POETS AND POVERTY: THE CASE OF MARTIAL

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ABSTRACT
The fact that most Roman poets belonged to the equestrian or senatorial class has encouraged a sceptical attitude towards complaints of financial hardship and inadequate patronage. Such complaints tend to be viewed as a conventional ‘mendicant facade’ – a facet of the poet’s bogus persona. However, the evidence provided by Martial’s Epigrams and by contemporary perceptions of what constituted wealth and poverty suggest that mere possession of equestrian status was no guarantee of affluence. It is likely that the plight of poets like Martial and Juvenal was more genuine than modern sceptics would allow and that their indictment of the state of patronage was more than a convenient literary pose.

In his seventh Satire Juvenal speaks as an embittered poet who has struggled in vain to achieve the financial security, and hence oitium, essential for real creativity; and elsewhere (particularly in the first and third Satires) he displays considerable empathy with the cash-strapped dependants of ungenerous amici. This image of an impoverished and down-trodden client is apparently corroborated by Martial’s portrayal of his friend, who is still obliged to trudge to the thresholds of the powerful in his ‘sweaty toga’, while he himself revels in the tranquillity of his Spanish farm, making up for thirty years of insomnia (Ep. 12.18).

Yet how credible are Juvenal’s complaints about poverty and the hardships of the dependant’s existence? One factor in particular has provided grounds for scepticism about the validity of poets’ references to their financial predicament: most of the known poets, from the time of Cicero onwards, belonged to the equestrian or senatorial class and were therefore in possession of the equestrian census (i.e. HS 400,000) at the very least.¹ According to Peter White, ‘a capital of this amount invested according to the usual practice in land and loans would have yielded just enough income for a man to live in modest comfort with no further exertion’; and, on the assumption that even

¹Tibullus has been cited as a good example of a well-off Roman poet of equestrian status who nonetheless complains about financial hardship in his first programmatic poem (1.1.5); see Cairns 1979:20 and Cloud 1989:206. On Republican and Augustan writers of equestrian rank, see Taylor 1968:469-86.
the poorest Roman knights should therefore be recognized as ‘men of property who could subsist on rents and interest’, he concludes that ‘for such men the problem was not how to secure their basic income but how to enhance it.’ In an earlier study, White argued that land to the value of 400,000 sesterces could provide the owner a 6% annual return in rents, or 24,000 sesterces. This figure, it would appear from several sources, represented the sum which would enable a person to live in Rome ‘with minimum comfort’ for one year. It is clear, therefore, that such modest ‘affluence’ (in the absence of any additional sources of income) must have been dependent upon realizing the full investment potential of that capital.

While it might be true that the proper investment of the basic equestrian census would have ensured a lifestyle of ‘modest comfort’, an individual’s perception of his or her financial status is a notoriously subjective matter and one in which self-pitying envy of the affluence of others is easily excited. Furthermore, it is obviously much easier for ‘sufficiency’ to be equated with ‘poverty’ in a society characterised by enormous disparities in wealth — and Rome of the first century CE was such a society. If paupertas denoted ‘small means’ or ‘moderate circumstances’, as opposed to abundancia, luxuria at one extreme and to egestas, inopia and penuria at the other, it is understandable that a capital of HS 400,000 could well be regarded as

3 See White 1982:52.
4 White (1978:89) cites Juv. Sat. 14. 322-24 (where the equestrian census is suggested as the next best thing for those who would not be content to live as frugally as Socrates or Epicurus); Juv. Sat. 9. 140-41 (where Naevolus yearns for an annual income of 20,000 sesterces to avert a life of beggary); Mart. Ep. 3.10 (where 2,000 a month — or 24,000 a year – is mentioned as adequate for a young man’s needs). He also points out that the semestris tribunatus (a sinecure sought after by literary men of equestrian rank) provided a salary of 25,000 sesterces.
5 Is it feasible that everyone in possession of the minimum HS 400,000 was in a position to benefit from the full investment potential of such a sum? It is possible, for example, that all or part of that amount might have been spent on a residence rather than on leaseable property, thus reducing or nullifying the investment potential of the original capital. Furthermore, if an investor in agricultural land were wholly or partly dependent on profits from agricultural produce, that was by no means a dependable source of income, as Pliny points out: reditus propter condicionem agellorum nescio minor an incertior (Ep. 2.4).
6 As the chorus in Seneca’s Troades (line 1023) remarks, est miser nemo nisi comparatus.
7 A modern case in point is provided by members of the academic profession, whose relative financial security has never altered the perception that they are undeservedly underpaid (cf. Saller 1983:249).
8 Seneca, Ep. 87.34: non video quid aliud sit paupertas quam parvi possesso; Ep. 87.35: paupertas est non quae paucia possidet, sed quae multa non possidet. Cf. Martial 11.31 (to someone who makes an exaggerated pretense of poverty): non est paupertas, Nestor, habere nihil.

