

Check Those References: Quotation, *simplicitas*, and Image-making in Martial *Epigrams* 11

This paper traces the ways Martial both constructs and dissects Nerva's authority in the early part of *Epigrams* Book 11. It begins and ends with a focus on 11.20, where Martial invokes Augustus – ostensibly as an authority who sanctions the production of obscene verse. According to this poem, the first *princeps* composed six obscene lines attacking Fulvia and defending his *mentula* against her advances. This representation of playful frankness (*simplicitas*, 11.20.10) in Rome's highest authority echoes the book's opening message about Nerva: under the new *princeps*, the world – including the poet eager to return to his lascivious roots – is free (11.2). But I argue that 11.20 is meant to be read through a political and suspicious lens, emerging as it does after a series that uses quotation to relativize authority and truth.

The first part of Book 11 marries the theme of political renewal to that of poetic license and obscenity. Echoing the official message of the day, itself a species of political “quotation,” Martial portrays Nerva as a peace-bringer after the model of Augustus (11.3). The senatorial appointee was advertised as another pious and peace-bringing ruler (Hekster 2015). But Martial shows that that model rests on its own careful public-facing constructions. His self-centered punchline in 11.3 (I hope there will be a new Maecenas, too!) underscores the role that poets can play in image-making. Next, Martial summons up other exemplars for Nerva in figures that featured in Augustan propaganda: Aeneas (11.4) and King Numa (11.5). The Augustan credentials of these two figures actually relativize, instead of firmly establishing, their value for the new “quoter” Nerva.

Martial has further business with Numa-the-symbol. An emblem of Golden Age candor, Rome's second king did not hesitate to use the word *mentula* (11.15.10). This prompts the reader

to imagine Numa in an erotic context, the single likely referent being his purported assignations with Egeria. The erotic dimension of the story is assumed in Ovid (*nympha, Numae coniunx*, *Fast.* 3.262) and hinted at in Livy (1.19.5), though not all sources wished to play that possibility up (Wiseman 2008, 159-65). In Martial, Numa's frank language prefigures – in both textual and historical senses – Augustus' use of the term *mentula* at 11.20.8. On one level, this is a good joke presenting another Augustan appropriation of Numa. (In the same way, Augustus' copious use of *futuo* appears inspired by an adulterous but candid wife in 11.7.) More obliquely, this historical “memory,” at least as mediated by Livy, demythologizes Numa into another politician. Even Rome's second king engaged in his own image-making, cultivating belief in his access to the goddess to win acceptance for his religious reforms (*cum descendere ad animos sine aliquo commento miraculi non posset, simulat...*).

The poem series that leads to 11.20 unpacks the image of Augustus that supplies Nervan propaganda. But 11.20 also poses problems on its own, failing by design to make Martial's bid for “Augustan” immunity a simple matter. If Martial is citing Augustus as a model of leniency who saw lascivious verse as harmless hair-down play, he is making a false claim on three counts. Augustus famously did *not* pardon the erotic poet Ovid, notwithstanding 11.20.9 (*absolvit lepidos nimirum, Auguste, libellos*; cf. Casali 2005, Hinds 2007). Then, the obscene epigram on Fulvia is far from apolitical – it is directed at a political enemy, set on the eve of the siege of Perugia, and ultimately equivalent (the last words are *signa canant*, 11.20.8) to a declaration of war. If authentic, it would have served the valuable purpose of advertising the virility and discriminating taste of Caesar's young heir (Hallett 1977). Most jarring of all, however, is the fact that Martial attributes these lines to “Augustus” when they logically would have been the creation of the young Octavian. By joining the image of the august, adult *princeps* with the brutal

doings of his youth, Martial undoes careful Augustan propaganda, and shines a light on the complex structure that underpins plain Saturnalian freedom.

Martial used to call Domitian *Auguste*, too. With a new regime, this adaptable poet must reinvent himself. But by taking a page from the political quotation game, Martial exposes the latter's inner workings and destabilizes its agenda of careful curation.

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