

## **EPIGRAMMATON LIBRI: MARTIAL IN SELF-ANALYSIS?**

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### **RESUMO**

Marco Valério Marcial foi exímio cultor do género epigramático, que burilou até à sua forma mais sublime e para o qual forjou um inovador e arrojado conteúdo, pelo carácter cinematográfico das suas composições e pela longa-metragem que oferece do homem romano. Ao completar a representação caleidoscópica do *Caput Mundi* do primeiro século d.C., no meio da miríade de personagens que o Bilbilitano esboçou, a própria existência emerge. Portanto, epigrama após epigrama, parece ser possível trilhar o percurso de Marcial. Para esta grande tensão que emerge do confronto entre a realidade, que, verso a verso, se insinua, e a ficção, ditada pelo filtro da criação poética, e que, ao longo dos anos, opôs a perspectiva testemunhal dos literalistas e o ponto de vista estanque dos revisionistas ensaiou-se uma mais harmoniosa abordagem eclética. Aceitando o convite que, através da sua obra, lança Marcial para rastrear a própria vida, o objetivo deste trabalho é estabelecer os limites de uma biografia e, além disso, compreender como esse marcador de identidade, com o qual o poeta cunhou os seus epigramas, foi a expressão de um processo não de autoanálise ou de autoelogio, mas de reflexão sobre a sua poética, almejando, em última instância, o louvor dela.

**Palavras-chave:** Marcial; Epigrama; Identidade; Relação Autor-*Persona*.

### **ABSTRACT**

*Marcus Valerius Martialis* was an eminent cultivator of the epigrammatic genre, which he polished to its highest form and for which he forged an innovative and daring content, by the cinematic nature of his compositions and by the feature film of the Roman man he offered. While completing the kaleidoscopic depiction of the *Caput Mundi* of the first century A.D., amidst the myriad of characters the Bilbilitan sketched, the own existence emerges. Therefore, epigram after epigram, it seems possible to trail Martial's route. For this great tension emerging from the confront between reality, verse by verse, insinuating itself, and fiction, dictated by the filter of poetic creation, and that, through the years, opposed the testimonial literalists' perspective and the airtight revisionists' point of view a more harmonious eclectic approach is proposed. Accepting the invitation suggested through Martial's *opus* to track his own life, this work aims to establish the limits of a biography and, furthermore, to comprehend how that identity marker, with which the poet coined his epigrams, was the expression not of a self-analysis or a self-praise process but of a reflection over the own poetics, ultimately towards its laud.

**Keywords:** Martial; Epigram; Identity; Author-*Persona* Relationship.

The poet is a forger who  
Forges so completely that  
He forges even the feeling  
He feels truly as pain.<sup>2</sup>  
(Fernando Pessoa)

Perusing the epigrammatic legacy of *Marcus Valerius Martialis*, the reader gets the impression of having glanced over not only the poetry, but also the poet himself<sup>3</sup>.

The literary work of art, resembling any artistic production, undoubtedly carries the seal of its creator. However, the assumption that the identity of the artist could be realizable through his work, even if art as a reflection of identity is a principle of relatively universal agreement, is a premise whose validity is rather much more controversial.

Indeed, artistic creation, in its multiple forms, has in reality its departure point, nevertheless it goes far beyond, and, therefore, literature cannot be taken for life itself. Following this long tradition in the field of Literary Studies, the theorist Fernando Lázaro Carreter even adverted, in his *De poética y poéticas*, that all the lyrics manipulate reality, even those that look more bound to the biographic truth of their own existences (cf. LÁZARO CARRETER, 1990, p. 38). Undeniably, poetry always implies a construction, currently being highly questionable the attempts to identify the empirical author with the textual author he created.

This far, the reader that perused Martial's books, from the *De Spectaculis* to the *Liber XII*, including the *Xenia* and the *Apophoreta*, certainly reminisces, among countless others addressed to him, this particular verses:

lector, opes nostrae: quem cum mihi Roma dedisset,  
'nil tibi quod demus maius habemus' ait.  
'pigra per hunc fugies ingratae flumina Lethes (10.2.5-7)

*reader, who are my riches. When Rome gave you to me, she said: "I have nothing greater to give you. By his means you will escape the sluggish waves of ungrateful Lethe"*<sup>4</sup>

Clearly there is now a question this reader is unable to contour: whom has he helped to flee the forgetful *Lethe*'s stagnant waters, Martial himself or his literary *persona*? And although being acutely aware of the literary canons, his answer could not be other than this: somehow the two of them — they both fled!

