

## The Soul of Wit: Martial's Art of Brevity in the Digital Age

In this project, I discuss the similarities of epigrammatic tropes within modern social media. There are many parallels in the content between poetic texts of the first century and social media that requires video manipulation, and while these are likely unintended, I argue that the emergence of new technologies allows the poet-creator to engage with and respond to their cultural contexts in similar ways. I intend to show that this “new” way of socializing with one another has roots in the western tradition of entertainment, social critique, and distance interaction (via text or video clip). I use as point of comparison: the epigrams of Martial, the first century Roman poet, and the popular media known as “Vine,” a six-second video extension of Twitter. This particular media lends itself to the programmatic style of epigram for a variety of reasons, but the most immediately apparent is the intentional brevity of both platforms. Additionally, the readers and viewers often experience the media content in the form of (re)combination of smaller elements.

Recently, scholars have a renewed interest in the significance of the poet in his time and the way he manipulates the traditions of his predecessors. While scholars have considered how the poet engages with the tradition, some also argue that the format of the epigram retains its relevancy and resonates with a modern audience. Fitzgerald claims that “Martial is a poet for our time” and “the epigram form [is] congenial to our distracted culture” (2007: 1). I take his argument a step further and say that the brevity exhibited in epigrams is becoming increasingly more appealing particularly to participants in popular culture by way of the very short video sketch that is the staple of the Vine platform. According to the Twitter blog, the intentionally short allowable length of the videos lends itself to the creativity of the user (Sippey 2013). It is worth noting that other platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, have conformed to this

extreme brevity by incorporating video extensions. Similarly, Martial uses brevity while engaging with the reader in the discourse of his epigrams. He addresses many issues and facets of Roman life that contemporary readers likely enjoyed, such as excessive alcohol consumption (1.87) and denied dinner invitations (1.23), evidenced largely in the length of his texts as collections and the number of epigrams contained within each, for a total of fifteen books. I will discuss, in particular, points of similarity between Martial's poetry and users of Vine, such as: invective (1.52), fame and reputation (7.12), self-referentiality (1.16, 1.23, 1.118, 2.8), and the idea of "books" or collections (1.1).

It is likely that the creators of Vine had neither the history of epigram nor Martial's additions to it in mind when they put restrictions on their platform. Nevertheless, there are many parallels between the ancient literary epigram and modern visually-oriented social media lauded for its brevity that ought to be considered. I intend to discuss the use of and reference to language, especially primary profanities, social relationships, and private versus public consumption via emerging technology: the codex and the smartphone, respectively. There is a cautionary step that must be taken: social media gives a deceptive representation of the current trends in general culture. It does not reflect what is actually happening to any given person at any particular moment. Fowler makes a similar observation of the text with which the reader is engaging: "...Martial creates his world rather than simply reflecting it..." (1995: 56). Similar to Martial working in his epigrams to "create his world," these "Viners" are creating their own world and projecting it on display. While the connections that I draw between these far-removed forms of communication are likely unintentional, the parallels are strikingly similar, and I argue that the adaptation of media in the ancient and modern worlds respectively allow for similar experiences of creative expression and response.

## Bibliography

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