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Aroused by Laughter: Martial's Priapic Humor

Eugène O'Connor

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AROUSED BY LAUGHTER: MARTIAL'S PRIAPIC HUMOR

Eugene O'CONNOR

Classicist & Editor (retired)
The Ohio State University Press
Columbus, Ohio, USA
emoconnorphd@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This essay explores Martial's Priapic humor, focusing on those epigrams featuring Priapic "space" and the acts of seeing and being seen, whose object is to arouse at times uncomfortable laughter. It follows, and is indebted to, recent classical scholarship on the act of reading as a form of erotic viewing and on the comic or lubricious possibilities of viewing others within domestic or public spaces. Martial offers himself, through his racy epigrams, as an object of titillation to his audience. Indeed, Martial's literary persona exposes himself for their pleasure and invites his readers, by reading his epigrams

aloud, to take him into their mouths. This essay sheds further light on Martial's humorous and scabrous Priapic persona in order to illustrate the ludic as well as the sexual and gustatory features of the act of reading in an oral culture.

KEYWORDS

Humor,
Latin epigram,
Martial,
Priapus,
oral reading,
sexuality.

Cet article porte sur l'humour priapique de Martial et étudie en particulier les poèmes évoquant les « lieux » de cet humour, quand l'acte de voir ou d'être vu a pour objectif de susciter, au moment opportun, un rire embarrassé. Cette réflexion s'appuie sur les récents travaux de chercheurs qui ont mis en évidence la dimension érotique de la vision dans l'acte de lecture et ont étudié les dimensions comiques et lubriques de l'acte de voir autrui dans les espaces privés et publics. Martial s'offre lui-même, dans ses épigrammes salées, comme objet d'excitation pour son public. En effet, le personnage fictionnel de Martial se donne en spectacle pour le plaisir de ce public et invite ses lecteurs, par la lecture à voix haute de ses épigrammes, à « l'avoir en bouche ». Cette étude met au jour la dimension scabreuse et humoristique du personnage de Priape chez Martial afin de révéler combien le désir sexuel et le goût sont attachés à l'acte de lecture dans une société de l'oralité.

MOTS-CLÉS

Épigramme latine,
humour,
lecture orale,
Martial,
Priape,
sexualité.

Martial is a poet of ubiquity: a tireless *viator* who traverses the streets, houses, arenas, public baths, and stews of Rome. Within the great metropolis, he encounters various social and sexual types whom he appraises in terms of either praise or censure. But Martial not only judges; as a composer of lascivious verse, he entices, inviting readers into his books of epigrams. He lifts the curtain, as it were, and invites them to witness what is described there, including humorous, often scabrous descriptions of vaginal and anal distortion, discharges, farts, and assorted bodily odors. More than this, Martial presents graphic images of sexuality and exposes himself, through his epigrams, to his readers. Indeed, in his desire to seduce others into reading his books, he positions himself at the center of his epigrams, as the ithyphallic guardian god Priapus places himself at the center of his garden as an object of sexual enticement.

In this essay, I explore Martial's Priapic humor, focusing, first, on his epigrams' visual appeal and their concern with the acts of seeing and being seen, for the ostensible purpose of arousing laughter. Indeed, as the speaker in *Epigrams* (hereinafter *Ep.*), I, 35 and elsewhere relates, this humor is not possible without a phallic thrust. The second feature that I shall discuss is the connection of oral reading with smells and tastes. This feature, too, serves Martial's phallic interests, including those epigrams castigating such socially disapproved practices as fellatio (e.g., *Ep.*, XI, 30) and irrumation (e.g., *Ep.*, II, 83). The Priapic penis is often made a "feeder" of hungry sexual orifices, be they mouths, vaginas, or

anus. By offering his epigrams for reading aloud, Martial quite literally places himself in his readers' mouths and thereby "penetrates" them with his Priapic poems.

My essay serves in part as a sequel to earlier studies of Martial's Priapic persona as a restorer of order – order, that is, within the world of his epigrams, where the poet orders events according to the caprice of his own prejudices and desires [1]. It follows, and is indebted to, work published in the last two decades on reading as a form of consumption, erotic or otherwise [2], and on the comic or lubricious possibilities of viewing sexually explicit wall paintings within domestic and public spaces, such as communal baths [3]. It is indebted also to recent work on poetic autonomy and self-representation in Latin poetry, wherein the poet defines his/her work's aesthetic value and its relation to his audience [4], and on the gendered space of the Imperial Roman garden [5]. It owes a debt, finally, to work by Florence Dupont and others on the effects of sexually loaded language on readers and listeners [6].

In the prose preface to his first book of epigrams, in which he addresses his prospective readership, Martial draws a clear analogy between the "theater" of his poetry and the viewing of racy spectacles. If such censorious types as Cato do not wish to view them, they can stay away – or they can take a seat and watch the show: "Epigrams are written for those who habitually watch the Floralia. Let not Cato enter my theater, or if he does, let him watch" (*epigrammata illis scribuntur qui solent spectare Florales*.

[1] E.g., O'CONNOR 1998.

[2] SHARROCK 2002: 265-295; YOUNG 2015: 255-280; BETTINI 2008: 313-374. SHORT 2009: 111-123 and SHORT 2013: 247-275, have studied the alimentary metaphors Latin uses to denote speaking or hearing and, by extension, reading. Indeed, reading, hearing, and listening can themselves be gustatory experiences. Examples abound in various genres; for example, in Plautus, *Aulularia*, 537: *nimum lubenter edi sermonem tuum* ("I have too eagerly devoured your speech"), and in a letter by Cicero to Atticus (4, 11, 2): *voramus litteras* ("we devour your letters [in the reading]").

