Martial's "Witty Conceits":
Some Technical Observations

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It was Sir John Harington (1560–1612), perhaps the best of the English epigrammatists after Ben Jonson, who wrote in the Metamorphoses of Ajax: "It is certain, that of all poems, the Epigram is the plesawntest, and of all that writes Epigrams Martiall is counted the wittiest." Elsewhere he boasts, "We steal some good Conceits from Martiall." His compliments are duly reflected in the numerous close translations he made of his Roman model.

It is sometimes difficult for the post-romantic sensibility to share Harington's enthusiasm for either Martial's form or his achievement. Still less can we follow Balthasar de Gracian, Martial's fellow countryman, in the elevation of Martial to the pinnacle of poetic practice in his Agudeza y arte de Ingenio en que se explican todos los modos y diferencias de Conceptos (1649). Gracian, however, was the enthusiastic theorist of the poetics of Mannerism, the style that depended on the concepto and the "conceit," on pointe and "wit" (acumen), that revelled in puns and double entendres, and, above all, in far-fetched metaphors and analogies, some of which that common-sensical critic, Dr. Johnson, doubted were worth the carriage.

Other obstacles are apparent. Martial's aggressive sexual humour, particularly in its selection of satiric targets, is hardly compatible with modern conventions—or indeed with some ancient conventions. Physical defects present just one instance. Much of Martial's other joke material is nowadays offensive, particularly that concerning women, slaves, passive homosexuality, prostitution, and coital perversions. On the other hand, the

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1 Richard Porson remarked at the end of the nineteenth century: "certainly the dignity of a great poet is thought to be lowered by the writing of epigrams."

2 The most concise discussion of European Mannerism of which English Metaphysical poetry is a vigorous branch may be found in E. R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trs. W. R. Trask (London 1979) 273–302.

3 For example, although Aristotle says in Book II of the Poetics: ὁ σκότων ἔλέγησεν θέλει ὁμορρήματα τῆς φυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος (Tractius Caeslinianus VIII, ed. Janko), Plutarch would set limits on what physical defects were proper subjects for jokes (Quaest. conviv. 2. 633b). Baldness was an acceptable butt; halitosis and blindness were not. Martial, like medieval and Renaissance humorists, such as Thomas More, blithely ignores such limitations. One is reminded of Homer's description of the gods' laughing at the limping of Hephaestus (Il. 18. 411, 417).
stinginess of patrons, the social aberrancy of freedmen in a status-conscious milieu, while not repugnant to the modern reader in the same way, seem obsolete subjects for lively humour.4

Nevertheless, a sketch of the techniques Martial employs for arousing in his readers certain amused reactions may provide some insights into Martial's poetic craftsmanship and rhetorical skills, and perhaps on the nature of Roman wit and humour in general.5 Some general techniques may be passed over as being of too broad an application for our limited purposes here. Obviously Martial takes advantage of the fact that even a mildly humorous story gains by being presented in verse, just as any joke gains in the telling by a skilled raconteur. The more artistic and delicate the verse (or the manner of telling) is, the greater the gain in our pleasure. The deployment of poetic and rhetorical devices superimposes a glitter on even mediocre material. Truisms and proverbs gain in the same way, when they are expressed in rhyme, or incorporate alliteration, assonance and brevity. The neat expression of these also counted as "wit" for Harington and Gracián.

Space forbids any long disquisition on the nature of humour itself and the multifariousness of its terminology. As Quintilian remarks: unde autem concilietur risus et quibus ex locis peti soleat, difficilimum dicere (Inst. 6. 3. 35).6 I would only underline, as relevant to Martial's particular brands of humour, that much of it is rooted in verbal aggression, which masks its hostility and defuses any explosive retaliation by invoking amusement or admiration in the audience. Martial takes great pains to stress the jocular light-heartedness of his work and his desire not to offend individuals.7 But Quintilian points out, anticipating Freud, a derisu non

4 These difficulties are compounded by the obscure topical and contemporary references on which certain jokes hinge and by the modern coolness towards certain types of ancient joke.
6 The best general discussions, to my mind, are Arist. Rhet. 3. 10. 1410b–13a and S. Freud, Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, tr. James Strachey (London 1960) 9–158. For a survey of Greek and Roman speculation on the subject, see M. A. Grant, The Ancient Theories of the Laughable (Madison 1924). The complexity of the terms used in discussing humour is as patent in Greek and Latin as it is in English. To make matters worse, the vocabulary for different aspects of the laughable changes with the passage of time and doubtless with changes in human sensibility and aesthetic perceptions. The best one can hope for is the recognition of "family resemblances." "Wit," for example, has suffered considerable semantic change in the transition from Elizabethan to modern times. In most of Sir Richard Blackmore's A Satire against Wit (1699), the term is synonymous with obscenity and blasphemy; elsewhere in his writings he describes it as "intellectual enameling" or "a rich embroidery of flowers and figures."
7 For a general discussion of Martial's mock-modest stance see J. P. Sullivan, "Martial's Apologia pro opere suo," Filologia e forme letterarie: studi offerti a Francesco della Corte (Urbino 1988) 31–42. Aristotle's view that amusement and relaxation are necessary parts of life (NE 1128b) is not at odds with the thesis that humour is frequently hostile; he just cautions
procul est risus (Inst. 6. 3. 7) and Aristotle had already stated τὸ σκῶμα λοιδόρημα τι ἐστίν (EN 1128a), and the socially explosive topics that Martial selects for the exercise of his satiric talents tell a different story.8

