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**Warts and All**

*Martial's Epigrams: A Selection*

Translated and with an Introduction by

Garry Wills

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What would Martial, the prolific dispenser of the pungent epigram, have done with Western culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? His readers across the millennia have probably asked the same question about their own times—and perhaps wiped their brows that they were spared his *stylus*, that unerring dart aimed at all the follies, hypocrisies, and unpleasant lunacies that a society necessarily produces and thus, with almost equal necessity, avoids talking about. Who really wants to have the following zinger uncorked at his funeral?

*Dying he went the earth beneath*

*And did his debts, not wealth, bequeath.*

An irony of our contemporary culture, one that would not have dodged the view of the ever-perspicacious Martial, is what one might call our preparation for pithiness. Saturated as we are in the short text message, the Facebook feed, and the constant Twitter update, we would seem the perfect audience for Martial's preferred format of crisp texts. Someone posts a picture online, and you can almost see Martial commenting in response, "You pose as cosmopolitan. Prophetic? / Not really metaphysical. Cosmetic."

But witty verse is not usually the sort of thing that gets posted, texted, tweeted. Myriad critics have noted that concurrently with the flood of words from text messaging or YouTube commentary runs the downward spiral of style: *ars brevis, vita brevis*. So while we are prepared in form, we are never prepared for the savage, knowing content of a satirist like Martial, born Marcus Valerius Martialis in Roman Spain around 40 CE. For the content, even all these years later, remains at our expense.

Garry Wills, who won a Pulitzer for his *Lincoln at Gettysburg* and has penned among other books the bestselling *What Jesus Meant*, has taken on the weird project of resuscitating a largely dead poet from a dead language. Wills's original training was as a classicist, so this newest book marks something of a homecoming for him, a return to the messy pagan world of the first-century Roman Empire after decades of writing about aspects of the Christian era. Martial often lampooned other writers ("His verse was meant to strike me low, / But since *he* wrote it—who will know?"), and though the satirist himself might have regarded suspiciously a retired historian's attempt at rendering Latin verse into English, Martial finds in Wills a surprisingly dexterous translator.

As an example of Wills's proficiency, consider the following epigram, given in Latin, literal English, and then Wills's version:

*Crine ruber, niger ore, brevis pede, lumine laesus,  
rem magnam praestas, Zoile, si bonus es.*

(Red of hair, black of mouth, short of foot, and wounded in your eye,  
You furnish something great, Zoilus, if you are good.)

The compression of the Latin, and the obscurity of expression in the second line, makes literal English awkward. Wills's solution is to chop out the specifics of the first line, and his elegant result runs thus:

*In you there's not a single thing to laud.  
To turn out honest were your greatest fraud.*

The connection between one's physical characteristics and one's moral qualities was a recurrent notion among the ancients, dating to their earliest literature. A literal translation of the epigram would not necessarily bring this fact to light, but Wills's knowledge as a classicist serves him well. Although he sacrifices the colorful string of descriptors from the first line, Wills manages to convey both the compression of the Latin and Martial's main idea in the epigram, that someone so foul in appearance must have ugly morals as well.

A challenge for any translator of ancient verse is in the difficulty of making the obscurities of the ancient world accessible without too much modernizing. In certain crucial ways, especially on matters of sex, ancient Rome nurtured cultural practices very different from prevailing cultural norms. Martial's pederastic poems furnish the piquant reminder that what we now regard as baleful was an everyday aspect of Roman society. Yet Martial never fully seems to revel in smuttiness. Indeed, at one point he addresses his own book, with no doubt some irony, and commands, "Be moral now, and forswear lust. / Speak not a thing that is not just."

I say some irony, because like many in the satirist tradition, Martial maintains a thoroughgoing concern not so much for prescribing a new morality as much as for uncovering the inherent goofiness of the present one. He can be acerbically earthy about what he sees, as when he writes "Your chamber pot is gold, your dish of glass-- / You spend less on your mouth than on your ass." Yet Martial's x-ray vision could and often did scan even deeper, plumbing the connections between professed morality and private actuality:

*This darkling world he claims, with rue,  
Has run itself into a ditch.  
And he can prove his thesis true:  
Is such a cosmos—he is rich.*

Martial wrote fourteen books of epigrams, so naturally Wills must cull a representative strand. Wills's judicious recognition of Martial's breadth gives strength to this new translation. Here we find, for instance, this silly couplet about a woman's balding pate:

“The coif she wears she claims she grew. / Does that seem splitting hairs to you?”  
Another hilariously mocks a man who, in an effort to gain as many gifts as possible from friends, holds several birthday parties a year, to which Martial offers the rejoinder that “If you keep your birthdays winter, spring, and fall, / We must conclude you were not born at all.” Wills is ever alert to what in rhetoric is called the *paraprosdokian*, the surprise ending that reverses or alters the meaning of what has come before it, and an element essential to so much of Martial’s *oeuvre*. Wills captures a sterling example of *paraprosdokian* in the pair of lines that runs, “For seven husbands dead, all tombstone read: / THIS GRAVE DID CHLOE MAKE. She did indeed.”