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paupertas when compared to the staggering wealth possessed by others. The gulf between the poor and the rich became even more accentuated in the early Imperial era:

In Cicero’s time a moderately wealthy man had an income 714 times that of one who was poor, while the extraordinarily rich were 10,476 times better off than the poor. For early Imperial times the gulf between free labourers and the reasonably wealthy remained precisely the same, but now the super-rich were 17,142 times wealthier than the poor.\(^9\)

Pliny the Younger was noted for his generous patronage (e.g. his gift of HS 300,000 to Romatius Firmus to enable him to attain equestrian status),\(^10\) yet his fortune – estimated at 20 million sesterces – was small in comparison with those of others in the early Empire.\(^11\) It must have been particularly galling for the likes of Juvenal to compare their financial situations with those of freedmen with the ‘Midas touch’. If the arrogant freedman of *Satire* 1, who boasts that his fortune surpasses those of Pallas and Licinus (see note 11) and flaunts his *molles ... in aure fenestrae* (1.102-09) is a caricature, there certainly were private freedmen whose wealth would have aroused such envious contempt.\(^12\)

Pliny himself makes some interesting remarks about his own ‘moderate’ financial status, on the occasion of his donation of an amount of HS 100,000:

>nec est, quod verear is, ne sit mihi onerosa ista donatio. sunt quidem omnino nobis modicae facultates, dignitas sumptuosa, reeditus propter condicionem agellorum nescio minor an incertior; sed, quid cessat ex reeditu, frugalitate suppletur, ex qua velut e fonte liberalitas nostra decurrit; quae tamen ista temperanda est, ne nimia profusione inarcescat ...\(^13\)

\(^9\) Bastomsky 1990:40. Estimates of the incomes of wealthy individuals (e.g. Cicero, Crassus, Narcissus) and of the poor during various periods of history have resulted in these rather precise ratios; clearly, they are only as rough indications of the disparities in wealth.

\(^10\) *Ep.* 1.19.

\(^11\) E.g. Gn. Cornelius Lentulus (died ce 25): 400 million; Narcissus (freedman of Claudius): 400 million; imperial freedmen M. Antonius Pallas and C. Iulius Calistus: 300 and 200 million respectively; L. Volusius Saturninus (died ce 56): more than 300 million; L. Annaeus Seneca (died ce 65): 300 million; C. Iulus Licinus (died after ce 14 and mentioned by Juvenal, *Sat.* 1.109): 200-300 million; Eprius Marcellus and Vibius Crispus (Tuc. *Dial.* 8.2): 200 and 300 million respectively. For a more comprehensive list see Duncan-Jones 1982:343-44.

\(^12\) According to Pliny, *NH* 33.135, C. Caecilius Isidorus (died 8 BCE) had a fortune of HS 60 million and bequeathed 4,116 slaves.

\(^13\) *Ep.* 2.4.
Apart from the description of his wealth as *modicae facultates*, this passage is significant in that it draws a distinction between the possession of capital *per se* and the ready income needed for day to day living: if Pliny, whose annual income has been estimated at HS 1,100,000,\(^{14}\) found it necessary to compensate for his ‘small or precarious’ income by ‘simple living’, how much more reason would the possessor of the bare equestrian *census* have to feel financially insecure. Even allowing for a degree of false modesty, it is hardly likely that Pliny is grossly misrepresenting his situation.

Cicero’s annual income has been estimated at about three-quarters of a million sestertes, yet Plutarch (Cicero 7) described his estate as ‘small’ and Cicero himself referred on several occasions to his debts.\(^ {15}\) It was Cicero, too, who once remarked that a certain man who barely possessed the equestrian *census* had nothing to lose except his life\(^ {16}\) – a clear indication that the basic qualification for equestrian status, as early as 49 BCE, was by no means a guarantee of financial security, let alone of affluence. It is also interesting to note that the equestrian *census* was set at the figure of HS 400,000 as early as 67 BCE by the *Lex Roscia* and that it remained as such throughout the Empire, even though the senatorial *census* amount was increased from HS 800,000 to HS 1,200,00 during the time of Augustus.\(^ {17}\) Even if the rate of inflation during the first century CE was modest,\(^ {18}\) it is clear that the attainment of equestrian rank was not likewise made more difficult by even a modest increase in the *census* rating.