[3] CLARKE 2002: 265-295; also GUNDERSON 2003: 235-237. CLARKE 2007: 74-75, 91, 107. In his examination of wall paintings and other erotic art for visual clues about how Romans processed sexual humor within domestic and public spaces, Clarke argues convincingly that one of the chief purposes of ribald sexual imagery was to arouse laughter.

[4] ROMAN 2014: 301-321.

[5] VON STACKELBERG 2009: 70-72; VON STACKELBERG 2014: 395-426.

[6] DUPONT 1999: 120-152; DUPONT & ÉLOI 1994: 161-177; OLENDER 1991: 59-82.

non intret Cato theatrum meum, aut si intraverit, spectet). Being the principal player in the theater of his epigrams, Martial positions himself at center stage. He (often facetiously) describes his epigrams as low, throwaway things meant for light holiday reading, especially during the Saturnalia, a time of revelry and license. Further embodying their status as flimsy and disposable, Martial's books are available in inexpensive codex form. As he states in *Ep.*, II, 2, 4, "I can be held in one hand" (*me manus una capit*). They are, therefore, literary pieces confined to a small space, but which can be easily opened and perused. Given these emphases on confinement, access, and visibility, what better guise for Martial than the ithyphallic Priapus in his garden? This Priapic guise underscores the ludic and also the sexual features of the act of reading as viewing, particularly reading epigram as a form of voyeuristic and sensual pleasure, all within the confined space of a codex.

By way of background, I offer a broad review of Priapus' background and his role as a comic and lubricious male symbol, after which I shall concentrate on seven epigrams in particular [7]. The god traces his origins to the Troad, the city Lampsacus (modern Lapseki) being his chief cult center [8]. In myth he is named as the offspring of Dionysos and Aphrodite, who rejected her son, repelled by his grotesque appearance and hypertrophied genitals [9]. Hermes is also called the father of Priapus [10], since both Hermes and Priapus carry associations with boundaries.

Priapus entered Rome through contact with Orientalized Greek culture. Like Hermes, he became, in Hellenistic and Roman literature and cult, a guardian of travelers and the dead [11]. At Rome Priapus was most popularly depicted as a guardian of gardens, whose role was to keep thieves from entering and stealing the garden's goods. His common representation in painting and statuary is that of a free-standing ithyphallic figure, or else a herm in the manner of the ithyphallic Hermes. He sometimes wears a chiton beneath which his erect penis is clearly visible. Priapic statues could

be painted red or else have a reddened phallus; hence the god's common epithet "ruddy keeper of gardens" (*ruber hortorum custos*) [12]. Being the son of Aphrodite/Venus, Priapus had associations with fertility cults throughout Italy. But beyond their connection with fertility, Priapus' hypertrophied genitals occasioned amused glances. Indeed, the ubiquity of phallic objects, including lamps, statues, and wind chimes, betrays a somewhat lubricious interest in representing the generative male organ in novel and sometimes outlandish ways.

By the time Martial began writing, Priapus had become a popular literary character at Rome: he features, for example, in Horace's *Satires*, I, 8; the Tibullan corpus; the *Vergilian Appendix*; and Columella's *Res Rusticae*. The god's literary persona is most fully developed in the *Corpus Priapeorum* (hereinafter *CP*), an early Imperial collection of bawdy poems dedicated to Priapus. Here he is variously described as an ineffective guardian, lustful, boastful, and crude in his exposure of himself to passers-by and, by extension, to the reader. From his position at the center of his garden, where he adopts a hypermasculine stance, the god threatens potential intruders but also invites them in for sexual delectation or sexual punishment (often construed as the same thing). He makes exaggerated, often bogus claims about his own potency; conversely, his phallus is merely a wooden imitation of a penis, with no real life of its own [13].

Katharine von Stackelberg [14] discusses the Roman garden as a place of layered, complex meanings. Most relevant to the interpretation of the garden as a demarcated space are questions of access, status, and permeability, with great stress laid on "inside" versus "outside." In her own study, Amy Richlin [15], focusing on the god's role as guardian of boundaries, establishes Priapus' garden as a demarcated place from which the obscene or satiric poet, assuming a normative, aggressive male stance, may exclude stern moralists (e.g., Cato), but also entice matrons, virgins, boys, and pathics into the Priapic garden to be "punished" with oral, vaginal, or anal rape. As Richlin puts it:

[7] These are, in order of discussion, *Ep.*, VI, 60; III, 68; XI, 16; II, 51; I, 35; XI, 51; and XI, 18. All translations from the Latin are my own.

[8] *Lampsacenus* was a common epithet of Priapus (e.g. Athanasius, I, 30A; Pausanias, IX, 31, 2).

[9] HERTER 1932: 62 ff.; OLENDER 1991: 59-60.

[10] Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 160.

[11] *CIL* VI, 3708.

[12] Ovid, *Fasti*, VI, 333.

[13] See OLENDER 1991: 61: "Priape menace les passants avec son 'arme' à la fois terrifiante et dérisoire. Son phallus est cause d'effroi et de rire".

[14] VON STACKELBERG 2009 : 68 et *passim*.

[15] RICHLIN 1983; 1992.

One minatory figure stands at the center of the whole complex of Roman sexual humor; he will be represented here by the god Priapus. The general stance of this figure is that of a threatening male. He is anxious to defend himself by adducing his strength, virility, and (in general) all traits that are considered normal – and this is the appeal of the joke teller to his audience, as if both are confirming and checking with each other that they are all right, despite the existence of abnormalities in other people. Hence the central persona or protagonist or narrator is a strong male of extreme virility, occasionally even ithyphallic (as in the Priapic poems) [16].