The point is, thanks to *Marci Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton Libri*, not only has his poetic self been given the chance of a continuous communication until today, as also life as this man has once lived it, two thousand years ago, has not been erased by the course of time. Indeed, Martial has had the ingeniousness for leaving his reader, through the own work of art, a glance of the writer behind the textual author and of the man beyond the artist.

The epigram closing the proemial dedication of the *Liber IX* perfectly illustrates these complex connections, contributing to comprehend how identity can be revealed before the readers' (and even before the author's) eyes, while the artist brings his art to light — a very special light, indeed:

hoc tibi sub nostra breue carmen imagine uiuat,  
quam non obscuris iungis, Auite, uiris:  
'ille ego sum nulli nugarum laude secundus,

*let this brief verse live under my bust, which you, Avitus, are placing in company not undistinguished: I am he whose trifles are praised second to none,*

Martial's portrait was to be subtitled with the poetic words of his literary *persona*: it was the poetic self presenting the man and, furthermore, this man clearly wanted to be known as a poet.

Effectively, poetry happens to be born in many cases from an aesthetic projection of its poet's personal reality (cf. BOUSOÑO, 1970, v. 1, p. 26), and not understanding this could be just as a mistake as discarding poetic forgery.

Yet this concern is not new. In the verses 27 and 28 of his *Theogony*, Hesiod had already stated through his Muses the intricate relations kept between truth and falseness: “ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, / ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.” (“we know how to speak many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things.”<sup>5</sup>).

So the wisest for the reader to do is expecting Martial to have been a loyal server of the Muses: having spoken many false things as though they were true; but certainly having also uttered true things.

Peter Howell, for instance, demands a demarcation from a perspective of Martial's life built, to a certain extent, on decontextualized epigrams, closer to the one he criticizes John Patrick Sullivan for having (cf. SULLIVAN, 1991 (2004 reprint), p. 1-55), insofar as “care is needed to the first person singular may be the ‘authorial’ use, rather than personal” (HOWELL, 2009, p. 9). However, he still scrutinizes the *opus* in search of the *persona* of the author, in the wake of Don P. Fowler (cf. FOWLER, 1995, p. 199-226), John Garthwaite (cf. GARTHWAITE, 1993, p. 78-102; GARTHWAITE, 1998, p. 157-172; or GARTHWAITE, 2001, p. 46-55) or Sven Lorenz (cf. LORENZ, 2004, p. 255-278).

In his *Teoría de la Expresión Poética*, Carlos Bousoño establishes, roughly in the following terms, a comparison that faultlessly fits Martial's literary *labor*: the relationship between poem and life is similar to the relationship mediating between two parallel lines, inasmuch as, despite never touching, each of which follows the evolution of the other in a perfect mimesis (cf. BOUSOÑO, 1970, v. 1, p. 28-29).

It is not surprising, then, to find the *Libri* utterly imbued of and by his whole being, when, either elevating himself through the writing of his epigrams, or submitting himself to the mendicancy of a *sportula* that would allow him to maintain his *Talia*, Martial has devoted to his *opera* his entire existence.

Numerous times, has he brought to the epigram the ultimate expression of identity — the name:

Undenis pedibusque syllabisque  
et multo sale nec tamen proteruo  
notus gentibus ille Martialis  
et notus populis — quid inuidetis? — (10.9.1-4)

*I, Martial, known to the nations, known to the peoples for my verses of eleven feet and eleven syllables, and my wit, abundant but not over-bold (why do you all envy me?)*

His *cognomen* — *Martialis* — he used it to subscribe and individualize the poetry, functioning as a literary name, when addressing to the kind reader that rewarded him with recognition, as in 6.82, or to the helpful patron that favoured his writing, as in 7.72, or to the hateful usurper who tried to take advantage on the poets work, as in 1.117, or even to the unbearable enviers, as here in 10.9. In the more formal circumstance of the proemial letters, opening the *Libri II, VIII, and XII*, are the *tria nomina* (although the *praenomen* being here omitted) — *Valerius Martialis* — that integrated the initial salutation he dedicated to his patron *Decianus*, to the Emperor *Domitianus Caesar Augustus Germanicus Dacius* and to his protector *Terentius Priscus*, respectively. However, it was his *praenomen* the more frequently summoned amidst the epigrams. Who was humbly presented to the patron *Fronto*, in 1.55, to the friend *Iulius Martialis*, in 3.5, or to a Nymph, in 6.47, and who was cited in a poetic response of the Cesar, in 1.5, or whenever there was an imagined mordacious switch of arguments, as in 8.76<sup>6</sup>, was *Marcus*. In fact, *Talia*'s “*nuces*” (“nuts”), as perceptible through 14.1, are more likely to match with a familial tone.

