

What's that smell? Odor in Martial's *Epigrammata*

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The notion of smell, both as an act and as an effluence of the body, has received relatively little focused study in Latin literature, despite its obvious significance and important connection to perceptions of body and character (for which see *inter alia* Richlin 1984, Corbeill 1996, Walters 1997). The close of Catullus 13, for example, rests on the understanding that both the smell of the *puella*'s unguent and Fabullus' appreciation of it are markers of taste (see Hallett 1978, Bernstein 1985, Detmer 1985, 1986, Nappa 1998). And Trimalchio's notorious gaucherie is betrayed, as far as Corinthian bronze is concerned, by his comments about the smell of his own bronze vessels (Linderski 1992, for which argument Mart. 9.59 was critical). In this paper, I address the significance of smell in Martial's *Epigrammata* as a marker of taste and discernment (or their absence). Like the *puella*, Fabullus, and Trimalchio, Martial's characters – and the poet himself – demonstrate their taste and culture both through the odors they exude and also through their ability to perceive and evaluate the odors of others. For example, a repeat olfactory offender in the *Epigrammata*, Zoilus, is ridiculed for stealing unguents and perfumes in 11.54, apparently to hide his own foul stench, which Martial attacks in 2.42, 11.30, *et cetera*; but Martial still has him complain that he detects an offensive smell exuding from the mouths of poets and barristers. Philaenis, rather than come across as well-bred and cultured in her expensive but rank purple robes, only raises suspicion about her own odor (9.62). In Martial, people who smell “good” seem to generate rather than allay suspicions about their moral and social status. In addition, drawing on recent anthropological / ethnographic work on the cultural significance of smell (e.g. Classen, *Ethos* 20.2, 1992), I demonstrate how Martial presents odor as a violation of the body's boundaries against which there is no defense. Many poems express simple revulsion or disgust at a foul odor, while in others (e.g. 12.85) stench is an indicator of deviant sexuality or an attempt to dissemble social status. In such cases Martial's diction typically highlights the act of giving off the smell, not of detecting a scent, (i.e. *olere* versus *olfacere*), and he emphasizes the powerlessness of the receiver. Smell thus becomes in Martial a significant but potentially dangerous tool in evaluating the ambiguities of class and moral fitness.