

A Female Friend: Violentilla in the Epigrams of Martial

Martial's epigrams contain numerous references to male friends. Not as common are historically verifiable female friends of the poet. This paper will discuss three epigrams dealing with Violentilla, the wife of Martial's friend and patron, the aristocratic L. Arruntius Stella. There are three poems concerning Violentilla (7.14, 15, 50). In them Martial shows something of the joking familiarity that he uses with male friends and, I would argue, goes so far as to eroticize her in the poems (at least in a kidding sort of way). These epigrams give us insight on what the relationship between a Roman man and the wife of a close friend might have been like. In these poems, all of which are written in elegiac couplet, Martial treats Violentilla in much the same way that Roman elegists treated their mistresses. He gives her a nickname, as Roman elegists did for the objects of their affection, calling her *Ianthis*, Greek for *violet*, a reference to her real name. Violentilla's husband had given her a nickname as well when he wrote love elegy about her before they were married, calling her *Asteris*. Martial, however, creates his own name for her, which gives the impression of more familiarity than we might expect to see in poetry dealing with the wife of a friend and patron. The poems all deal with erotic themes. In 7.14 Martial describes a supposed tragedy that happened to his girl (her well-endowed slave boy died without having reached his full potential), and he writes about it in terms of the deaths of Lesbia's sparrow and a dove that Ianthis once owned. Galán Vioque (2002) has noted that no matter what Catullus' intentions were when he wrote about the sparrow, by Martial's day it was at least sometimes being treated as a phallic symbol (e.g. Martial, 11.6.16). Given that Martial mentions Lesbia's sparrow and Ianthis' dove immediately before setting up the punch line ("she lost her 12-year slave boy before his penis reached the 18-inch mark"), that seems to be the case here. It is noteworthy that Martial seems comfortable giving the wife of a friend and patron an elegiac nickname and then inserting her into a poem that is a joke about penis size. Two other epigrams, 7.15 and 50, also involve "Ianthis" and deal with erotic themes. Both poems describe gardens at a house owned by Violentilla and are replete with references to objects of sexual desire from Greek mythology and legend (e.g. Hylas, Argynnus, Ganymede, and Nymphs) as well as a sexual aggressor (Hercules). Martial treats the gardens of Ianthis as a sort of urban *locus amoenus*, in which some sort of sexual violence is about to take place, as often happens in the *loci amoeni* of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (e.g. 1.568-582). In 7.50 Martial even comes across as a bit flirtatious as he pays a compliment that could be applied to either a fountain in the garden or to Violentilla (1-2). It has often been noted (e.g. Sullivan, 1991; Galán Vioque, 2002) that despite differences in social standing, Martial shows an easy familiarity with Stella. The poems discussed in this paper show that the poet was comfortable not only with Stella but with his wife as well and that in Flavian Rome a less than formal relationship might exist between a man and the wife of a good friend.