

*Ad Infernas Liber Iturus Aquas: Affection, Manumission and Death in Martial 1.101*

In an emotionally vivid epigram (1.101), Martial depicts himself freeing a young dying slave of whom he was particularly fond, giving as motivation his desire to see him go into the Underworld as a free man. This poem has been used by many scholars as cornerstone for our understanding of master-slave relationship. Rawson (1966) employs the epigram as proof that sometimes the requirements of the Lex Aelia on manumission could be circumvented. Howell (1980) praises the poet's selfless act – even commenting on the fact that he would have had to pay a tax on that man's emancipation. However, scholars have, I believe, taken this poem at face value, not problematizing the emotional and legal implications that it subsumes. My discussion of the epigram aims at reevaluating it as evidence for social history.

From a legal point of view, a slave manumitted on his dying bed was not considered to be free (D. 40.4.17). Indeed, slaves manumitted informally by the means of a legal fiction – who are called Junian Latins – returned to their enslaved status at death. Therefore, Martial is depicting empty gesture at the eyes of the law. On the emotional level, the poet displays genuine affection for the prematurely departed slave. However, three considerations arise. First, Martial stresses that this slave was a particularly skilled and trustworthy, thus making him rather unique. The very act of writing about his death sets him apart from all the other slave deaths that must have died in the poet's household over time. Second, the epigram was composed by someone who purposefully projects a positive image of himself for his generosity. Third, the poet portrays two moments of passage – manumission and death – happening almost at the same time: the act of passage into a new life is mirrored and doubled, thus making the epigram more literary appealing.

Although the poem appears to represent genuine emotions on the part of the author, we cannot take it as a true picture of real life interactions between slaves and masters. It represents a narrow point of view and single piece of evidence which can help us problematize how we represent master-slave interactions in our scholarship.

#### Bibliography

Howell, P. 1980. *A Commentary on Book One of the Epigrams of Martial*, London.

Rawson, Beryl 1966. "Family life among the lower classes at Rome in the first two centuries of the Empire", *Classical Philology*, vol. 61, pp. 71-83.