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Martial's 'Epic'¹: *Os Impurum* and Oral Sex in the *Epigrams*²

Francesca Sapsford
University of Birmingham

Martial's main twelve books of epigrams³ have, over the years, been selected, censored, and re-organised according to each editor's particular whims and view of Martial's poetry. Scholars have praised Martial's wit and style, but have at the same time been wary of what was thought of as the very sexual and obscene nature of many of the poems. Further issues have arisen due to the time in which Martial was writing; authors who thrived under the reign of Domitian, especially those who are seen to have flattered him with their writings, have been mistrusted. This opinion arose mainly in the nineteenth century⁴ where he was made out to be a 'fragmented, if not fundamentally incoherent, poet at the mercy of his personal wants and prejudices.' Sullivan argues that this view arose due to the 'selective discarding, or ignoring, of different critics areas of Martial's work which seemed to them offensive, boring, trivial or incomprehensible.'⁵ This has, to some extent, been encouraged by the view of the *Epigrams* as occasional poetry written for specific occasions or in order to elicit patronage, and the books themselves as simply a place for Martial to collect together whatever epigrams he had, rather than entertaining the idea that material was specifically selected and arranged.⁶

¹ I use the term 'epic' here to allude to the idea of a twelve-book connected corpus and the way in which the number of books of the *Epigrams* is likely to have been influenced by Vergil's *Aeneid*, a text which was extremely influential on later Latin literature in all genres.

² This short piece is based on a paper given at the IAA Postgraduate Colloquium 2009. I am grateful to those who attended for the comments which have informed the current work.

³ This research does not include the *Liber de Spectaculis*, *Xenia*, or *Apophoreta* which are previously published works and not part of the twelve-book project which Martial set himself

⁴ For example, Sellar and Ramsey (1884) in the introduction to their edition of Martial comment that 'while no writings more imperatively demand censorship, none lend themselves to it more readily, or suffer less from the process' (iii); Paley and Stone (1881) hold similar views and argue that 'in Martial we have a great mixture of the bad with the good. If we have placed the latter in the hands of the young without fear of scandal from the former, I think we shall have served in some degree the course of Roman literature' (ix).

⁵ Sullivan (1991: 115).

⁶ Cf. White (1974). Sullivan (1991), in his foundational study, uses White's theories extensively. For further on Sullivan's use of White, cf. Fowler (1995).

However, a theory has begun to emerge which recognizes that the books Martial published were not simply haphazard edited collections, but structured literary works, with a variety of methods employed by the author in order to connect and interlink the poems within each book.⁷ As such, several scholars have looked at cycles and themes within individual books, but no one has, so far, looked in depth at the *Epigrams* as a 'dodecapartite whole' as suggested by Holzberg (2002, 2006) and Lorenz (2004).⁸ The aim of my research is to investigate some of the ways in which the *Epigrams* can be read as a twelve-book series, and as such I have begun by following one theme through the corpus and investigating the ways in which it is used, its frequency, and how individual occurrences inform not only later epigrams but also, through re-reading, can change the interpretation of earlier epigrams within the theme.

One of the main problems with such a reading of Martial is that, despite the work of people such as Fowler, Garthwaite and Lorenz, this is still a new way of looking at the *Epigrams*. As such, the prevailing opinion by many who produce collections of the poems still seems to be that reading the poems taken out of context and in any particular order does not make a difference, and do not see the books as structured literature. As late as 2004, an edition of the *Epigrams* edited by Watson and Watson makes no effort to preserve the original reading order or structure of the poems chosen for the edition. They counter this argument by simply stating that 'we see it as our task to imbue readers with some of the enthusiasm which we entertain for Martial: and this purpose could best be served by selecting poems upon which we feel we have new and interesting things to say' and that by doing so they have given 'a representative sample of Martial's oeuvre.'⁹ The problem seems to be that Martial's *Epigrams* are easily separated; it is unlikely that a contemporary edition of Vergil's *Aeneid*, or, in fact, of any Latin poetry, within the same series would arbitrarily choose passages of 'interest' without any regard to the order in which they would have been found in the original, and without clearly showing the extract's place in the whole. The idea that one can compare the

⁷ Cf. Fowler (1995), Fitzgerald (2007), Garthwaite (1993, 1998, 2001), Holzberg (2002, 2006), Lorenz (2004), etc.

⁸ Holzberg (2006: 148); Lorenz (2004: 276).

⁹ Watson and Watson (2004: vii).

epigrams of Martial with Vergil's *Aeneid*, however, is a controversial view; to compare books of seemingly low-brow 'trifles' with the greatest Latin epic would seem to many a comparison which cannot, and should not, be drawn. However, this is in some ways the point of my research project, in that I wish to argue that Martial's *Epigrams* should be considered as a literary whole, in the same way in which we look at the *Aeneid* or *Thebaid* or any of the other narrative works by Latin authors.

The theme on which I have concentrated is that of *os impurum* (the impure mouth) and oral sex, one which would not perhaps be the first that springs to mind when looking at the *Epigrams*. However, this theme, and its interaction with other themes throughout the corpus, allows for a reading that, rather than merely looking at a sexual practice, places the emphasis on orality (not just looking at a sexual practice, but at the emphasis on orality). This can be seen throughout the twelve books, and is an obvious successor to similar themes within Catullus.¹⁰ The theme has several general linking devices. One obvious way in which Martial links the poems of the theme throughout the corpus is through the use of recurring characters, such as Postumus, Zoilus, Rufus, and Galla, among others. Further devices which can be seen are, for example, the placing of poems within the theme at similar positions in different books, and the juxtaposition of poems within the theme of *os impurum* and oral sex with poems on related themes of the *convivium* and the book. The aim of my research is to more fully explore these devices, but I am only in the early stages of these investigations. In looking at this theme the problems with recent editions which use selections from the *Epigrams* and pay no attention to the original ordering begin to be more obvious. Watson and Watson's edition does include some of the poems which feature *os impurum* and oral sex, but because the reading order has been changed significantly that the poems, in isolation from the original context of the book and the series, cannot be seen and read in the same way as they can within the original publication.¹¹

¹⁰ See Fitzgerald (1995) on orality within the Catullan corpus.

¹¹ The poems included within this edition from the theme of oral sex and *os impurum* are (in the order within the book): 2.8, 2.20, 2.77, 3.2, 4.72, 6.64, 10.4, 10.5, 2.91, 2.92, 4.30, 9.18,

In general I am arguing for a more holistic approach to the reading of the *Epigrams*, one which takes account of the individual books and the series as a whole, and sees the poems not just as random trifles, but carefully structured books with fully integrated themes and cycles which were meant to be read, and re-read, as such.

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12.15, 6.21, 7.36, 8.55, 10.64, 12.31, 10.47, 12.18, 12.57, 2.14, 4.67, 6.88, 7.53, 12.68, 5.24, 8.53, 10.50, 3.87, 6.42, 3.12, 7.20, 8.6, 8.23, 9.25, 12.48, 1.102, 3.76, 4.20, 8.54, 10.68, 3.85, 6.7, 6.39, 2.89, 9.67, 3.75, 6.26, 8.31, 7.67, 12.20, 3.65, 7.87, 2.16, 2.29, 3.82, 9.73, 2.26, 9.80, 6.53, 9.15, 10.16, 12.32, 3.52, 3.57, 6.72, 3.44, 7.95, 3.8, 4.87, 6.74, 7.39, 12.54, 3.78, 7.79, 2.80, 4.18, 4.44, 4.59, 7.37, 5.34, 9.29, 10.63, 10.67.

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