The focus of this discussion is not the equestrian who benefited from a salaried position or who had the time (and inclination) to devote to business interests, but the one whose choice of a literary ‘career’ held out no prospect of a substantial and regular source of additional income\(^ {19}\) and who was accordingly even *more* dependent on the generosity of his *amici* and, if he

\(^{14}\) Duncan-Jones 1982:21; see also De Neeve 1990:369-71
\(^{15}\) He complained that his villas at Tusculum were ‘overwhelming’ him with debts (*ad Att. 2.1.11*), while his exile had also forced him into debt (*ad Att. 4.1.7; 4.2.5; 4.3.6*).
\(^{16}\) *Ad fam. 9.13.4*.
\(^{17}\) Suet. *Aug. 41.1*; Cassius Dio 55.13.6. Saller (1983:250) makes the pertinent observation: ‘Now if the equestrian *census* of four hundred thousand sestertes had initially been set in the Republic as the sum required to live without working, it certainly would not have been adequate to meet the rising living costs and living standards of Rome of the emperors.’
\(^{18}\) Some indication of inflationary pressures during the period in question is provided by the fact that the basic legionary pay was 900 sestertes from the reign of Augustus to that of Domitian, but 1,200 sestertes from Domitian to Septimius Severus (see Duncan-Jones 1982:10).
\(^{19}\) See White 1982:50-52. Such an individual’s plight would have been exacerbated if, like Martial (see below), he had no real inclination towards careers such as advocacy.
was fortunate enough, on imperial patronage. Such an individual, by the very nature of his ‘profession’, would have found it in his interests to cultivate such relationships assiduously in order to secure audiences for his works (in addition to the expected material benefits of such amicitia).

As a contemporary of Juvenal, the poet Martial provides a convenient and instructive parallel: he did possess equestrian rank, but nonetheless complained ad nauseam about his financial straits. This apparent anomaly has been cited as an example of the ‘mendicant facade’ typically adopted by poets. Yet the evidence of his Epigrams suggests that his property certainly did not bring in enough money to sustain a comfortable lifestyle, while the very nature of the beneficia attested in his poems (see below) militates against any notion of affluence on his part. His little farm at Nomentum was a pleasant enough retreat, but its productivity was such that it had to be supplemented by produce from the local market; and, as Martial jokingly remarked, nil nostri, nisi me, ferunt agelli. Indeed, the frustrating infertility of his little estate was one of the main factors which made the prospect of a return to Spain so attractive.

Furthermore, having a large circle of amici (as Martial’s epigrams would seem to attest) was no guarantee of financial security: when Martial’s friend, Sextus, is derided for believing that he can make a living at Rome first as a

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20 Hardie 1983:51; 54-56; see also Bramble 1974:159.
21 E.g. Ep. 6.27; 6.43; 12.57. The dwelling, however, was shabbily appointed: nulla tegit fractos nec inanis culcita lectos, / putris et abrupta fascia reste iacet (5.62.5-6).
22 Ep. 7.31; 9.60; 10.58.9; 10.94. Cf. 3.47, where Bassus is pictured carting a variety of farm produce from Rome to his unproductive villa. Furthermore, these references to the unproductiveness of his Nomentan property provide little reason to assume, as Hardie (1983:51) does, that Martial would have had a steady income from his vineyards. Obviously, the estate could not have been entirely unproductive: in 10.48 he refers to wine and fresh produce supplied from there for a modest dinner-party; but, even if one makes allowance for a degree of exaggeration on Martial’s part, this ‘admission’ must be weighed against the far more frequent allusions to the general unprofitability of his Nomentan farm in relation to his needs; see Saller 1983:251.
23 illa placet tellus in qua res parva beatum
   me facit et tenues luxuriantur opes:
   pascitur hic, ibi pascit ager ... (10.96.5-7).
   Life in his satucae ... casae (4) promised other advantages, too: a bright, warm hearth, as opposed to the igne maligno (7) of his urban fire-place; freedom from the pretiosa fames and bankrupting produce market of Rome (9); less wear and tear on expensive togas (11-2); and release from the irksome duty of paying court to patrons (reges) — on which see below. Such were the eagerly anticipated advantages, but it would appear that perpetual idyllic bliss proved somewhat elusive for Martial: see Howell 1998:181-85.
24 Shackleton Bailey (index to Loeb edition) assigns this name to the category of ‘certainly or
lawyer and then as a poet, he announces that he will then ‘court the halls of great men.’ To which Martial gives the sardonic reply:

\[
\text{vix tres aut quattuor ista} \\
\text{res aluit, palleet cetera turba fame ...} \\
\text{si bonus es, casu vivere, Sexte, potes.}
\]

(3.38.11-12; 14)

Another factor that needs to be taken into account is the possibility that Martial really did not fare well in the competitive environment of those who jostled for beneficia. As Wallace-Hadrill remarks:

One of our problems in envisaging how Roman patronage worked is that of seeing how the patron was in a position to (let alone willing to) deliver the goods to large numbers of dependants. Yet the power of the patron may derive not from the ability to secure benefits for all who ask, but from the sheer impossibility of securing them for any but a minority.\(^{25}\)

