

Ludibria Horrenda: Martial's Construction of Monstrosity in Flavian Rome

Ethnicity and sexuality define the monsters that occupy Martial's epigrams. These are not the monsters of mythology (e.g. Scylla, Polyphemus, or Medusa); instead the poet depicts non-Romans as monsters. To describe these *monstra*, the poet uses words such as *deliciae* and *ludibria*, characteristic of traditional, amatory poetry, which evokes hierarchies of power and control. I build on the arguments of Hinds, Gold, and Williams especially. While Gold argues that Martial's poems are a reflection of everyday life at Rome and Hinds explores how the poet brings myth into reality, Williams discusses the Roman masculine domination of foreigners and women. Using these arguments as a foundation for exploration of the development of monstrosity, I argue that this nomenclature, the labeling of foreigners or 'others' as delightful monsters, indicates two important things: 1) the term *monstrum* has experienced a shift in meaning in the Flavian period, and 2) Martial uses the term *monstrum* as a marker of alterity and subjugation that perpetrates and solidifies the imperial Roman hierarchical structure. The poet employs the term *monstrum*, which in the Republic described a frightening divine sign, to indicate a lovely pet. I point out that, by redefining *monstrum*, he simultaneously marks the individual as a pleasant diversion, while stressing its 'otherness' by referencing its ethnicity and sexual subservience.

I look at two poems in particular that highlight an erotic display of authority over foreign peoples. In epigram 7.87, which is addressed to Lausus, Martial uses the term '*monstra*' to describe the 'pets' of people he knows: a fox, a puppy, a monkey, an ichneumon, a magpie, a nightingale, a snake, and an Ethiopian man. There is no difference between human and animal; the foreign people and animals are lumped into one category of 'other.' These creatures are discussed in amatory terms that emphasize their subservient status: *gaudet, fruitur, flagrat amore, amat, delectat, nectat*. I argue that the *monstrum*'s meaning has shifted to indicate a beloved pet; it has become a term of endearment. This change in meaning is a significant one that speaks to the larger issue of the domination and acquisition of foreign peoples as objects for the display of wealth and power. Martial affects this change by employing the language of amatory poetry to show the disparity of power between Roman and foreigner.

I then turn to epigram 6.39, in which Martial is mocking the paternity of Cinna. Although the man claims to be the father of seven children by a single mother, Martial insists that he is not the only father, for they exhibit different ethnic characteristics. I argue that, because of this lack of paternity and 'Romanness,' Martial implies that they are inhuman and therefore monstrous, and he uses language of sexual domination to illustrate and define their monstrosity. Because of their inhuman status, 'real' Romans can use them for whatever purpose they please including sodomy (*percide ... filium*, 14). This act reinforces that Cinna's son is not the same status as he – he is inferior and not a legitimate Roman or man, more slave or woman. The poet evokes this sexual hierarchy with one of the other sons as well – the boy with the pale

face and the “pathic brow” (*cinaeda fronte*, 11). The child is physically inscribed with sexual and social subservience. Thus, I suggest that, through the characterization of these children as ‘other’ coupled with the description of their sexual penetration, the poet illustrates that ethnic difference warrants sub-human or monstrous status.

The *monstra* that once were full of religious and political meaning have been emptied of it and instead are displayed for entertainment. In these two epigrams, Martial provides a snapshot of Romans’ relationship with foreign peoples. These *ludibria horrenda* are not horrendous because they are intrinsically repulsive monsters, but because they reveal something horrendous about those who label them as such: by reducing them to merely their ethnicity and sexuality, Martial along with his fellow Romans are all too eager to dehumanize the ‘others’ of the world.

Hinds, S. (2007) ‘Martial’s Ovid/Ovid’s Martial,’ in *JRS* 97: 113-154.

Gold, B.K. (2003) ‘*Accipe Divitias et Vatum Maximus Esto*: Money, Poetry, Mendicancy and Patronage in Martial,’ in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*. Leiden. 591-612.

Williams, C. (1999) *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*. Oxford.