Appropriating this rugged he-man role, Martial in *Ep.*, X, 65, for example, contrasts his own body hair and unkempt locks with Charmenion's depilated body, elaborately curled hair, and high, feminine voice [17].

Priapus threatens potential intruders with violent sexual assault, but just as often he himself is the object of lewd fascination. The animated Priapic statue is in many ways an impish, foul-mouthed figure, rather like a wryly carved wooden dummy that is given voice and thereby assumes an often louche alter ego for the ventriloquist [18]. It is in this vein that Priapus operates – as a lubricious wooden totem, reducible to a swollen phallus that freely indulges in scatology and crude sexual language (*impudica verba*; *CP*, 8, 2); a god who dwells in a place from which shame has been routed (*pudore pulso*; *CP*, 14, 7); and a bogus *littérateur* who indulges in the very Roman practices of word play (*CP*, 67) [19] and false etymologies (*CP*, 68) [20]. At the same time, Priapus runs the risk of being “unmanned” and himself made a ridiculous

character: he boastfully compares himself to the major deities (*CP*, 9, 20); he overlooks a garden of no special distinction (*CP*, 14) [21]; he is flatulent (Horace, *Satires*, I, 8); he bungles his role of custodian and is even importuned by thieves (*CP*, 61, 66, 73). As Maurice Olender argues, Priapus' physical ugliness embodies a social ugliness, an *amorphia* that manifests itself in the god's shameless, outrageous behavior, so in contrast to the ideal of the virile adult male Roman citizen [22].

SPACE AND EROTIC VIEWING

A central feature of Priapic poetry is its emphasis on a defined space, most often the confined space of an urban garden. The trope of the garden, in non-sexual as well as sexual contexts, enjoyed a long life in Latin agrarian and bucolic poetry. In Columella's *Res Rusticae*, X, for example, there is the recurring motif of the gardener as poet and the garden itself as poem. The world of the garden, being a place of order, is by necessity “enclosed” [23]. The maintenance of the enclosure requires a fence or hedge [24]. From the tidy and exclusive enclosure of his Priapic epigrams, therefore, Martial can ward off or else entice his audience into entering his books by offering them a forbidden pleasure. Indeed, space is integral to the Priapic poems generally, in that certain zones, whether gardens or otherwise, act as demarcated sites of sexual exposure [25]. The site of such exposure, such as a domestic interior or a bathhouse, may become a scene of ribald humor, with the hypertrophied penis literally straining against its narrow boundaries.

[16] RICHLIN 1992: 58. On the Roman sexual schema as phallogentric, see, e.g., Martial, *Ep.*, XI, 16; also PARKER 1997: 48. See as well the discussion by GUNDERSON 2003: 36-44. On Priapus as an apotropaic deity, see VON STACKELBERG 2014: 410.

[17] Such inveighing against the degeneracy of the contemporary Roman male was a stock feature of early Imperial declamation. For example, in *Controversiae*, I, pr.8-9, the elder Seneca complains about how the young men of his day have become effeminate and softened by luxury: they curl their hair, affect female voices, and depilate themselves.

[18] See BROWN 1998: 941 ff. on the uncanniness prompted by such lifeless objects, or *homunculi*, that become animated and assume an ersatz life of their own.

[19] See SULLIVAN 1989: 193. Sullivan (195) cites an example in Martial's Priapic epigram XI, 18 (discussed below), where the poet, complaining to his patron of the small size of his garden, wishes that the patron had provided a *prandium*, or meal, instead of a *praedium*, or spread.

[20] Cf. Martial, *Ep.*, XI, 19, in which the poet's penis (*mentula*) commits frequent solecisms.

[21] UDEN 2010: 211 discusses the *hortus Priapi* within the context of early Imperial urban gardens, more notable for providing pleasure than for sustaining produce. See note 51, below.

[22] OLENDER 1991: 63; see also DUPONT & ÉLOI 1994: 156. As a literary character, Priapus had long been exploited as a buffoon, a mockery of a more serious deity, even as he kept his minatory aspect. Clearly the Romans saw nothing puzzling in Priapus as a *reconciliatio oppositorum*, linked as he was in both myth and art with Hermaphroditus. See O'CONNOR 1989: 41; VON STACKELBERG 2014: 410.

[23] See O'CONNOR 1998: 198-201.

[24] Columella, *Res Rusticae*, X, 27-28. See also Vergil, *Georgics*, IV, 147, where the poet cannot discuss gardening further, as he is cut off by insufficient space.

[25] See WILLIAMS 2010: 100 for a discussion of the phallus as a marker of boundaries, including domestic thresholds.



Figure 1

Wall painting of Priapus weighing his phallus, House of the Vettii, Pompeii. Photo courtesy of Buzz Ferebee. © Jackie and Bob Dunn.

www.pompeiiinpictures.com

Priapic statues and paintings were a common feature in domestic and public spaces and made expressly for the purpose of viewing. A wall painting of Priapus weighing his huge phallus on a scale is prominently displayed in the entryway of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii (fig. 1) [26]. In the entry hall of the house of Jupiter Fulminator, or Jove the Thunderer, at Ostia Antica, there is a black and white floor mosaic decorated with multiple winged phalli, whose purpose was ostensibly to ward off the evil eye. But surely such purportedly apotropaic images as these, placed as they were in high-traffic and therefore highly visible parts of the house, must have occasioned at least some bordello humor.