At the time that he wrote Book 1 of his Epigrams, Martial was living in quite humble circumstances: in an apartment (cenacula, 1.108.3) up three long flights of stairs (scalis ... tribus sed altis, 1.117.7), probably situated on the Quirinal, overlooking the porticus Vipsania in the campus Agrippae (1.108.3).\(^{26}\) His cramped living conditions are suggested in another epigram from the same Book: vicinus meus est manuque tangi / de nostris Novius potest fenestris. By 94 his circumstances seemed to have improved sufficiently to enable him to purchase a small town-house (parvi ... in urbe lares, 9.18.2; parvaeque in urbe domus, 9.97.8), also on the Quirinal, in the vicinity of his cenaculum.\(^{27}\) The modest, if not humble, nature of this abode is further suggested by its lack of a proper water-supply: sicca domus queritur nullo se rore foveri (9.18.5).\(^{28}\) It is tempting to believe that the purchase of this property (which, it has been suggested, would have been worth about 150,000 sesterces)\(^{29}\) was facilitated by his attainment of eques-

\(^{27}\) See Sullivan 1991:27.
\(^{28}\) According to Strabo 5.3.8, almost every house in Rome had water laid on, but this is no doubt an exaggeration.
trian status.\footnote{vidit me Roma tribunum (3.95.9). On his tribunate (most probably the honorary post of tribunus semestris) see Allen 1970:345-46; Sullivan 1991:4, 32.} If this was indeed the case, the ‘tying up’ of a sizeable proportion of the \textit{census} amount in fixed property (together with the expenses of running his household) would have further reduced his disposable income.

Martial’s possession of the \textit{ius trium liberorum} and honorary tribunate, his fame as a literary figure and the fact that he was instrumental in securing imperial grants of citizenship for others have been cited as indicators of his real status in Roman society: ‘The measure of the man and the poet is the public approval of the court; his standing with the Emperor was the most important single element in his existence, and all else derived from it.’\footnote{Hardie 1983:51.} However, while Martial prides himself on the fact that his poems were sometimes read for Domitian’s enjoyment\footnote{ipse etiam tanto dominus sub pondere rerum
non dedignatur [has nugas] bis terque revolvere Caesar (6.64.14-15);
namque solent sacra Caesaris aure frui (7.99.4).} and basks hopefully in the belief that poets are Domitian’s \textit{gloria dulcis, cura prior} and \textit{deliciae},\footnote{8.82.5-6.} there is no persuasive evidence to suggest that his talent earned him substantial and on-going largesse from the imperial court. In Book 3 he does state that ‘both Caesars’ (i.e. Titus and Domitian) praised him and bestowed on him certain ‘rewards’ (\textit{praemia}) in addition to the \textit{ius trium liberorum}.\footnote{praemia laudato tribuit mihi Caesar uterque
natorumque dedit iura paterna trium (3.95.5-6).} It is likely that these ‘rewards’ refer to favours other than the granting of the honorary tribunate, as he refers specifically to his elevated status a few lines later (\textit{vidit me Roma tribunum}). However, judging by the earnestness of his subsequent hints and flatteries addressed to Domitian, in particular, it would seem that the \textit{praemia} referred to were coupled with specific instances of imperial praise (\textit{laudato tribuit mihi}), rather than indicative of sustained patronage. Such an inference is suggested by the following lines, in which the poet responds to an imaginary question from Domitian about the ‘profitability’ of flattering addresseees:

\begin{quote}
‘\textit{quid tamen haec prosunt quamvis venerantia multos}?’
\textit{non prosint sane, me tamen ista iuvant.}
\end{quote}

\footnote{This is not to suggest that Martial did not hanker after regular imperial patronage: ‘... he has already hinted in 5.6 (and will make it clear in 5.19) that this is in fact a suppliant book, not}
The impression that Martial was far from confident that his verse would reap further rewards from this source is strengthened by another wheedling and sycophantic epigram from his eighth book:

\[
\text{si quid forte petam timido gracilibus libello,  
inproba non fuerit si mea charta, dato.  
et si non dederis, Caesar, permitte rogari:  
offendunt numquam tura precesque iovem  
qui figit sacros auro vel marmore vultus,  
non facit ille deos: qui rogat, ille facit.  
(8.24)36}
\]

In yet another epigram (6.10) he refers to a direct petition to the princps for ‘paucu ... milia’, concluding with the hopeful words (presented as imaginary encouragement from Pallas Athene, the ‘Thunderer’s confidant’): quae nondum data sunt, stulte, negata putas?’ Martial gives no subsequent indication whether or not requests such as these were successful;37 but, in the light of two later poems (in which Domitian is contrasted first with Nerva and then with Trajan), it would seem that he had scant reason to feel grateful towards the former:

\[
largiri, praestare, breves extendere census  
et dare quae faciles vix tribuere dei,
\]

composed simply for the love of it, but with the emperor specifically in mind, and in hope of at least small remuneration. In short, Martial highlights the feigned innocence of Domitian’s question with a patently disingenuous reply’ (Garthwaite1998:166).

