

*Scripta Mentula: Sexualized Language and Macro-Epigrammatic Structure in Book 3 of
Martial's Epigrams*

Scholars are divided as to the care and deliberation that Martial took when arranging his poems for publication into a book form. White (1974) argues that the poems of Martial were first published and distributed in small collections (*libelli*) that were then rearranged without regard to their original context and republished in the books as they have been passed down in the manuscript tradition. In contrast, Fowler argues that “the poems are not logs of social relations, but texts which simulate and construct a social world” (Fowler 1995: 219). Fitzgerald (2007) argues for the importance of the juxtaposition of poems within a book. Moreover, a number of poems in the books anticipate a sequential reading (1.39 & 40; 3.68 & 69). Many scholars also note that the beginnings (and less frequently the endings) of each book in Martial's dodecalogue are consistently marked as important.

I argue that one book in particular not only marks its beginning and ending, but displays a meticulous bipartite structure. Martial structures Book 3 like a single epigram, setting up a “situation” in poems 3.1-5 that is followed by an unexpected “response” in poems 3.68-69 (the terms are from Williams 2004), and concluding with a “point” in poems 3.91-92. The composition of the epigram writ large into the architecture of the whole book becomes, as I refer to it, macro-epigrammatic. The use of sexualized language emphasizes the key moments, “situation,” “response,” and “point,” effectively signposting the architecture of the book for the reader by creating a metapoetic macro-epigrammatic joke which centers around the concept of castration.

The poet creates the situation (3.1) by characterizing the book as a *gallus*. I argue that *gallus* in this context does not merely refer to the book's place of publication, but also refers to a

castrated man (an idea rejected by Fusi 2006), a designation Martial has already used in Book 1 (*Gallo turpis est nihil Priapo*, “nothing is uglier than a castrated Priapus,” 1.35). The “response” to this castrated book comes in poem 3.69 with the first appearance of the term *mentula* (“dick”), which appears elsewhere in Martial’s poetry (e.g. 1.35) as an emblem of epigrammatic obscenity and as a piece of metapoetic code for his own book (Williams 2002; O’Connor 1998; Hallett 1996; Richlin 1992). In 3.69, Martial proves that his own book actually does contain a *mentula*, and is therefore not a *gallus* as the poet suggests in 3.1. In fact, Martial suggests that a rival’s poetry is the equivalent of a poetic *gallus* - or *self-castrated* man. This reading is born out through the “point” at the end of the book.

Martial punctuates his book with a triad of poems 3.90-92 that revisit the topic of castration, specifically as it relates to the cult of Cybele. Two poems featuring the names Gallus and Galla (3.90 and 3.92, respectively) frame a poem about priests of Cybele, who were known to practice self-castration (3.91). By framing the poem containing the priests with poems using forms of the proper name Gallus/a, Martial maps out the term’s constellation of meaning. The reader can only appreciate the complexity of the term if they have read the book in sequence. Furthermore, the association of *gallus* with castration has greater implications in the interpretation of epigram more broadly (e.g. *Carmina Priapea*). Martial deploys the term *gallus* throughout his corpus to mean not simply “castrated” but even worse: “*self-castrated*.” The point of the macro-epigrammatic joke is that Martial has not self-castrated his book in an act of self-censorship.

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