Indeed, the fending off of evil could itself be

effected by laughter. In his essay on the *apodyterium*, or dressing room, of the suburban baths at Pompeii, John R. Clarke [27] discusses the role of erotic images, from the refined to the outrageous, in arousing surprise and laughter within the context of bathing. The bathhouse being a place of exposure and, therefore, danger, phallic amulets worn on the body could serve an apotropaic purpose by warding off the evil eye. But,

[t]o judge from the surviving evidence, the most efficacious images were those that provoked laughter. Three private bath complexes of the late first century B.C.E. at Pompeii employ images of the ithyphallic *Aethiops* for comic – and apotropaic – effect. ... Their atypical body and skin types, as well as their huge, erect penises, made them perfectly unbecoming, and therefore funny, spectacles. Elsewhere we find the Lucky Hunchback, often equipped with a huge phallus, poised at danger points such as entrances to houses, to dispel the evil eye with laughter [28].

The bathhouse itself, being a place where attractive bodies were displayed and appraised, furnished a steady source of phallic humor. Petronius' *Satyricon* provides his audience with an extremely Priapic picture of the well-endowed Ascyrtos, who is applauded at the public bath. The incident is recounted by the nauseous versifier and pederast Eumolpus:

And in another part a naked young man who had lost his clothes was demanding Giton with no less indignant shouts. As the youth mocked me as a madman with the most impudent imitations, a great crowd gathered around him with applause and the most awestruck admiration. For he had sexual organs of such enormous size (*inguinum pondus tam grande*) that you would think the man was simply an attachment to his penis (*laciniam fascini*). Oh, a man equal to the job! I think he begins yesterday and finishes tomorrow. He found assistance right away: a Roman knight rumored to be infamous wrapped a cloak around the wanderer and took him off home, I believe to enjoy (*uteretur*) such a great piece of good fortune by himself [29].

We may compare with this Martial, *Ep.*, IX, 33:

[26] This painting is discussed in full by KELLUM 2015: 199-224; see also CLARKE 2007: 184-189.

[27] CLARKE 2002; 2007.

[28] CLARKE 2002: 156. See further CLARKE 2007: 64-67.

[29] *Satyricon*, 92.

The bathhouse in which you hear applause,
Flaccus,
know that it's the one featuring Maro's cock [30].

In the opening epigram of his first book, Martial already boasts that he is "known throughout the world" (*toto notus in orbe*; I, 1, 3). By being universally read and recited, the poet is also widely viewed. In *Ep.*, VI, 60, Martial touts his universal popularity in terms that suggest surprise and/or outrage at the sudden exposure to a highly graphic sexual image of the sort that might be found on a domestic or bathhouse wall:

My city Rome praises, loves, sings my books.
I'm on every lap, every hand holds me.
Look, they're blushing, growing pale; they're
open-mouthed, astounded, they hate me.
But this is what I want. Now my poems appeal
to you.

Playing the Priapic role, Martial offers his racy epigrams as sources of titillation to, as well as physical objects to be handled by, his voyeuristic readers, who include supposedly chaste Roman matrons and upright male citizens. In *Ep.*, III, 68, Martial begins with a mock-modest warning to a pious matron not to venture beyond the female-oriented part of his book, for what lies beyond the barrier are the male-focused gymnasium, the public bath, and the poet's literal exposure:

Matron, up to this point my book has been written
for you.
You ask for whom the interior part is written?
It's for me.
Here are the gymnasium, the baths, the stadium:
withdraw.
We're taking off our clothes: avoid looking at
men naked.
From this point on, all shame cast aside after the
wine and roses,
Terpsichore, staggering, doesn't know what
she is saying.

[30] *Audieris in quo, Flacce, balneo plausum, / Maronis illic esse mentulam scito*. See also Martial, *Ep.*, I, 96, featuring a man of sham morals, who "devours" with his eyes and with smacking lips the luscious, well-hung studs (*draucos*) at the public bath.

[31] SHARROCK 2002: 272.

[32] See GUNDERSON 2003: 178: "[T]he example of Lucretia was adduced to explain how Roman *mores* had always been principally concerned with chastity (*puđicitia*)". See also WILLIAMS 2010: 123.

[33] In *Ep.*, XI, 104, Martial's appeal to his wife to be more lascivious, he says that she may be a Lucretia by day, but a Lais at night (vv. 21-22). RICHLIN 1992: 62

In no ambiguous terms, but openly she names
that thing
which haughty Venus receives in spring, that
thing
which the bailiff has set up in the middle of his
garden as custodian
and which the upright virgin peeks at through
the screen of her hand.
If I know you well, already bored with a long
book, you were putting it down,
but now you are reading it all – with relish.

The male-oriented part of Martial's book has been cordoned off from the *matrona*. But at the same time she is invited to read, or rather view, the Priapic phallus – Martial in a state of undress. Like Priapus lying in wait for his "victims" to enter his garden, Martial lurks behind the screen for the woman to intrude. Alison Sharrock's comments on the genderedness of the reader are appropriate here [31], for Martial imposes a different standard for the female readers of his books. Here and elsewhere in the *Epigrams*, the woman breaks the rules: by acting not in accordance with her assigned gender role, she trespasses into forbidden territory, thereby risking danger. The poet goads the matron further by making the "barrier" eminently permeable and therefore easy to transgress.