36 Cf. 8.56 and 8.82.

37 The argument that etiquette would have prevented acknowledgement of imperial gifts (Hardie 1983:46) is unconvincing, when viewed against the sycophantic excesses of Martial’s laudatory epigrams. It is hard to believe that someone so eager for recognition by the imperial court would have foregone the opportunity to advertise any financial rewards, in the same way as he drew attention to the granting of his honorary tribunate and the ius trium liberorum (3.95); these are almost certainly the gifts acknowledged again at 4.27.5: non alius poterat quae dare dona mihi. It should be noted that Statius (Silv. 3.1.61-62) did not consider it infra dig. to acknowledge an imperial munus in the form of permission to tap into the public water supply; the fact that Martial does not refer to the success of a similar request of his own (9.18), should probably be ascribed to disappointment rather than politeness. On Martial’s tone of ‘disaffection, if not sarcasms’ underlying the apparent humility of his addresses to Domitian in Book 5, see Garthwaite 1998:171.
nunc licet et fas est. sed tu sub principe duro
   temporibusque malis ausus es esse bonus;
(12.3.9-12)\textsuperscript{38}

omnes cum love nunc sumus beati;
   at nuper (pudet, ah pudet fateri)
omnes cum love pauperes eramus.
(12.15.8-10)

Perhaps Martial’s failure to secure monetary handouts from Domitian himself
is less surprising when his sycophantic praise of the emperor’s underlings\textsuperscript{39}
seems to have yielded no more than the gift of an extravagantly praised
toga\textsuperscript{40} from Parthenius, Domitian’s freedman chamberlain or secretary.

If the failure of emperors, Domitian in particular, to provide him with
adequate financial rewards is implicit in his poetry, his frustration at the general
unprofitability of poetry is more explicit and persistent. In his first book he
tries to persuade his friend Flaccus to forsake the life of a poet: quid petis a
Phoebo? nummos habet arca Minervae (1.76.5). Helicon, he says, has
nothing beyond a loud but empty ‘bravo’, and he concludes with a bitter
contrast between the impoverished world of literature and the profitable forum
Romanum:

\begin{quote}
quid tibi cum Cirrha? quid cum ermesside nuda?
   Romanum proprius divitiusque forum est.
illic aera sonant: at circum pulpita nostra
   et stierles cathedras basia sola crepant.
(1.76.11-14)\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

This was not merely the complaint of a ‘novice’ poet struggling to establish

\textsuperscript{38} See Loeb text, edited by Shackleton Bailey, where 6.7-12 is combined with 4 to make up
12.3.
\textsuperscript{39} at nunc tantus amor cunctis, Auguste, tuorum est
   ut sit cuique suae cura secunda domus.
tam placidae mentes, tanta est reverentia nostri,
tam pocata quiet, tantus in ore pudor (9.79.3-6).
\textsuperscript{40} 8.28. Perhaps Martial’s description of its eventual threadbare condition (9.49) suggests
that Parthenius’ generosity began and ended with the donation of that multum cantata (9.49.1)
item of clothing!
\textsuperscript{41} On the significance of Martial’s cynical advice to Flaccus, see Pitcher 1984:416.
himself, because, a decade or so later, Martial was still beset by the problem of securing the support of a latter-day ‘Maecenas’. In a poem addressed to Nerva, he prides himself on the fact that his poetry is read throughout the empire; yet,

\[\textit{quid prodest? nescit sacculus ista meus.} \\
\textit{at quam victuras poteramus pargere chartas} \\
\textit{quantaque Pieria proelia flare tuba,} \\
\textit{cum pia reddiderint Augustum numina terris,} \\
\textit{et Maecenatem si tibi, Roma, darent!} \]

(11.3.6-10)

There is another factor of considerable importance which, in the cases of Martial and Juvenal certainly, created tension between the desire to be a productive writer and the desire to be financially secure. If, as Peter White has convincingly argued, the relationship of poets to their wealthy \textit{amici} was essentially no different from that of other dependants and they too had to pay court to ‘earn their keep’, it is not surprising that one of Martial’s complaints about the irksomeness of his obligations was the fact that he had to waste time which he would rather devote to his writing. The following poem comments not only on this particular irritation but – most appropriately in the present context – illustrates why the possession of property was not necessarily a safeguard against having to scrounge a supplementary income:

\[\textit{Anxuris aequorei placidos, Frontine, recessus} \]

\[\textit{at non erunt aeterna, quae scripsit. non erunt fortasse, ille tamen scripsit, tamquam essent futura (Ep. 3.21). Perhaps, too, Martial’s attempts to justify the licentiousness of some of his verse (e.g. 3.68) point to another obstacle in his pursuit of substantial patronage from Domitian in particular. It is also relevant to note that Martial begged the curator of the Palatine library to allow his works to be housed there (5.5).} \]

\[\textit{White} 1978; 1982; 1993 \]
et propius Baias litoreamque domum,
et quod inhumanae Cancro fervente cicadae
non novere nemus, flumineosque lacus
dum colui, doctas tecum celebrare vacabat
Pieridas; nunc nos maxima Roma terit
hic mihi quando dies meus est? iactamur in alto
urbis, et in sterili vita labore perit,
dura suburbani dum iugera pascimus agri
vicinosque tibi, sancte Quirine, lares.
sed non solus amat qui nocte dieque frequentat
limina nec vatem talia damna decent.
per veneranda mihi Musarum sacra, per omnes
iuro deos, et non officiosus amo.

