

Plagiarism, Play, and Persona in Martial

Several of Martial's scopic poems respond to those who plagiarize his poetry, i.e., attempt to win fraudulent credit by passing off his work as their own. Recent critics (e.g., Spahlinger 2004, Fitzgerald 2007, and Rimell 2008) have examined some of the plagiarism poems, with focuses upon their historical status and rhetorical codes. This paper builds upon that work by offering new readings of two of the relevant epigrams, one of which likely responds to the other. My concern is to uncover as yet unrecognized elements of wit and humor in the poems and to look at the relationship between the biographical Martial and his first-person speaker, the plagiarism victim. Exploring the latter topic will lead me to address a broader topic in Martial studies and Latin literary criticism, namely persona theory. At issue will be the historicity of the plagiarism that Martial describes and the extent to which we can identify his literary "I" with the poet himself.

The first poem that I will examine is *Ep.* 1.53. This piece is part of the "Fidentinus cycle," or the series of six epigrams (*Ep.* 1.29, 38, 52, 53, 66, and 72) that deal with the plagiarist Fidentinus. Martial asserts that Fidentinus has mixed his own poem into a *libellus* that otherwise contains Martial's epigrams, and has attempted to pass the entire volume off as his own. Dominating the poem is a catalogue, through which Martial contrasts himself and his inferior thief (4-10). The poem then ends with Martial's claim that his poetry is recognizably his even without his name attached, while Fidentinus' contribution operates as a reverse sphragis or seal of inauthenticity, because it differs so much from the better texts around it (11-12). All of this makes for a coherent scopic epigram. But I would argue that there is more to the text. As Rimell (2008, 44-8) has observed, *Ep.* 1.53 is a notably clunky poem, and is unusual in containing hexameters. I believe that both features have a deeper significance and underscore the idea that style and quality mark Martial's literary property as his and protect him from Fidentinus' plagiarism. Martial sets the conditions for readers to see that he has produced poetry unlike his usual work (and, by

implication, akin to Fidentinus' inferior effort), so that he proves that his epigrams are, indeed, identifiable by their appearance. Form ironically reinforces content: readers recognize how unlike Martial's other poetry *Ep.* 1.53 is only if his customary style is itself recognizable.

Similar to *Ep.* 1.53 in several ways is *Ep.* 10.100, on an unnamed plagiarist who creates epigrams by interspersing his lines and Martial's. Like the former poem, *Ep.* 10.100 describes someone combining his poetry with Martial's (1) contains a catalogue that sets up a hierarchy between the superior source and the inferior thief (2-6); and possesses legalistic language (2; cf. 1.53.3). These parallels indicate that Martial was adapting the earlier poem. I suggest that a concern in *Ep.* 10.100 was to give the unidentified plagiarist some biographical specificity as a writer (and "writer") of scazons or limping iambs, the meter that *Ep.* 10.100 itself contains. Evidence for this comes first in Martial's use of the lion and the eagle to represent himself in the poem's catalogue (3-4). Elsewhere in Book Ten (*Ep.* 10.65.12-13), Martial employs that imagery to portray himself as a vigorous verbal aggressor. When Martial then concludes the catalogue with the image of a person making his way on uneven legs, one fast like the Spartan runner Ladas' and one wooden (5-6), his message, and with it another layer of satiric humor, comes into clearer focus. The plagiarist's work "limps" awkwardly, because it combines Martial's strong scopic scazons with his own inferior ones.

But are we really to equate this represented Martial with Martial, the historical poet? And is the plagiarism victim in *Ep.* 1.53 to be read biographically? I will end the paper by proposing that we should see in the epigrams what Nauta (2002, 49) labels a "partial reality." The plagiarism may itself be fictional, as Martial's scopic situations customarily are. But following Nauta and Damon (1997, 152), I maintain that we should not absolutely separate fiction and history in these or his other plagiarism poems, and that Martial used the unreal situation in part to promote his actual authorial self. While the speaker is a persona, the historical poet remains visible behind the mask.

Works Cited:

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