Ep., XI, 16, another warning to the pious female reader, this time features the legendary symbol of chastity, Lucretia, whose rape by Tarquin led to the downfall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic. As a Roman matron, Lucretia serves as the "normative" woman, in contrast to the dissolute Bassa, whom Martial calls a "fucker" (*fututor*) (*Ep.*, I, 90) [32]. Here Lucretia blushes in the presence of her kinsman, Brutus; however, once Brutus departs, she abandons all restraint to read Martial's book. By doing so, Lucretia is divested of her lofty matronly status and made just another randy female reader/voyeur, like the matron of *Ep.*, III, 68 [33]. But Martial engages in equal opportunity arousal: his

discusses Freudian *Herabsetzung*, that is, degradation of figures who are superior as part of the parody, caricature, and travesty of satire. In her essay on the sexuality of the Roman matron, WATSON 2005 similarly argues that "Martial holds up to ridicule the traditional concept of the asexual *matrona* ... " and "blurs the conventional distinction between *matrona* and *meretrix*" (70). Martial, states Watson, "advocates that wives act as *meretrices* within their marriage. Thus he redefines the concept of the *matrona* to include sexuality while retaining the concept of *puđicitia*" (70). This is in line with the relative freedom, sexual and otherwise, enjoyed by elite Roman women. See ROUSSELLE 1988: 75.

poems, he claims, will have the same “lubricating” effect on both sexes. The reading, and thus the viewing and consumption, of Martial’s Priapic verse will make even the most censorious male reader rampantly erect, his swollen penis pressing against his clothes (XI, 16, 5–6) [34], and will make even the most morally upright woman *uda*, or “wet” (XI, 16, 8). Similarly, *CP*, 8, also addressed to supposedly chaste matrons, describes the irresistible allure of an exposed penis made visible in the reading of the poem:

Chaste matrons, go far from here;
it’s shameful for you to read dirty words.
They care not a fig and go straight for them;
matrons too, without a doubt, have a taste for it
and look willingly at my big cock.

In Martial’s Priapic epigrams, emphasis is placed on reading as viewing, specifically, viewing as voyeurism, looking on things that are forbidden but which the voyeur, such as a reputedly chaste matron, may look at nonetheless, even if partially averting her gaze or half-holding her hand in front of her eyes.

By this action, the reader/viewer is made complicit in Martial’s act of seduction. However, such bathhouse looking and appraisal carry distinct risks. Think again of Lucretia, who is for Martial an avid consumer of forbidden verses [35]. But as Martial’s readership knew, the Lucretia of history, having been raped and therefore sexually compromised, chose death over dishonor.

IS IT BIG ENOUGH? TASTY ENOUGH?

The Priapic penis is not merely for looking, but also for tasting. In Martial, *Ep.*, XIV, 70 (*Priapus*

siligineus, or “Priapus made out of wheat”) the phallus is a literal comestible.

If you wish to be sated, you may eat our Priapus;
though you nibble on genitalia, you will be
pure [36].

The body parts belonging to those who lust after large penises, namely, anuses, vaginas, and mouths, are themselves Priapic spaces, liable to being grossly penetrated, distended, and soiled after being “fed” through frequent penile contact. *Ep.*, II, 51 features a certain Hyllus, who spends all his money on hugely endowed studs, even at the price of denying his stomach food and drink, thus rendering one body part empty and looking on with envy while the other is filled to bursting:

Although often a single coin remains in your
coffer
and worn smoother than your asshole, Hyllus,
neither the baker nor the innkeeper will take it,
but some well-hung stud.
Your poor stomach witnesses (*spectat*) your ass-
hole’s feast.
That part goes hungry while the other’s
gorged [37].

This feature of exaggerated size serves Martial’s phallic interests: penises that are large or oversized dominate the space that they inhabit. But, being an indiscriminate penetrator of often voracious sexual orifices, be they mouths, anuses, or vaginas in the classic *triporneia*, or threefold punishment [38], the Priapic penis itself risks becoming fouled by bodily fluids, including blood and excrement [39]. In turn, the constant reception of a penis can render the body cavity ugly, flaccid or distorted; as a result,

[34] See also Catullus, 32, 10-11: *nam pransus iaceo et satur supinus/pertundo tunicamque palliumque* (“now having dined I lie, and stuffed, supine, I’m poking through my tunic and my coverlet”).

[35] The character of Lucretia is indeed ambiguous; cf. her portrayal in Ovid’s *Fasti*, I and see KING 2006: 212: Lucretia is outwardly chaste but she conceals erotic desires.

[36] *Si vis esse satur, nostrum potes esse Priapum; / ipsa licet rodas inguina, purus eris.*

[37] Overeating generally was considered by Roman moralists a classic sign of profligate behavior (see CORBEILL 1996: 128). Martial turns this stricture on its head by emphasizing not the mouth (*os*) as the usual receptor of food, but rather the anus. The mouth itself, however, may be likened to a door (*os/ostium*) through which food passes, and therefore an exit from which words

issue. RICHLIN 1992: 148 adduces several examples from Latin invective that establish a relation between eating and depravity generally. See CORBEILL 1997: 102. See especially DUPONT & ÉLOI 1994: 182-185 on the voracity of the anus, mutilated by penile penetration and thus made in effect a greedy mouth. In their discussion of *Ep.*, II, 51, they call Hyllus’ feeding of his anus “une anti-nourriture”.

[38] See *Carmina Priapea*, 13: *Percidere, puer, moneo; futuere, puella;/barbatum furem tertia poena manet* (“I warn you, boy, you will have your ass split; girl, you will be fucked. A third punishment awaits the bearded thief”).