(10.58)

This is not an isolated complaint,\textsuperscript{44} and Martial – like Juvenal in his seventh
Satire – also stresses the necessity of\textit{ otium} for creativity and draws attention
to Virgil and Horace as\textit{ exempla} of the fruits of proper patronage:

\begin{quote}
\begin{flushleft}saepe mihi dicis, Luci carissime Iuli,
\textquotesingle scribe aliquid magnum: desidiosus homo es.\textquotesingle 
\textquoteleft otia da nobis, sed qualia fecerat olim
Maecenas Flacco Vergilioque suo:
condere victuras tempem per saecula curas
et nomen flammis eripuisse meum.
in steriles nolunt campos iuga ferre iuvenci:
pingue solum lassat, sed iuvat ipse labor.
\end{flushleft}
\end{quote}

(1.107)

\textit{Otium}, of course, is merely a euphemism for financial security provided by a
generous\textit{ amicus}; and Martial – to be echoed by Juvenal again\textsuperscript{45} – makes

\begin{flushright}
\begin{tabular}{l}
\textit{quod mihi vix unus toto liber exeat anno} \\
\textit{desidiae tibi sum, docte Potite, reus.} \\
\textit{iustius at quanto mirere quod exeat unus,} \\
\textit{labantur toti cum mihi saepe dies ...} (10.70.1-4).
\end{tabular}
\end{flushright}

In 11.24 Martial jokingly complains that dancing attendance on his patron, Labullus, deprives
him of time which he could better spend on writing:\textit{ sic fit / cum cenare domi poeta non vult}
(lines 14-15); on Martial’s just grounds for complaint, see Kay 1985:124-25. The same
grievance is voiced in 1.70, 10.58,10.70; cf. also 12.68.

\textsuperscript{44} Juv. Sat. 7.
the point more explicitly in a poem addressed to Flaccus (8.56):

\[ \text{risit Tuscus eques [i.e. Maecenas] paupertatemque malignam} \\
\text{reppulit et celeri iussit abire fuga.} \\
\text{‘accipe divitias et vatum maximus esto ...’} \\
(9-11) \]

\[ \text{...quid Varios Marsosque loquar ditataque vatum} \\
\text{nomina, magnus erit quos numerare labor?} \\
\text{ergo ego Vergilius, si munera Maecenatis} \\
\text{des mihi? Vergilius non ero, Marsus ero.} \\
(21-24) \]

Martial’s poems create the strong impression that he had little time or inclination for profitable pursuits, other than paying hopeful but irksome court to his wealthier amici, and that he was constantly dogged by the incompatibility of his need for financial security with his hankering after a life of ‘creative leisure’. This dilemma is illustrated by the following poem, which he wrote after his return to Spain:

\[ \text{matutine cliens, urbis mihi causa relictae,} \\
\text{atria, si sapias, ambitiosa colas.} \\
\text{non sum ego causidicus nec amaris litibus aptus} \\
\text{sed piger et senior Pieridumque comes;} \\
\text{otia me somnumque iuvant, quae magna negavit} \\
\text{Roma mihi: redeo, si vigilatur et hic.} \\
(12.68) \]

It is significant that the sentiments expressed here are quite consistent with those of a much earlier epigram, where Martial, after stating his preference for defectantia rather than seria, proceeds to explain what talis amor costs him:

\[ \text{nam si falciferi defendere templaque Tonantis} \\
\text{sollicitasse velim vendere verba reis,} \\
\text{plurinus Hispanas mittet mihi nauta metretas} \\
\text{et fiet vario sordidus aere sinus.} \\
\text{at nunc conviva est comissatorisque libellus} \\
\text{et tantum gratis pagina nostra placet.} \\
\text{sed non et veteres contenti laude fuerunt,} \\
\]

150
cum minimum vati munus Alexis erat.
'belle' inquis 'dixi: iuvat et laudabimus usque.'
dissimulas? facies me, puto, causidicum.
(5.16.5-14)

The personality traits which emerge from his epigrams on this theme – particularly his preference for a life of genteel otium rather than active money-making – are also reflected in another poem, in which he discusses what constitutes the ‘good life’:

vitam quae faciunt beatiorem,
iucundissime Martialis, haec sunt:
res non parta labore sed relicta;
non ingratus ager, focus perennis;
lis numquam, toga rara, mens quieta;
vires inguenae, salubre corpus;
prudens simplicitas, pares amici,
convictus facilis, sine arte mensa;
nox non ebria sed soluta curis,
non tristis torus et tamen pudicus;
sommus qui faciat breves tenebras:
quod sis esse velis nihilque malis;
sumnum nec metuas diem nec optes.
(10.47)\(^46\)

The penultimate line is, of course, wishful thinking and far removed from the unpleasant realities of Martial’s life of scrounging and frequent complaints about niggardly patrons.

