Martial is uncomfortable with sex? The Roman Woman and the Foreign Prostitute

The sexual deviance of the Roman woman is a favorite topic for Martial, who is all too eager to report on the unfaithfulness of a spouse (1.62, 6.7), to jest at an illicit relationship transcending—or descending—social class (2.55, 2.59), and to expose homoerotic—particularly male—proclivities (1.58, 9.21). Martial goes so far as to ascribe the acts of the *meretrix* to the *matrona*, perverting, in writing, the Roman woman (Watson, 2005). This is a sexual fantasy, indulging the mind and inverting social dynamics in a form of literary role-play. When sex becomes transactionary, however, when the Roman woman is a prostitute, Martial struggles for words, literally. He must go to lengths to reconcile the actuality of the Roman woman, the prostitute. I argue that reading Martial provides an ethnographic treatment of Roman prostitutes subverting their nationality, redefining their ancestry.

Prostitution in Rome is an established profession. Prostitutes were paid and were taxed. Martial even recognizes the attendance of *Gadibus inprobis puellae* at dinner parties (5.78), notably because he excludes them. The implication is that such *puellae* are a common attraction at such dinners. Nevertheless, prostitutes were considered to be *infames*, associated with transgressive sexuality (Edwards, 1997). Prostitutes in Rome were common, but a looming threat for Romans (Williams, 2010). Their conflation with the Roman woman is not tolerable to Martial, who already struggles with the financially independent, wealthy woman, "*inferior matrona suo sit, Prisce, marito: / non aliter fiunt femina virque pares*" (8.12). A direct comparison between the frugal matron and greedy prostitute (Strong, 2016) better contextualizes the hesitation with which Martial approaches his self-created issue. The chaste woman is fundamental to Martial's conception of the Roman woman, "*lusistis, satis est: lascivi nubite*

cunni: / permissa est vobis non nisi casta Venus" (6.45), thus issues arise when such a woman is herself a money-making prostitute.

The actual frequency with which Martial writes about Roman prostitutes is low: they are not a fond topic, but what exists is telling. Of primary focus in this paper are epigrams 7.30 and 10.68. Epigram 7.30 addresses Caelia, commonly in Martial a nymphomaniac (Soldevila, Castillo, Valverde, 2019), who gives herself sexually to all ethnicities except Romans. Caelia is a *Romana puella*, and a structural reading of the epigrams reveals that she is the subject giving (*das*) throughout the poem, until the punchline, "*qua ratione facis, cum sis Romana puella, / quod Romana tibi mentula nulla placet.*" Art Spisak emphasizes Martial's use of power fantasies: control is important (Spisak, 1994). Caelia gives herself to the *mentula* of all other ethnicities, but no Roman penetrates Caelia; the Roman girl and the prostitute are not conflated. Epigram 7.30 mocks a Patrician girl, Laelia, who thinks herself Greek, Lais. Martial does not allow this, "*non tamen ominino, Laelia, Lais eris.*" To be Greek is to speak Greek during sex and to engage in prostitution like Corinthian girls. Such is the profession of Lais, not Laelia, a stock Roman name that alliterates with *legis* and *legitimam* (Soldevila, Castillo, Valverde, 2019). The prostitute Lais appears again in 11.104, as the counterpart to the matronly Lucretia. Corinth, through metonymy with Carmenion, is further sexually characterized in 10.65, "*tu flexa nitidus coma vagaris … levis dropace tu cotidiano*." Martial's preference to separate the prostitute from the Roman woman can be likewise observed in 1.34—which compares Lesbia to the Greek prostitute Chione, a recurring character—and in 2.55 and 3.11, where he introduces the prostitute Thais, also a recurring character. A more nuanced reading of the aforementioned epigrams is necessary to understand the social commentary within the pith.

It is through the dual-framework of the Roman woman and the "foreign" prostitute, maintained in their separation from one another, that Martial can reconcile the prostitution of the Roman women about whom he writes. Martial makes a dedicated effort to deny the Roman ancestry of the prostitutes, regardless of their lineage. For Martial, prostitution was simply not acceptably Roman, but a profession to be idealized in its cultural foreignness.

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