

**REVIEWS**

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Fitzgerald, William (2007) *Martial: the world of epigram*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press. X, 248 p. ISBN 978-0-226-25253-7.

William Fitzgerald's rather recent book takes the reader to the world of epigram and introduces one of its most famous ancient poets – Martial. This review will provide a short overview of the book and its main arguments with brief commentaries where needed, though not pretending to cover nor explain all of the aspects present in the book.

Before introducing the content it seems reasonable to discover the aim and target audience of this book. Some information on this can be found on the cover of the book, where it is stated that this “study will delight classicists, literary scholars, and anyone who appreciates an ingenious witticism.” As the potential readership is defined here to be so large-scale, this information is not very helpful. I think the book will be most definitely enjoyed by a scholar with good knowledge of Martial and Latin (Greek and French would also be helpful). This conclusion is founded upon the fact that some of the introductory notes are missing, which could be essential for a Martial-beginner, some parts of Latin (mostly in the Endnotes section) are left untranslated, as well as some comments in French. So, although the book invests quite a lot of space to introduce some crucial aspects of Roman life that are indispensable when trying to understand Martial, it is still hard to imagine someone without previous knowledge of Martial and without a good proficiency of Latin to be able to enjoy the book in its entirety. However, as it touches various topics concerned with the ancient and contemporary literature, also comparing the socio-political situation of ancient Rome with the “West in its late capitalist phase” (35), it is a very inspiring reading for those willing to ignore the difficulties mentioned above.

The book contains six chapters, an excursus, a final conclusion, endnotes, bibliography, an index of the epigrams and a general index. The first chapter introduces the topic of the book in general with its main arguments and provides some provisional notes about what follows. Central concepts like the relevance of Martial's poetry for our times, the internal and external ambiguousness of the epigrams, the sceptical and panegyric nature of epigrams, juxtaposition of the epigrams are all presented in this chapter to hint at what is to be expected. This is followed by a short excursus on the history of the epigram in Greece and in Rome.

The second chapter concentrates mostly on the *Liber Spectaculorum*, the first and in many ways the most distinctive of Martial's books. Fitzgerald deals here with the sincerity of Martial's panegyric to the emperor and succeeds in showing the reader that there is much more behind the visible unambiguous praise of the emperor than one might think *prima facie*. The book stands out from all the others primarily because it is written for a single event, for the games given by Titus for the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheater in 80 BC. In this chapter, the reader is confronted with a very interesting account of the concept of 'spectacle'

and its relation towards a book containing the descriptions of the same spectacle,<sup>1</sup> which will definitely make the simultaneous reading of the epigrams more interesting.

The third chapter focuses on Martial's First Book of Epigrams, which, according to Fitzgerald, as the first book of miscellaneous epigrams is an exemplary model for the other books that succeed it. Through the analysis of 25 epigrams on various topics<sup>2</sup> Fitzgerald provides quite a few new interesting interpretations and therefore useful aspects to be considered when reading Martial's epigrams. The prevailing approach here, and actually throughout the book, seems to be the consideration of the juxtaposition of (at first sight) different epigrams and their complementary behaviour toward each other.

Chapter four explores more closely the juxtaposition of the epigrams and exemplifies the theory by analyzing 26 epigrams. Fitzgerald asks intriguing questions such as what kind of effect do two completely adversative epigrams produce and whether this effect is intentional or arbitrary. It seems that Fitzgerald holds the view that almost everything in Martial's books is intentional, at which he hints already in the first chapter by saying that "Martial may suggest that we browse his books (10.1), but it is clear that in some respect they are as constructed as any other books of Latin poetry" (p. 4).

In chapter five, Fitzgerald takes up more closely the question of the relationship between the *lector* (*studiosus* as Martial would have it), the author and the emperor. Here, some aspects are of special interest: on the one hand the heterogeneity of the readership, for example according to their social class status or gender, which thus leads to individually different approaches and understandings of the book (and the consideration of this heterogeneity is most probably also intentional), and on the other hand the becoming-one of the same readership, the comparability of the abstract reader to the almighty emperor.

The last chapter is mainly concerned with the reception of a literary work and looks into the misinterpretations of Catullus by Martial and the reinterpretation of Martial by a Christian poet, Johannes Burmeister. Fitzgerald looks into the different poems of Catullus that were probably the basis for some of Martial's poems, but from a very different angle, thus sometimes interpreted as mocking the original poems of Catullus (assuming that the reader is familiar with them), their themes and finally their author. However, Fitzgerald seems to accentuate the ambiguous relationship between Catullus and Martial and points out the possibility for succeeding authors to play with the oeuvre of the precursors as they please. This is what Johannes Burmeister does in his parody of Martial's epigrams, although in a rather extreme way.

One of the major arguments of this book, that the positioning of the epigrams in a book is not random, is very interesting (although not new) and in some point also very convincing, adding extra wit and creating a sort of second dimension to the oeuvre of Martial. Still, as it is not an absolute rule and rather an extra layer of wit, it is mostly up to the reader's

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<sup>1</sup> This introduces at the same time the interesting polemic of copy *versus* original, which is also dealt with in the book (e.g., p. 36).

<sup>2</sup> Like the relationship between the poet and its audience, the concept of slavery and especially of possession, past and present, to mention but a few.

competence to either discover, dismiss or misinterpret it. The presentation of coherent epigrams with their translations and the following short interpretation is relevant and helpful (even when the translations are in prose), for it provides the reader the opportunity to follow word for word the original, thus facilitating the understanding of the following interpretation. The small titles that are placed inside the chapters marking a new aspect or argument to be analyzed are first of all informative and secondly break the impression of an overall academic treatise and bring the book a bit closer to the atmosphere of Martial's epigrams.

One could complain that the general information about Martial is very much lacking, as well as the information about the source or edition of the text (though it's mentioned at one place in an endnote, it could easily be left unnoticed and therefore make it more difficult to follow the original text).<sup>3</sup> Further, the notions or concepts with which the author operates are not always clearly stated and may result in misunderstandings. For example, Martial's epigrams are in several places referred to as satirical, without explaining the relationship of satire to epigram, which leaves the question whether satirical is to be understood the same way as witty.

Although stressing the ambiguous nature of Martial's epigram book, it seems that Fitzgerald still pursues in many places *the* right and unequivocal interpretation, and this could make a reader cautious, especially when no original version is presented for comparison.

To conclude with, Fitzgerald's monograph is to be read from the beginning to the end (i.e. from cover to cover). First, because it is interesting, although sometimes difficult reading, and second, because in that way it is easier to follow the main concepts at work throughout the book. Although one should be careful with the generalizations and comparisons made of and with our time, they are none the less still inspiring to read, even when they provoke a certain feeling of disagreement (which can be a good thing). Fitzgerald certainly brings Martial a bit closer to an interested reader.

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<sup>3</sup> This applies also to the lack of information about the metre, to which in general very little attention is being paid. Still, the discussion is present in some more crucial points (e.g. the modifications of Catullus' poems), but the general information will remain lacking for a reader who is not that familiar with Martial's poems.