It would seem that even the upkeep of a suburban retreat and his own team of mules could prove irksome to Martial, as suggested by his attitude towards Charinus, who was jealous of his literary fame: hoc opto: mulas habeat et suburbanum (8.61.9).

There is frequent mention of beneficia, hoped for and received, in his verses. While it is possible that some of the addressees are fictional – particularly those castigated for extraordinary meanness – there appears to be sufficient reliable evidence in his poems to suggest that Martial was in real need of on-going assistance, both in cash and in kind, from his amici.\(^47\)

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\(^{46}\) Cf. 2.90; 6.43; 10.104.

\(^{47}\) For a less straightforward interpretation of Martial’s motives, see Spisak (1998:254), who
Martial refers to apparently unsuccessful requests for loans of HS 100,000 (3.40; 6.5; 6.20), to a loan of HS 6,000 after he had asked for double that amount (4.76) and to an empty promise of a loan of 200,000 (5.82). Of course, loans are ‘gifts’ with a sting in the tail, as Martial himself wryly observes: *tu Magnus quod das? Immo ego, quod recipis* (3.40.4). As for gifts in kind from Martial’s benefactors during his stay in Rome, they would seem, in the main, to have been the fairly modest ‘tokens’ of the on-going reciprocity between amici (especially those given at the time of the Saturnalia). Gifts given or requested at times other than the Saturnalia—and therefore probably more indicative of the normal scale of gift-giving by amici—include silver plate (8.71) a slave boy or girl (requested at 8.73), some mules (11.79; it is possible, however, that these were merely loaned to him by the addressee), a boar (11.27), a basket of food (9.72), a glass bowl (8.51; 8.33), and a covinus (12.24). There is no reason to believe that all of these are deliberately chosen to suggest the parsimony of his amici (even though Martial is disparaging about the quality of the bowl mentioned in 8.33).

The gifts tend to be both modest and practical, like the roof-tiles given to him by his friend Stella, when his country house was damaged during a winter storm (7.36); but the item which features most frequently in the context of amicitia and patronage is the toga, a gift which could emanate from a donor as August as the emperor’s own secretary. While Martial’s sycophantic praise of the latter was clearly motivated by his eagerness to ingratiate himself with the imperial court, there is little doubt that this type of gift fulfilled a genuine need. This much is implied not only by his gratitude for the receipt of such gifts, but also by his frequent allusions to the threadbare state or inferior quality of his togas and to his need for replacements: it is signifi-

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48 On his return to Spain, Marcella presented him with a small property (12.31).
49 E.g. those itemised in 7.53: six three-leaved tablets, seven toothpicks, a sponge, a napkin, half a peck of beans, a wicker crate of Picenian olives, a flagon of must, Syrian figs, dried prunes and a jar of figs. For a different assessment of the worth of the gifts received by Martial, see Saller (1983:252-53), who maintains that ‘some of the gifts were of quite considerable value, and a few were in fact as good as continuing income.’
50 In this poem Martial jokes about the ever-decreasing amount of silver given him each year, after an initial weight of 4 pounds 10 years previously. Elsewhere (10.57) he mentions 1 pound as a regular gift, while an amicus who sends him *libras quattuor aut duas* (12.36) is described as *optimus malorum*.
51 He has lavish praise for a toga given to him by Parthenius (8.28).
52 E.g. 10.73
53 2.58; 3.36; 5.79; 6.11; 7.92; 8.28; 9.49; 9.100; 10.14; 10.29; 10.96; 12.36; 12.72; 125.
cant that this aspect of amicitia was obviously both irksome and expensive enough for him to cite it as one of the reasons for his decision to leave Rome and to return permanently to Spain:

\[\text{quattuor hic aestate togae pluresve teruntur,} \\
\text{autumnis ibi me quattuor una tegit ...} \]

(10.96.11-12)

Even if one allows for a degree of poetic licence in this regard, one can believe that for people like Martial, who were obliged to pay regular court to the affluent and powerful, the wear and tear on the obligatory garb for the salutatio must have been a constant source of expenditure: a mundane, but revealing insight into the realities of Martial’s financial position. When Martial thanks his friend Stella for the donation of some roof-tiles, are we to dismiss the concluding line (Stella, tegis villam, non tegis agricolam, 7.36.6) as an entirely contrived joke with no relevance to his personal needs? The frequency with which Martial makes such allusions should lead one not only to question assumptions about his supposed affluence, but also to take seriously his complaints about the regular inconvenience and drudgery of having to attend salutationes: the toga becomes a ubiquitous symbol not only of his paupertas but also of the irksomeness of his dependancy on his wealthier amici.