[39] E.g., *Carmina Priapea*, 46, 9-10: *fossas inguinis ut teram dolemque/cunni vermiculos scaturientes* (“so that I may wear down the ditch in your middle and drub the crawling maggots in your cunt”); *Carmina Priapea*, 68, 8: *et pediconum mentula merdalea est* (“and the bugger’s cock is caked with shit”).

the pathic may need to purge because his sphincter has been worn down by constant anal sex. The mouth in particular, if its narrow space is invaded by a thrusting penis, can smell like feces, whose exhalations, equivalent to farts, may make even good food foul and therefore inedible. For example, in *Ep.*, III, 17 the hot appetizers being passed around at table are refused once Sabidius has blown on them to cool them, since his foul breath has turned them into *merda*, or shit. (The implication is that Sabidius indulges in oral sex.)

The appropriateness of time and place for obscenity was not lost on the epigrammatist, which shows in the distribution of racy epigrams throughout his oeuvre. For example, fully one-third of Martial's book VII is satirical or sexual, since it was issued in December 92, Saturnalia time, which allowed for the loosening of traditional strictures. Book XI, which appeared in December 96, contains more obscene poems than any other book, once again allowing for Saturnalian license, but also rejoicing that the more liberal Nerva has assumed the imperial throne following the assassination of the intolerant and tyrannical Domitian. In *Ep.*, XI, 2, one of a series in which he announces the program for this book, Martial, says Stephen Hinds, "welcomes and eulogizes the new government of Nerva; and he associates Nervan liberalization with the programme which he announces for his book, a programme which will indeed dominate it: a new accession of obscenity and uninhibited bawdiness (i.e., uninhibited even for Martial), for which the poet claims specifically Saturnalian licence (XI, 2, 1-6)" [40]. Martial is quick to defend the normative use of obscenity in the service of humor by adducing, for example, in *Ep.*, I, 35, the approved custom of marriage: just as husbands with their wives, he, or rather, his poems, cannot please without a *mentula*. *Mentula*, the vulgar term for the penis, occurs forty-eight times in Martial (as compared to twenty-six times in the *Carmina Priapea*) [41]. He refers later in *Ep.*, I, 35 to the marriage song, or *thalassio*, a scurrilous yet recognized part of the marriage ceremony, and also to the spring rites of the *Floralia*.

All these are occasions when what is normally forbidden may be openly looked at. Obscenity has its place; it is useful, and even necessary. Fittingly the same law (*lex*) is given to scabrous verse, that is, it

cannot please unless it titillates. Picking up on imperial legislation outlawing castration, Martial pleads: "please don't castrate my books" (*nec castrare velis meos libellos*; I, 35, 14). There is, the poet states, nothing more foul (*turpius*) than a gelded Priapus, for his books cannot please his readers without a *mentula* (*hi libelli ... non possunt sine mentula placere*; I, 35, 5). The *mentula*, then, the rampant male organ, is the very essence of Martial's Priapic humor [42]. Notably, in the Saturnalian Book XI, in which he wants to put on full display his phallic prowess, Martial banishes whatever lurks in the dark (*quidquid. ... in tenebris ... ite foras*; XI, 2, 4); that is, the pious moral posturing of a Cato or a Fabricius, which he separates from himself and his poetic agenda.

A particularly piquant example of a thrusting penis pinioned within narrow confines for exaggerated effect is *Ep.*, XI, 51, in which the penis of Titius is called a *columna*, or "column" [43]. In this epigram, notable for its brevity, Titius' columnar penis threatens to overwhelm his commodious bath. Thus it offers an outstanding example of Martial's Priapic humor and also his literary art.

From Titius extends a column (*columna*) as long
as the one the girls of Lampsacus adore.
Here, with none to disturb him, Titius
bathes in his giant bathhouse (*thermis
grandibus*).
Nonetheless Titius bathes
in a confined space.

Lampsacus here is a direct reference to Priapus, the city Lampsacus being his cult center. Titius is a *gentilicium* also used by Martial in *Ep.*, IV, 37, 2 and VI, 55, 5 [44]. The name Titius, along with Seius, occurs frequently in Roman law to suggest "an indefinite or fictional person, or a person referred to by way of illustration", as defined by *Black's Law Dictionary*. Titius is also a *nom parlant*, in that it sounds like *titus*, a vulgar Latin metaphor for "penis" [45]. Therefore, Titius, that is (if we accept the legal reminder), "Mr. John Doe", is also Mr. Prick, an especially appropriate appellation because he is so enormously endowed.

The word *columna* is significant, for, beyond its suggestion of exaggerated size to denote Titius' *mentula*

[40] HINDS 1998: 129.

[41] See ADAMS 1982: 9-12.

[42] See HALLETT 1996: 323.

[43] Cf. *Carmina Priapea*, 10, 8, where Priapus' prick is also called a *columna*.

[44] See KAY 1985: 179.

[45] ADAMS 1982: 32 and *passim*.

(which is linked with Lampsacus, and thus with the god Priapus), it denotes the column of a temple or other imposing public building. The grandeur implied by *columna* (think here of a grand Ionic or Corinthian affair) is further underscored below (v. 4) by *thermis grandibus*, normally denoting an enormous public bath, with an elegant, colonnaded portico. But here the words describe the lavish (and presumably expensive) private bath of Titius, which he alone occupies (and fills up completely with his penis). This reference to *thermae* as the place where Titius and his penis are located, is appropriate because, as illustrated by the examples from Petronius and Martial cited above, the bathhouse could be a scene of assignation and a place where well-endowed men were ogled and applauded. Likewise, the bathhouse furnished a site where erotic paintings could be displayed for amused looking and enjoyment. Titius, or Mr. John Doe, by contrast, has no real identity, because, unlike those well-hung worthies in the public bath, *he has no one to look at him*. That is, no one but the reader who may read and thus regard the scene of Titius and his gigantic penis for the purpose of arousing laughter.