The birthday, according to repeating verses, Martial celebrated it in the March calends:

Natales mihi Martiae Kalendae,  
lux formosior omnibus Kalendis, (10.24.1-2)<sup>7</sup>

*My natal Kalends of March, day fairer to me than all Kalends*

and, by the time his *Liber X* was published, he was 57 years old:

quinguagensima liba septimanque  
uestris addimus hanc focus acerram. (10.24.4-5)

*for the fifty-seventh time I give your altar cakes and this censer.*

Martial *dies natalis* was, then, presumably the first day of March of the year 38. However, on the one hand, the Roman tradition of concentrating in the calends the whole month's anniversary commemorations (cf. LUCAS, 1938, p. 5) and, on the other, the dating problems brought by the fact that only a second edition of this book from the year 98 survived, making impossible to discern if this epigram 10.24 was or not included in the first edition of the year 95 (cf. FRIEDLANDER, 1967, p. 64-65), render very difficult total accuracy difficult.

His filiation, even if just mentioned once, is made very clear by this emotive invocation on the occasion of the death of the little slave *Erotion*:

Hanc tibi, Fronto pater, genetrix Flaccilla, puellam  
oscula commendo deliciasque meas, (5.34.1-2)

*To you, father Fronto and mother Flaccilla, I commend this girl, my pet and darling.*

*Fronto* and *Flaccilla* would be tenderly blamed for the diligent, still apparently worthless, education they provided their son in his land of birth:

at me litterulas stulti docuere parentes: (9.73.7)

*But my foolish parents taught me my ABC.*

Martial was from *Augusta Bilbilis*<sup>8</sup>, in the Imperial Roman Province of *Hispania Tarraconensis*, nevertheless, his adulthood he would live it in Rome, where he got renowned, but also old:

Municipes Augusta mihi quos Bilbilis acri  
monte creat, rapidis quem Salo cingit aquis,  
ecquid laeta iuuat uestri uos gloria uatis?  
nam decus et nomen famaue uestra sumus,  
nec sua plus debet tenui Verona Catullo  
meque uelit dici non minus illa suum.  
quattuor accessit tricesima messibus aestas,  
ut sine me Cereri rustica liba datis,  
moenia dum colimus dominae pulcherrima Romae:  
mutauere meas Itala regna comas.  
excipitis placida reducem si mente, uenimus;  
aspera si geritis corda, redire licet. (10.103)

*You whom Augustan Bilbilis on her steep hill, that Salo girdles with his rapid waters, created my fellow townsmen, do you rejoice in the flourishing fame of your poet? For I am your ornament and renown and glory, nor does his Verona owe more to spare Catullus, or would wish me less to be called hers. A thirtieth summer has joined four harvests since you first gave Ceres your rustic cakes without me, while I have lived among the fair structures of imperial Rome. The realms of Italy have changed my hair. If you receive me back in kindly mood, I come; if the hearts within you are ungentle, I can return.*

After these 34 years (or, eventually, 35<sup>9</sup>) of joys and yet also sorrows in the *Vrbs*, Bilbilis was constantly brought to his mind as a redoubt for a serene oldness<sup>10</sup>.

Being the *Caput Mundi*, Rome allowed him to achieve an enviable universal fame, he made use of in his mockery of Charinus:

Liuet Charinus, rumpitur, furit, plorat  
et quaerit altos unde pendeat ramos:  
non iam quod orbe cantor et legor toto,  
nec umbilicis quod decorus et cedro  
spargor per omnes Roma quas tenet gentes, (8.61.1-5)

*Charinus is green with envy, he bursts, fumes, weeps, and looks for high branches from which to hang himself – not now because I am recited and read the world over, nor because, handsome with bosses and cedar oil, I am scattered through all the nations under Rome’s domination*

Although his first sixteen years in the capital of the Empire have not allowed more than some “apinas” (“rubbish”) of a “iuuenis et puer” (“a young man and a boy”), as described in 1.113, the fact is, in the year 80, Martial’s first book — the *Liber de Spectaculis* — honouring the inauguration of the Coliseum, inaugurated itself, a remarkable series of well-liked publications<sup>11</sup> that have been even able to scope the imperial ear and undoubtedly to please it<sup>12</sup>, since Martial benefited from recognition by both Caesars, Titus and Domitian, as he proudly registered in 3.95.

