

### Actors in the Audience: False *Equites* in Martial's *Epigrams*

As is well known, Martial in his *Epigrams* is a strong critic of hypocrisy and falsehood in all their forms and especially of stern, over-zealous moralizers who laud traditional values but do not live according to them. He also criticizes those who pretend to be of equestrian status by dressing in expensive clothing in order to sit amongst the *equites* in the theater. In book 5, Martial addresses this topic in no less than eight epigrams (V.8, 14, 23, 25, 27, 35, 38, 41) and refers to Domitian's recent edict renewing the rules for seating in the theater. I argue that these epigrams should be solidly placed in the iambic tradition which Spisak defines as using "wittily humorous assaults on a character-type in order to address and treat behaviors dangerous to the social community" (20). Throughout these poems Martial plays on themes seen elsewhere in the *Epigrams* – the effeminacy of those who wear brightly colored clothing, the use of expensive clothing to suggest wealth, and the hypocrisy of using clothing to pretend to be what one is not. These epigrams strongly suggest Martial's anxiety concerning false identity, the disconnect between appearance and reality, and the fact that deviants can use bright clothes and brash talk to create a façade that fools others into thinking they belong where they do not. Not only does Martial attack these false knights for their apparent effeminacy and fraud but he does so to provide a public service by publicly (i.e. in his poetry) exposing frauds placed in the middle of the audience in the public setting of the theater.

Not only are the frauds pretending to meet the property qualifications for knights, but many are doing so by wearing colorful, expensive clothing. As seen elsewhere in the *Epigrams* (e.g. 1.96), the masculinity of anyone wearing red, purple, or green is suspect. Thus, these false knights neither meet the property qualifications nor do they behave according to the gender

norms expected of the proper Roman men who deserve to sit among the *equites*. Instead, they each resort to playing the part of a knight and putting on a show in the middle of the audience.

The false knights seen in these epigrams are often found out and expelled from the theater by an usher. In V.41, the speaker calls his target, Didymus, less of a man than a eunuch and more effeminate than Attis and states that he will see whether or not Didymus is a knight. The speaker's statement that he will expose his target in the theater suggests that the poet is placing himself in the role of the usher. Thus, while the usher is exposing the fraudulent knights in the scenario the epigram imagines, the poet is exposing his constructed targets by means of the epigrams themselves and warning his readers of those who exhibit such behavior.

#### Bibliography

Spisak, A. L. 2007. *Martial: A Social Guide*. Duckworth.