The situation described here is, indeed, utterly farcical. *Thermis grandibus* is an exaggeration, just as the hypertrophied penis is an exaggeration [46]. Such a comic description “deflates” (in contrast to the penis’s ballooning size) any sense of power that may have been suggested by the bath or the gigantic male endowment. The *mentula* here is not an agent but rather a victim, an unwieldy pole shutting Titius in. Titius is a *mentula* but a *mentula* in a ridiculous, Priapic sense [47]. Titius’ huge, unwieldy “column” would make *any* space feel small, and it keeps getting bigger and bigger. With his penis described in such gargantuan terms, Titius is isolated in his bath, just as Priapus, rejected by his mother and

the community of greater deities, finds himself alone within the confines of his garden [48].

No less farcical in its emphasis on tight, confined space is *Ep.*, XI, 18, featuring a Priapic statue that has to be “halved” in order to fit within Martial’s garden’s tiny confines. This poem’s reliance on exaggeration, in this case exaggerated smallness, to make its point, addresses his stingy patron Lupus, who has given Martial a garden space no bigger than a window box. Therefore, despite its phallic guardian, the garden fails to provide enough to eat. The garden is in fact so small, says Martial, that a cicada could cover it with its wing; an ant could consume its contents in one day; a cucumber cannot lie straight; and, most tellingly, a Priapus would not have room for his hook or his *mentula* [49]. Like the distinctly phallic cucumber, therefore, Priapus’ member cannot swell in luxuriant fashion as it wants to do. From a purely social standpoint, Martial’s tiny garden fails as a status symbol [50]. Also, like the urban garden of Priapus, which is infertile and even sterile, Martial’s phallic garden, bursting against its meager confines, is unable to provide ample provender or effective sex [51].

Both *Ep.*, XI, 51 and XI, 18 illustrate Martial’s use of exaggeration in the service of humor. But what else can we say about Martial that makes his audience laugh? It may be the curt, witty, and finely drawn descriptions of his city, Rome, with its stews and public baths; the dreary dinner parties; his trudging around Rome to salute a mean patron; the poetasters who steal Martial’s verses and claim them as their own; the bawds, the bores, and finally those scabrous poems describing randy old women, pathics, fellators, and cunnilinctors. Indeed, it is this very bumping against the teeming humanity within the space of the city walls, with its outrageous sights and often unpleasant tastes and odors, as much as it is the obscene language, fit more for the toilet wall [52],

[46] See RICHLIN 1992: 61-62 for her discussion of hyperbole in satire as a mode of denigrating and thus ostracizing the target of criticism.

[47] Cf. Catullus, 115, 8: *Non homo, sed vero mentula magna minax* (“Not a man, but truly a great big threatening prick”).

[48] DUPONT & ÉLOI 1994: 188-189.

[49] Compare *Ep.*, VI, 72, in which a thief of extraordinary rapacity (*fur notae nimium rapacitatis*) enters a huge garden, but finding nothing else in it but a marble Priapus, steals the Priapus.

[50] See VON STACKELBERG 2009: 11.

[51] See UDEN 2010: 211 on Columella, *Res Rusticae* X, 94-95: “Pliny’s [the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*] dire image of urbanites’ gardens, cultivated for pleasure not

produce, is thoroughly and farcically brought to life in the gardens of the *Carmina Priapea*, where produce is in desperately short supply and visitors go (if we are to believe Priapus) explicitly to satiate their lusts”. See, for example, the Priapic garden of *Carmina Priapea*, 51, enticing not for its poor produce, but because it offers the god’s phallic “punishment”. Relevant here, by contrast, is Columella, *Res Rusticae* I, pr.14-15, which praises the virtuous order of old-fashioned agriculture, for in requiring hard work it promoted manliness, in contrast to the rank effeminacy of contemporary Roman males.

[52] Cf. *Ep.*, XII, 61 where Martial responds to Ligurra’s fear and desire to be impugned in Martial’s epigrams: “Don’t worry. You’re not a worthy target. Seek rather some drunken bard who scribbles verselets to be read while taking a crap” (*[qui] scribit carmina quae legunt cacantes*, v. 10).

that accounts for the epigrams' salaciousness. It is that very quality of "wit" again, what the Romans called, using a gustatory metaphor, *sal et lepor*, that is, salt and wit, for without salt Martial's epigrams are *incondita*, or artless. Such a culinary reminder would be appropriate for a society used to reading aloud, often within the context of a *convivium*, or feast.