His fame couldn’t have reached higher nor further and, yet, he has not attained the desired (and deserved) prosperity:

sed meus in Geticis ad Martia signa pruinis  
a rigido teritur centurione liber,  
dicitur et nostros cantare Britannia uersus.  
quid prodest? nescit sacculus ista meus. (11.3.3-6)<sup>13</sup>

*My book is thumbed by hard centurions beside Mars’ standards in Getic forests, and Britain is said to recite my verses. What’s the use? My purse knows nothing of all that.*

Being who he reached to be, he felt living miserably (cf. TORRÃO e COSTA, 2010, p. 93-96). Indeed, the utmost his economical achievements have gone was perfectly consubstantiated in his moving from the rented third floor in the Quirinal, described in 1.117, to the small house he has later been able to buy in the same neighbourhood, referred, for instance, in 9.18<sup>14</sup>; the maintenance of a little farm in *Nomentum*, stated, among others, in the same 9.18<sup>15</sup>, and in the possession of some slaves in his household, perceived in various compositions<sup>16</sup>.

The truth was, with no salary (cf. HABINEK, 1998, p. 106), nor a Maecenas to assist him, the hated adulatory subjection to a patron was a degrading path, but still the only path for a writer to survive. Martial’s Rome did not feel sorry for her poets, who, in spite of all the supplications, she voted to the consuming position of *clientes*, as these sorrowful verses attest:

Iam parce lasso, Roma, gratulatori,  
lasso clienti. [...] (10.74.1-2)<sup>17</sup>

*Spare at length the weary congratulator, Rome, the weary client. [...]*

Confessing himself tired of wasting in vain his days, as in 5.20, declaring his rage by the loss of the most precious of his times, the time for Talia, as in 11.24, he has exchanged Rome for Bilbilis:

me multos repetita post Decembres  
accepit mea rusticumque fecit  
auro Bilbilis et superba ferro. (12.18.7-9)

*me my Bilbilis, proud of her gold and iron, revisited after many Decembers,  
has received and made a rustic.*

There would his writings be far and protected from the degrading patron of 1.70, the disgraceful bookseller of 7.77, the shameful plagiarist of 1.66... However, only one final book — the *Liber XII* — has Martial wrote in Bilbilis. Undeniably, some core part of him has been left behind, lost in the *Magna Vrbs*. He was in Hispania but somehow he felt an irresistible and humongous homesickness that even silenced his *Talia* (cf. COSTA, 2013, p. 56-58).

Unquestionably, the sole occurrence every man is incapable of mentioning — the own death — are missing the pages of his books.

And yet, should not conclude the reader that the legate of the own biography has been to Martial the motivation for his writings. Being this the truth and would his last be his years of major production: in Bilbilis was he finally able to obtain his so called “otia” (“leisure”), from 1.107, and “munera” (“gifts”), from 8.55(56), that could grant him an insouciant life, so propitious to self-analysis.

In the proemial dedication of the *Liber XII*, the poet disclosed the reasons below his silence: Martial was missing his Roman fellow citizens, who truly provided to his epigrams not only the readers as also the themes:

si quid est enim quod in libellis meis placeat, dictavit auditor: illam  
iudiciorum subtilitatem, illud materiarum ingenium, bibliothecas, theatra,  
conuictus, in quibus studere se uoluptates non sentiunt, ad summam omnia  
illa, quae delicati reliquimus desideramus quasi destituti.



*For if there is anything to please in my little books, the audience dictated it. The subtlety of judgments, the inspiration of the themes, the libraries, the theatres, the gatherings where pleasure is a student without realizing it, to sum it all up, all those things which in my fastidiousness I forsook, I now regret as though they had deserted me.*

In fact, as asserted Sara Myers: “life is his stated theme” (MYERS, 2006, p. 452). After all, his poetry was born from those men living in Rome:

hoc lege, quod possit dicere uita ‘meum est’.  
non hic Centauros, non Gorgonas Harpyiasque  
inuenies: hominem pagina nostra sapit. (10.4.8-10)

*Read this, of which life can say: “It’s mine.” You won’t find Centaurs here or Gorgons or Harpies: my page smacks of humanity.*

Well, the truth is — and the exceptional artist he was perceived this before anyone else did — Martial was just another Roman!

Therefore by accomplishing the kaleidoscopic representation of the quotidian of the *Caput Mundi* of the first century A.D., the Bilbilitan ended up sketching his own life. Among the corrupting vices he criticised and the edifying virtues he exalted, the types he condemned and the figures he praised, the man he projected to be as well as the one that he was actually able to build unveiled. Martial himself enlarged (and, above all, enriched) his myriad of characters, becoming, as is now very clear, the one whose identity is more intensely revealed.