Martial is hardly likely to have assailed his audience with allusions to his paupertas so regularly throughout his poems, unless that audience accepted the fundamental validity of such complaints. Martial, after all, had a patently clear motive in advertising his comparatively slender means, and it would hardly have helped his cause to indulge in such an incessant charade. There is sufficient evidence, spread throughout the corpus of his writings, to suggest that Martial’s temperament was genuinely ill-suited to a life of litigation or any other avenue of employment. It is therefore not difficult to accept that his frequent references to haunting the thresholds of prospective benefactors are not to be simply dismissed as elements of an artificial literary persona: in reality he had no other option. The self-portrait which emerges from Mar-

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54 So, too, when he contrasts Zoilus’ showing off of his eleven togas with his possession of a single garment (5.79).
55 See Leary 1996:190: ‘It is likely ... that poorer clients were hard put to appear at the salutatio properly dressed and that there was some justification behind the numerous complaints which survive about the dress requirement.’
56 E.g. 3.4; 4.66; 10.47; 10.74; 12.18; 12.72.
tial’s poems is consistent and credible enough to make one temper, if not abandon, one’s scepticism about the validity of his financial grievances.

However, if one continues to doubt the basic veracity of Martial’s portrayal of his financial straits on the grounds that poets habitually hide behind a fictitious persona, there is an interesting piece of evidence from an independent source. Pliny, in paying tribute to Martial (who had composed a poem in his honour), mentions that he gave the poet a monetary gift, specifically to help him with his travelling expenses on his return to Spain: prosecutus eram viatico secedentem; dederam hoc amicitiae, dederam etiam versiculis, quos de me composuit (Ep. 3.21.2). This immediately begs the question: why should Pliny have donated the money for this purpose, unless he was aware of a real need on Martial’s part? We do not know whether or not Martial ‘sold up’ in Rome prior to his departure; if he did (as suggested by 10.92), it would make Pliny’s gift all the more surprising. We do know, however, that a benefactor provided Martial with a small house and farm on his return to Spain. Where, one may wonder, had all that equestrian capital gone?

Martial, as we have already seen, was delighted to have forsaken the frustrations and hardships of trying to make a living in Rome; and this delight could even be coloured by a certain smugness, as seen in the poem which he addressed to his friend Juvenal, whom he left behind in Rome.

\[
\text{dum tu forsitan inquietus erras} \\
\text{clamosa, Juvenalis, in Subura} \\
\text{aut collem dominae teris Dianae;} \\
\text{dum per limina te potentiorum} \\
\text{sudatrix toga ventilat vagumque} \\
\text{maior Caelius et minor fatigant;} \\
\text{me multis repetita post Decembres} \\
\text{accipit mea rusticumque fecit}
\]

37 Martial entrusts the care of hoc omne agelli mite parvuli numen (13) to Marrius of Atina. post septima lustra reverso

38 has Marcella domos parvaque regna dedit (12.3.17-18).

39 The fact that Juvenal put his denunciation of Rome in the mouth of ‘Umbricius’ seems to me to reflect the reality of Juvenal’s own continued domicile in the city; and, while Umbricius may well be a fictitious character, his weariness of the client’s impoverished life is something which loomed large in the life of the real Martial (and, no doubt, in the lives of others in his position).
auro Bilbilis et superba ferro.
(12.18.1-9)

However, what is of more importance than the tone of this epigram is the fact that, for Martial, his friend Juvenal can provide a mirror-image of his former self. It would be absurd to attempt to explain away this portrayal of his fellow-poet, with its sharp awareness of the client’s subservient drudgery, as a mere poetic charade. This is a candid observation on their respective fortunes; and, as such, it is yet another piece of persuasive evidence to suggest that, even if many poets were of equestrian rank and that this did provide a basis for a relatively affluent standard of living for them, there were others, like Martial and Juvenal, whose circumstances and dispositions (including an aversion to the more conventional means of income-generation), might have consigned them to a life of ‘shabby-genteel’ paupertas.

Once again, the credibility of their complaints can be corroborated by reference to a remark by Pliny (who would probably be regarded as a more sober and less suspect authority): *fuit moris antiqui, eos qui vel singulorum laudes vel urbium scripsent, aut honosibus aut pecunia ornare; nostris vero temporibus ut alia speciosa et egregia, ita hoc in primitis exolevit* (Ep. 3.21.3). In the light of this contemporary assessment and in the face of the sheer consistency of Martial’s portrayal of his struggle to make ends meet in Rome, it would be foolish to assert that Juvenal’s picture of the life of a dependent poet in Rome – as it emerges from the evidence of the seventh and third Satires in particular – has more to do with a bogus persona than with the truth.

Bibliography


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60 It is pertinent to bear in mind Pliny’s assessment of Martial, both as a person and as a writer: *erat homo ingeniosus, acutus, acer, et qui plurimum in scribendo et salis haberet et fellis nec candoris minus* (Ep. 3.21); see Pitcher 1999:554-62.
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