But what has surely contributed to Martial’s enduring appeal rests not merely in his chic descriptions of the rebarbative, but also his wise insights into both the nature of history and art. Consider these majestic verses addressed to Mark Antony, who died some seventy years before Martial was born:

*The worst death you contrived  
Was Cicero’s harsh end.  
The man of treasured words  
To silence you did send.*

*Your purchased agent with his sword  
That honorable head assailed,  
Triumphing over eloquence  
Where even Catiline had failed.*

*This is the just reward  
For your transgression grim:  
Since you tore out his tongue,  
All tongues will speak of him.*

Embedded in this poem, alongside a strong sense of history, is Martial’s consciousness of art’s potential for eternity. Antony was the impetuous lover and doomed power-seeker. Cicero, though not himself immune to desires for power, was the rhetorical craftsman, the artist. Cicero’s presentation of himself through his publications has ensured the longevity of his fine reputation, a sense of lastingness of which Martial himself was not unaware when regarding his own work.

Martial’s poems “breathe deep of everyday,” and this causes the occasional lapse in interest that readers of this book may suffer. As he elsewhere says, “My poems crowd on one another’s heel. / The thronging of them all is what you feel.” Reading through this book too quickly can be wearying, and while Wills has shrewdly brought out the more subtle of Martial’s poems, he overindulges the coarse and the brash, making Martial sound rather more querulous to our ears than he might have sounded to a Roman, who did not have all the epigrams, or even so hearty a fraction of them, bound in one book. All the same, Martial knew he was bound to reiterate certain themes. Accused by a friend of just that, he ripostes that she often “bid me dine with you,” and did “repeat a

recipe or two.” To be sure, Wills’s heavy dosage of Martial’s more prurient verse allows something like the following vignette from Roman life to gleam all the more poignantly:

*The water dripping from the gate  
Took on a pointy frozen state,  
And as a boy was passing under,  
It fell and stabbed him like ice-thunder.  
Fortune will find new ways to trick us.  
We learn that it can water-drip us.*

Wills’s final couplet is more cutesy than the Latin (the grim last line: *aut ubi non mors est, si iugulatis aquae?*), but the inclusion of this poem and others like it expands our default memory of Martial as only a jokester. An undercurrent of seriousness pervades even the wittiest barbs.

Ultimately, Martial’s moral seriousness makes the title “Rome’s Gossip Columnist,” as Wills calls him in his introduction, a misleading assignation. Martial didn’t just go dig up dirt. He sifted it, too. He was more than a gossip columnist, for amidst his calumnies he maintained a critic’s eye for the moral paradoxes and a poet’s ear for condensing the complex silliness around him into poised, urbane verse.

We cannot and should not, moreover, distinguish his urbanity from his urban-ness, his essential engagement with the banquets, baths, wines, sexual positions, folds of clothes, scents of perfume, and desire for fame that defined his echelon of Roman life in the first century CE. Even the simplest poem can say much about Martial’s attitude toward the body, social status, and quotidian custom, as in the lines “Her breasts unwieldy so obstruct her path, / She buys two extra tickets at the bath.” The pastoral impulse, which occasionally appears among Martial’s poems, serves as but a foil to his gritty documentation of the city scene.

This is literature, but it arrives not with the same lofty, stately voice of Vergil or the long-winded periodicity of Cicero; nor is it the cultivated Hellenism of Horace or the plucky irreverence of Ovid. In Martial we find unexpected things. We find not the ennobling inheritances of Rome we are so quick to point to in other Latin writers. We discover, rather, heirlooms of an altogether more lubricious sort, a tawdriness that is nevertheless waggishly and even charmingly depicted. As Garry Wills’s pitch-perfect translations show again and again, Martial gives us the “warts and all” of ancient verse but makes the warts look, ironically, like beauty marks.

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