Indeed, the textual author attracting the empirical to his gallery, uncovered both the exceptional character of the man, whose critical sense proved to follow not the presumption of a superior morality, but an assumption of his deep humanity; and the sharp technique of the poet that, personalizing the situations, provided them the needed authenticity and attracted to his poetry the readers’ sympathy.

And not only the message, as also its form was considered in this charming process. Nothing but the reader can guarantee universality and immortality, and Martial intended to assure them both to his *opera*.

How many times have the verses cited here apostrophized the reader? How many times were their questions left open, waiting for his reply? How many times have they appealed either to his sensibility, wanting him to condole or to enrage, to forgive or to

condemn, or to his senses, provoking him to see, to smell, to hear, to touch or to taste their world?

Perusing his *Epigrammaton Libri*, Martial's contemporary readers imagined having opened the window to any Roman street, the nowadays' ones believe having travelled through time to Rome!

The identity marker, with which the poet coined his epigrams, contributing to this complicity climate established with the reader, was, in fact, one of the most significant tributes of Martial to the formal revolution he worked over epigrammatic poetry and, consequently, a crucial impetus of a unique production.

A subtle thus genial construction, especially revealed whenever the *focus* is over the *sors* of a poet and the grasp of his poetry in the deceiving *Magna Vrbs*: without targeting self-analysis or self-praise but clearly pursuing the analysis and (through it) the praise of the own poetics, Martial, the *persona*, brings, then, Martial, the poet, into the poetic scene.

The reader is now aware of what the author meant in 6.61(60):

nescioquid plus est, quod donat saecula chartis:  
uicturus genium debet habere liber.' (6.61(60).9-10)

*There is something more that gives centuries to paper. A book that is to live must have a Genius."*

and is entirely convinced that Martial's books effectively have that "genium" ("genius").

In his poetry, the intimate connection between the artist and his work of art dictated that the success of the first would be in the triumph of the last (and vice versa!) and, thus, were accomplished his prophetic words:

condere uicturas temptem per saecula curas  
et nomen flammis eripuisse meum. (1.107.5-7)

*Then I would try to write works that would live through the centuries and snatch my name from the funeral fires.*

Moreover, while revealing his poetic art, Martial culminated with the revelation of traces and facts of the own identity, both as poet and as man, behind and beyond the created *persona*.

It is there, indeed, in the grand opening of his great *opus*, and even knowing they belong to a literary entity, a sole glance over this life offered to *Talia* suffices to believe these words:

Hic est quem legis ille, quem requiris,  
toto notus in orbe Martialis  
argutis epigrammaton libellis: (1.1.1-3)

*You read him, you ask for him, and here he is: Martial, known the world over for his witty little books of epigrams.*

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation of the verses of Fernando Pessoa is quoted after the work of George Monteiro.

<sup>3</sup> A reflexion upon Martial 1.1.1-3 resulted in the lecture “‘Hic est quem legis ille [...] Martialis’ — The identity of the artist through his works of art”, delivered in the United Kingdom, in 2011, within the context of the Classical Association Annual Conference. The following year, new ideas on the subject have granted the material to build the poster “Martial: a glance of the writer behind the textual author and of the man beyond the artist”, aimed for the Research Day of the University of Aveiro, in Portugal. This proposal, gradually honed amidst the works towards the PhD Thesis on Martial literary production, intended to complement and enrich those primeval studies.

<sup>4</sup> The *Martialis Epigrammata*, both in their original Latin version and in their English translation, are always quoted after the critical edition of D. R. Shackleton Bailey, with the indication of the book, the epigram and the verses.

<sup>5</sup> The verses of Hesiod's *Theogony*, both in their original Greek version and in their English translation, are quoted after the critical edition of G. W. Most.

<sup>6</sup> *Vide*, also, 5.29 and 5.63.

<sup>7</sup> *Vide*, also, 9.53, 10.92 and 12.60.

<sup>8</sup> *Vide* 1.49, 4.55 and 12.18.

<sup>9</sup> *Vide* 12.31.

<sup>10</sup> *Vide* 10.13, 10.78, 10.96 and 10.104.

<sup>11</sup> *Vide* 5.16 and 6.60.

<sup>12</sup> *Vide* 7.99.

<sup>13</sup> *Vide*, also, 5.13 and 11.108.

<sup>14</sup> *Vide*, also, 9.97.

<sup>15</sup> *Vide*, also, 2.38 and 9.97.

<sup>16</sup> *Vide* 1.88, 1.101, 3.65, 5.34, 5.37, 5.46, 5.64, 6.34, 8.63, 8.67, 9.93, 10.61, 11.26, 11.58, 11.73 and 12.71.

<sup>17</sup> *Vide*, also, 3.36 and 10.70.