read of Oedipus and gloomy Thyestes, Medeas and Scyllas, what are you reading about but monsters? What use to you is stolen Hylas, or Parthenopaeus and Attis, or dozy Endymion, or the boy stripped of his slipping wings, or Hermaphroditus who hates the amorous waters? How do empty fictions on miserable pages please you? Read this, of which life may claim “That’s mine.” Here you will not find Centaurs, no Gorgons or Harpies; my pages taste of human life.

7.2.1-4

Cuirass of our lord, impervious to Sarmatian arrows, more trustworthy than the Getic shield of Mars, which the slippery hooves of countless boars created to be safe even against the blows of Aetolian spear...

Inflation or Grotesque Amplification?

10.67

*Pyrrhae filia, Nestoris noverca,  
quam vidit Niobe puella canam,  
Laertes aviam senex vocavit,  
nutricem Priamus, socrum Thyestes,  
iam cornicibus omnibus superstes,* 5 *hoc tandem sita prurit in sepulchro  
calvo Plutia cum Melanthione.*

2.47

*Subdola famosae moneo fuge retia moechae,*

*levior o conchis, Galle, Cytheriacis.*

*confidis natibus? non est pedico maritus:*

*quae faciat duo sunt: irrumat aut futuit.*

11.99

*De cathedra quotiens surgis – iam saepe notavi –*

*pedicant miserae, Lesbia, te tunicae.*

*quas cum conata es dextra, conata sinistra*

*vellere, cum lacrimis eximis et gemitu:*

*sic constringuntur gemina Symplegade culi,* 5

*ut nimias intrant Cyaneasque natis.*

*emendare cupis vitium deforme? docebo:*

*Lesbia, nec surgas censeo nec sedeas.*

3.85

*Quis tibi persuasit naris abscidere moecho?*

*non hac peccatum est parte, marite, tibi.*

*stulte, quid egisti? nihil hic tibi perdidit uxor,*

*cum sit salua tui mentula Deiphobi.*

Epigram Dominates

6.71

*Edere lascivos ad Baetica crusmata gestus*

*et Gaditanis ludere docta modis,*

*tendere quae tremulum Pelian Hecubaeque maritum*

*posset ad Hectoreos sollicitare rogos,*

*urit et excruciat dominum Telethusa priorem:*

*vendidit ancillam, nunc redimit dominam.*

11.60.1-6

*Sit Phlogis an Chione Veneri magis apta requiris?*

*pulchrior est Chione; sed Phlogis ulcus habet;*

*ulcus habet Priami quod tendere possit alutam*

*quodque senem Pelian non sinat esse senem;*

*ulcus habet quod habere suam vult quisque puellam,*

*quod sanare Criton, non quod Hygia potest.*

10.67

The daughter of Pyrrha, stepmother of Nestor,

who was grey when Niobe saw her as a girl,

whom old Laertes called grandmother,

the nurse of Priam, mother-in-law to Thyestes,

already having outlived all the crows,

Plutia was at last laid in this tomb and

itches with lust along with bald Melanthio.

2.47

Flee, I warn you, the treacherous nets of the infamous adulteress, Gallus, smoother than Cytherian shells. Oh, you trust your buttocks? Her husband is not a sodomizer. He does two things: he forces you to suck or he fucks.

11.99

Every time you get out of your chair – I have noticed it often – your wretched underwear buggers you, Lesbia. You try to pluck at it with your right hand, with your left hand, until you rescue it with tears and groans: so trapped is it in the twin Symplegades of your ass as it enters your gargantuan, Cyanean buttocks. Do you want to correct this shameful fault? I will tell you how: Lesbia, I advise you neither to get up nor sit down.

3.85

Who persuaded you to cut off the adulterer’s nose? That’s not the part that offended you, husband. What have you done, you fool? Your wife, I tell you, loses nothing here, seeing as your Deiphobus’ cock is unharmed.

6.71

Trained to perform lusty moves to Baetic tunes and to play in Spanish styles, able to arouse trembling Pelias and to stir Hecuba’s husband at Hector’s funeral, Telethusa burns and tortures her former master; he sold a handmaiden, now he buys back a mistress.

11.60.1-6

You ask whether Phlogis or Chione is more fit for love-making? The more beautiful one is Chione, but Phlogis has the fever. She has a fever that could stretch Priam’s strap and not allow old Pelias to be old. She has a fever that every man wants his girl to have, one that Criton can cure but Hygia cannot.

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