

REVIEWS

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Spisak, Art L. (2007) *Martial: a social guide*. London: Duckworth. VI, 151 p. ISBN 9780715636206.

Spisak's book consists of 151 pages (of which 50 pages are notes), bibliography, and index. This book, with a beautifully illustrated cover, is written in easy-to-understand language and evidently meant for the widest readership.

The book begins with an introduction (13 pages) followed by four chapters on invective, friendship, praise, and the conception of the good life in Martial's poems. At the end of the book is a three-page conclusion. Spisak's aim is well formulated; he wishes to refute a misinterpretation of Martial's poetry as "unobjectionably trivial" or without any "moral reflection" (p. 2). One of the reasons for these interpretations is that obscenity and sexual content are important parts of Martial's poetry. Thus, it is necessary for Spisak to show why Martial uses these. Also, one cannot ignore the fact that Martial himself often states that his poetry is for entertainment and fun. In response to these ambiguities this study tries to answer the following questions: How did Martial's poems affect his audience, and did they have any additional function besides entertaining? Spisak's hypothesis is that their main function was to instruct and guide in an ethical sense. The result of this guiding, in turn, was "the unifying and strengthening of the social group through the expressions of its views" (p. 4).

To prove this, Spisak views Martial's corpus in the context of Indo-European blame/praise poetry, which was a powerful form of social control. The author shows that the main characteristics of this tradition (invectives and their social context) carried through ancient Greek iambic tradition and Greek Old Comedy over to Roman satire and epigram. Inside the iambic tradition Spisak describes Martial's poetry as a social guide in two senses: the poems catalogued and reflected upon social practices and views and also encouraged certain behaviour (p. 12). The following chapters show in more detail in what sense Martial is an iambic poet.

The first chapter deals with Martial's invective, the tradition behind this, and the functions of invective in the social community. Spisak argues that the aim of Martial's obscene jokes was to reconnect people with their base feelings and instincts and thus maintain the community's healthy and productive state (pp. 20, 33). To understand better the aims of invective, Spisak examines its origins, going back to the myth of Iambe. He states that this myth reveals that the purpose of invective is not malicious attack, but it is originally associated with moving the goddess from her antisocial and infertile acting (pp. 15–18). Spisak says that the aim of Martial's invective is not just providing delight and fun but rather to reveal a community's vices and instruct his social community. In addition, his obscene and sexually graphic invective has a specific target: Roman hypocritical *gravitas* and *severitas* (pp. 32–33).

With the second chapter Spisak tries to show that Martial's epigrams of friendship are not, as often thought, a form of extortion. According to Spisak, Martial's conception of *amicitia* has an inherently contradictory nature; although it is based on a mutual affection, it shows itself through the exchange of goods and services (p. 40). To understand this contradictory nature, Spisak brings in the theory of social exchange. The best formulation of this is the last line of Martial's epigram 5.42: "Only that wealth which you have given away will you always have" (p. 50). Thus, Martial's purpose with his poems of friendship is, according to Spisak, not flattery or extortion of something, but to remind the reader of the importance of the social exchange. Only through it can one establish trust and strong social ties in community, which are, in turn, necessary for the community to be strong and prosper (p. 50).

The third part of this study deals with poetry of praise. Here also the aim of the author is to refute the view that Martial's approbative poems, especially those which are addressed to the emperor Domitian, are "mercenary flattery" (p. 56). Spisak argues that the poetry of praise should be understood as prescribing social views and strengthening the norms of his readership (i.e., encouraging certain behaviour through a single case, for example 1.39 and 6.24) (pp. 53–54). For example in epigram 5.36 Martial says: "A certain person who was praised in my book, Faustinus, plays innocent, as if he owed me nothing. He has cheated me!" (p. 53) According to Spisak, Martial is not insincere here, but he expresses an idea that the worst crime is *ingratia* (ingratitude) because the social community will not hold together and social exchange cannot work without gratitude (p. 59) Martial's most frequent honorand is the emperor Domitian. Spisak says that in these cases of praise Martial plays a role of power broker between the emperor and his subjects (p. 68), and that his purpose when he praises the emperor is a legitimation of Domitian (p. 65).

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Martial's conception of the good life. This is, according to Spisak, an epicurean pastoral ideal. Spisak connects it with the Roman archetype of the golden age of Saturn (pp. 90–95). The aim of this, as Spisak says, is to show that all the vices come from the city; Martial shows with his urban-rural antithesis "city life as difficult, dangerous, unhealthy, and immoral" (p. 78). This ideal is expressed, for example, in the epigrams 2.90, 1.55, and 4.5. (Spisak analyses those poems quite thoroughly on pages 74–78. For the analysis of the epigram 10.47 there is a separate subsection [81–90]). Spisak argues that Martial wants to tell his reader that a good life is possible only if he finds a proper balance between personal wants/needs and societal expectation (pp. 89–90). Evidently the final purpose is again for social exchange to work and for the social community to prosper.

The reader should consider that Spisak goes quite far with his theory of iambic poetry as a social guide. For example, he interprets Archilochus' attack in verse on Lycambes in this context, which means that in an Archilochus poem there was nothing personal, but it illustrates a general truth to the community: oath-breakers are a menace to society (p. 19). For my taste this book is too radical, but I still think that Spisak is worth reading. He is consistent and does not let many questions go unanswered. It is quite evident that Spisak sees Martial as a blame and invective poet rather than as a praise poet. For that reason this part in his book is the most solid and credible.

I would recommend this book to the widest readership and to anyone who is even a little interested in Martial or in Indo-European iambic tradition. The reader does not have to understand Latin to appreciate Spisak's discussion; one can find some of Martial's most famous epigrams here together with English translations. I am not sure if Spisak could change the mind of someone who is convinced that Martial's poetry is just for fun without any deep reflection, but he certainly could make him or her consider the other interpretation.