Martial's epigrams, claiming a universal appeal, embrace not only the high-born but also the prostitutes, buggers, and other low life of the imperial city. Being a seasoned denizen of the metropolis, he appropriates the bawling language of the Roman streets. Speech itself has a particular "flavor", sweet or salty, depending on the genre. Recommending his own epigrams, Martial states, for example, in *Ep.*, X, 4, 9-10, that the reader/auditor will not find in this book Gorgons or Harpies, which are the stuff of epic. Instead, he says, "my page tastes of humankind" (*hominem pagina nostra sapit*). In *Ep.*, XI, 90, 8, Martial addresses Chrestillus, who approves only of the bombastic poetry of old, "May I perish if you don't know what a *mentula* tastes like" (*dispeream ni scis mentula quid sapiat*). Martial establishes a nexus between, on the one hand, epigram with its "salty" taste, best expressed by the penis, specifically Martial's own penis, which entices and, like a delectable meal, should be tasted and enjoyed, and on the other, Martial's self-validation as a poet. Such an assertion may be related to the "tastes" of things one might find in a brothel or on some crowded urban thoroughfare; namely, other bodies that can be viewed, sampled, touched, or penetrated. These sensations relate well to Martial's many epigrams castigating those who indulge in sexual practices, particularly cunnilingus and fellatio, that can be construed as perverse forms of eating, that is, consuming rotten food that leaves the mouth dirty and the breath unpleasant. Martial's oral fixations include as well the sundry paltry gifts of bad food

[53] However, Martial, like other freeborn Roman males, was not averse to the delights of lovely young slave boys, as in *Ep.*, III, 65, describing Diadumenus' sweet breath and fragrant kisses, so in contrast to the excremental mouth of the adult male pathic.

[54] See SULLIVAN 1991: 42-43. The medical literature itself warned against excessive ejaculation, in both females and males. See, for example, Soranus, *Gynaecology*, I, 30-33 and also the discussion by ROUSSELLE 1988: 15.

[55] See *Ep.*, VI, 36, featuring Papyrus, who has both a huge nose and a huge penis. As a result, every time he has an erection, he can smell it.

and undrinkable wine (e.g., *Ep.*, X, 36), implacable toxins that further excite revulsion (and which may incidentally leave a bad taste in the mouth). Salt is at the heart of it: the spicy, well-seasoned point (e.g., *Ep.*, X, 4, 10) expressed in those poems which treat eating or devouring, whether by mouths, vaginas, or anuses.

CONCLUSION: HUMOR AS A TOOL OF TITILLATION

Being familiar with human foibles and vices, Martial positions himself within his epigrams as the normative, controlling Roman male. As such, he may share with his audience a distinct distaste for men playing the passive sexual role, tribades, and randy women generally, who violate his sense of decorum [53]. At the same time, Martial, playing the Priapic role, is himself made an object of titillation. Even the most censorious of his epigrams share space with his bawling humor. For example, in *Ep.*, XI, 104, the poet, acting as the dominating husband, chastises a wife who behaves not like a proper Roman wife but more like a Vestal, who proffers not passionate kisses but dry pecks on the cheek; who does not compliantly offer herself for sex from behind or even give him a hand job. Martial inveighs against masturbation in *Ep.*, IX, 41 [54]. Indeed, he says, it is a great crime (*scelus ingens*), tantamount to castration. But the poem's final line, "what you waste, Ponticus, with your fingers is a human being" (*istud quod digitis, Pontice, perdis, homo est*), for all its avowed moral outrage, leaves the reader with a highly lubricious picture of semen dribbling over the hand.

Martial entices and at the same time mocks supposedly chaste matrons and passive adult males who are attracted by large penises, and who have a fondness for oral, vaginal, and anal sex, resulting in an unclean mouth and distorted body parts. His Priapic epigrams' emphasis on the visual appeal of the large penis, sometimes inflating like a balloon, can veer into the comic grotesque. In *Ep.*, XI, 51, as we saw, the enormous size of Titius' penis, called a *columna*, threatens to take over his entire bathhouse, leaving Titius confined and alone. Hypertrophied genitals may, therefore, join the list of deformities that include distended anal or vaginal apertures [55].

By exposing his own universally regarded penis, even if figuratively as part of his poetic program, and inviting his audience to view it, fondle it, and finally "take it in their mouths", Martial exploits the

Roman custom of reading aloud as an act of oral consumption. Playing the role of a controlling Priapic male, he in effect irrumates his many readers by inserting his words in their mouths. Once invited into his phallic books, in which the poet “lifts the curtain”, his dedicated audience will not be able to take their eyes off him; indeed, they will continue to read to the point of climax. In this regard, they may be compared to the Phrygian servants in *Ep.*, XI, 104 who masturbate while watching from behind the door as Andromache (described as an *uxor*, or wife) rides Hector [56]. They must read on, licking their lips and fondling themselves as they do so. The consumers of Martial’s epigrams abandon all restraint.

Martial’s familiarity with a broad swath of human-kind entitles him to be such an expositor of bawdy, phallic humor, an object of merriment and delectation for those he invites into his Priapic garden. His Priapic books tout themselves as avatars of unchecked testosterone; they feature as well less welcome markers of human animality which all,

both men and women, share, such as farts, bad breath, body odor, and defecation. It is as if the poet were saying (to borrow a line from Horace, *Satires* I, 1, 69-70): “Why are you laughing? With a change of name, the tale is being told about you” (*quid rides? mutato nomine de te/fabula narratur*). Thus Martial’s many readers, holding his codices in their hands, will be confronted, surprised, titillated, targeted, and aroused to the point of (possibly uncomfortable) laughter by the scabrous Priapic humor of the *Epigrams*. ■

[56] See HINDS 1998: 133-134, who notes that Martial alludes in *Ep.*, XI, 104, 13-14 to Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, II, 703-704, describing Antromache in bed with Hector. Ovid is hesitant to release salacious details, offering but a hint of the bedroom scene: *Conscius, ecce, duos accepit lectus amantes:/Ad thalami clusas, musa, resiste fores* (“Behold, the knowing bed has received the two lovers. Stop, Muse at the sealed chamber doors”). The vigorous voyeurs of Martial, *Ep.*, XI, 104, by contrast, “peep in and enjoy the action within in the most demonstrative and explicit way possible” (134).

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