

Trimming Masculinity: Facial Hair in Martial's *Epigrams*

The study of facial hair is a burgeoning field in many areas of history (e.g. Evans and Withey 2018) but has been understudied in the Greco-Roman world. While some attention has been given to beards in portraiture (e.g. Walker 1991, Zanker 1995), little has been paid to the representation of beards in the literary sources. One such source, Martial, was writing at a time when beards were experiencing a popular resurgence in Rome at the end of the first century CE. Martial has previously been used to investigate the Roman barbershop (Toner 2015). This essay instead examines the symbolism of facial hair in the *Epigrams*. Martial generally uses his epigrams as a vehicle to define his version of masculinity and lampoon those who deviate from that definition (Sullivan 1991). For Martial, facial hair is a central indicator of masculinity, whether that be in terms of sexuality, authority, or social class. From this we can begin to identify the importance of facial hair in Roman perception and performance of masculinity.

The ability to grow a beard is largely the domain of male humans, and hence the beard is intrinsically tied into representations of masculinity. The *Epigrams* offer us a glimpse into how men of the late first century CE displayed masculinity via their facial hair, or indeed, their lack of it. The presence or absence of facial hair in the ancient world was a powerful tool as visual appearance was central to Roman construction of social meaning (Olson 2017). In the *Epigrams*, facial hair is fundamental in the communication and perception of masculinity.

While we should not assume that there was a uniformity of masculinity, Romans possessed “some fundamental, generally agreed concept of maleness” (Foxhall 1998, Osborne 1998), which has also been referred to as “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005, Tosh 2004). While Martial’s idea of masculinity may or may not conform to this hegemony, his criticisms of

facial hair presentation bring to light a variety of masculinities. For Martial, facial hair is foremost proof of one's manhood (*Epigrams* 4.7 and 11.39). We can also see that some of Martial's subjects modify their facial hair, in conjunction with other bodily traits, in a way that does not conform to his idea of proper masculine presentation. He wants neither *virum nimium* nor *virum parum* (2.36, also 3.74, 8.52). The variation in facial hair which Martial critiques allows us to identify a range of masculine sexual expression, including what Olson calls "hypersexual" men (2.62, 3.63, 8.47). Additionally, Martial uses facial hair as a means to deride individuals who perform dishonest masculine authority, as he does with Chrestus, who strives to be like the hairy Romans of old, but is himself hairless (4.36, also 9.47, 12.42). So, facial hair could be used to perform and understand masculine power, as well. Lastly, facial hair indicates one's sub-masculinity (i.e. being less of a man due to social and economic standing), when one's beard is unkempt (7.95, 12.59). Thus, the state and type of one's facial hair was a visual marker of class.

Martial, whose main goal is to critique the world he lives in, uses facial hair as a literary device to comment on proper forms of masculinity and presentation. The use of Martial for cultural history is fraught, due to the nature of his genre. But in the *Epigrams*, it is evident that facial hair was an essential indicator of masculinity, both for the viewer and presenter, and that the masculinities represented by facial hair came in a variety of shades.

Bibliography

Connell, R.W. 2005. *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Evans, J. and A. Withey, eds. 2018. *New Perspectives on the History of Facial Hair: Framing the Face*. Cham: Palgrave.

- Foxhall, Lin. 1998. "Introduction." In *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity*, edited by L. Foxhall and J.B. Salmon: 1-9. London: Routledge.
- Olson, Kelly. 2017. *Masculinity and Dress in Roman Antiquity*. London: Routledge.
- Osborne, Robin. 1998. "Sculpted men of Athens: masculinity and power in the field of vision." In *Thinking Men: Masculinity and Its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, edited by L. Foxhall and J.B. Salmon: 23-42. London: Routledge.
- Sullivan, J. 1991. *Martial: The Unexpected Classic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toner, Jerry. 2015. "Barbers, Barbershops and Searching for Roman Popular Culture." *Papers of the British School at Rome* 83: 91-109.
- Tosh, J. 2004. "Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender." In *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*", edited by S. Dudink, K. Hagemann, and J. Tosh: 41-58. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Walker, Susan. 1991. "Bearded Men." *Journal of the History of Collections* 3.2: 265-277.
- Zanker, Paul. 1995. *The mask of Socrates: the image of the intellectual in antiquity*. Sather Classical Lectures 59. Berkeley: University of California Press.