

## The *Usucapio* of High Literature in Martial's Epigrams

This paper argues that one of Martial's sustained modes of engagement with higher genres is through humor, particularly involving the co-option of characters and scenes in order to juxtapose them with or illustrate the obscene denizens and tropes of epigram, the poetry of life. Our scholarly position on Martial's attitude toward epic and tragedy has long been informed primarily by those epigrams which directly approach the subject of genres and the contrast between high epic and tragedy especially against low epigram: 4.14, a deferential poem to Silius Italicus; 4.49, more emphatically denying that epigram is frivolous by comparison with scenes of myth; 8.3 and 10.4, where epigram is lauded as the poetry of real life; and such poems as 5.53 and 9.50, which deride authors of epic and tragedy. The stuff of these high genres – mythological material – nevertheless appears in upwards of a fifth of Martial's total collection. Some scholars suggest that Martial's use of myth in these numerous instances is simply as innocuous cultural capital, "merely variations for common ideas and expressions . . . aiming only to stimulate stock responses in his audience and where metrically convenient" (Sullivan 1991: 232). Others emphasize Martial's explicit disavowal of myth in the epigrams listed above even in the face of this considerable portion of poems (Hinds 2007: 138-9), or interpret myth's inclusion as either glorifying by adding grandeur or banalizing by juxtaposing with the lowly subjects of epigram (Fitzgerald 2007: 34-67).

In this paper I add nuance to the lattermost interpretations and reconcile Martial's conspicuous use of myth with both his disavowal of it and assertion that epigram is real and useful. I feature just a few epigrams which illustrate how Martial subordinates the characters and tropes of high literature to those of epigram: he both amplifies the bawdy and ribald material of epigram with epic similes or comparanda, in effect outdoing the superlatives of epic, and

reimagines the mythic as mundane and maculate, literally subjugated and exploited by the featured players of epigram. For example, the adulterer Gallus of 2.47 depilates himself such that he is smoother than Venus' 'shells'; Lesbia of 11.99 has trapped her undergarment in her own Symplegades; the strumpets of 6.71 and 11.60 can wield their feminine power over Pelias and Priam; and the superannuated Plutia in 10.67 shames her epic ancestry with her base lust. We see throughout all of these the mechanisms of humor: the juxtaposition of high and low, grave and gross, as well as the triumph of weak and marginalized over mighty: both the genre of epigram over epic and tragedy, and Martial's characters over myth's.

#### Bibliography

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Fitzgerald, William. 2007. *Martial: The World of the Epigram*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sullivan, J. P. 1991. *Martial: the unexpected classic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.