A beginning may be made with the truism that most conscious humour, and almost all wit, relies on the element of surprise or unpredictability in different forms and to a greater or lesser degree. Just as language works by narrowing almost instantaneously the range of semantic and syntactic possibilities of each successive unit in a verbal sequence such as a sentence, so experience and the laws of reasoning both prepare us conceptually for a large but still limited range of progressions and endings to a story, or conclusions to an argument. When this process is frustrated by linguistic ellipse, for example, or the logic is derailed, the result is incomprehensibility, nonsense, or, with the appropriate circumstances, paradoxes, jokes, riddles, or witicisms. Metaphor and analogy depend on a similar process: the implicit or explicit likeness presented can be appropriate, startling, puzzling, incongruous, disgusting, humorous, absurd, incomprehensible or, in poetic contexts, aesthetically impressive or frigid.

Why surprise (τὸ προσεξεπαρτάν) is so fundamental in the generation of laughter was explained by Aristotle in his discussion of metaphor and wit: μᾶλλον γὰρ γίγνεται δῆλον ὅ τι ἐμαθὲ παρὰ τὸ ἑναντίον ἔχειν, καὶ ἐξεικὲν λέγειν ἡ ψυχὴ "ὡς ἀληθῶς, ἐγώ δὲ ἣμαρτον" (Rhet. 1412a). This is valid for riddles, verbal coinages, and other wordplay.9 Freud makes much of this element in jokes also, in speaking of the pleasure derived from "seeing" hidden similarities and differences.10

Before examining the phenomenon in its technical manifestations, one must allude briefly to Martial’s readiness to go beyond surprise to achieve shock by the blatant use of obscenity,11 often in conjunction with more

8 An analysis of Martial’s social and erotic material, such as the decay of patronage, the disruptive excesses of the freedman class, the financial power and sexual corruption of women, and the transgression in general of traditional boundaries is attempted in J. P. Sullivan, “Martial,” Ramus 16 (1987) 177–91.

9 Allied to this, in certain other classes of joke, is “recognition,” the rediscovery of what is familiar rather than the discovery of what is new, cf. Freud (supra n. 6) 120–22, who grudgingly gives credit to Aristotle for his theory that the pleasure of recognition is the basis for the enjoyment of art. I assume Freud is thinking of the observation ἡ ἀναγνώρισις ἐκπληκτικῶν (Poet. 1454a).

10 Freud (supra n. 6) 11–12.

11 There is little question that Martial uses more obscene words and allusions than any other known Roman poet; see J. N. Adams, The Latin Sexual Vocabulary (London 1982) 1–8 for a discussion of the general topic and passim for Martial’s specific usages. The subject is only sketchily discussed by ancient theorists of rhetoric, since the orator is to be discouraged from αἰσχρολογία or obscenitas and βδελυρία or scurrilitas, because of his need for a dignified
innocuous rhetorical formulas. These obscene jokes are invariably "tendentious" or aggressive, but they achieve their object of amusing the reader by their very flouting of social conventions. They allow the release, often under the merest pretext of wit, of forbidden emotions and repressed impulses. Of course the cleverer they are, the more uninhibited by shame our amusement becomes.\(^2\)

In what follows, a somewhat heuristic classification of Martial's humorous techniques is adopted.\(^3\) The divisions, although not entirely arbitrary, are not watertight, since allocating a joke to one or another may be open to interpretation and even disagreement, particularly as Martial often employs two or more techniques at once to produce the humorous reaction. The classifications I propose are:

I. Jokes based on empirical observation which confounds common sense expectations, presenting paradoxes and incongruites;

II. Jokes based on informal syllogistic reasoning which may end in conclusions which are seemingly valid, but are, on reflection, absurd, paradoxical or shocking, often because a superficial appearance of sense hides nonsense or illicit inferences;

III. Humour based on various kinds of wordplay, such as puns;

IV. Humour based on analogical metaphor or simile or symbolic instances;

V. Humour dependent on various types of rhetorical schemata and tonalities, such as parody, hyperbole, rhyme, anaphora, or irony.

I. Surprise is most obviously the ingredient in the jokes and riddles that hinge on the παρά προσδοκίαν.\(^4\) An elaborated paradox may be seen in this satiric epigram on Bassa (1. 90):

\[
\text{persona. Aristotle had been very strict in discouraging a gentleman (ὁ ἐλεύθερος) from vulgarity (βιομολογία).}
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\(^2\) See Freud \(\text{supra n. 6) 100.}\)

\(^3\) More elaborate classifications are of course possible. I would single out for their ingenuity the classifications of Gracián in his Agudeza y Ingenio and, for brevity, Szelest \(\text{supra n. 5).}\)

\(^4\) A considerable number of Martial's epigrams concern themselves with lusus naturae and various other strange events or appearances in nature which are also startling or unexpected. But few of these random ἄξαρωσόδοξητα are humorous or even interesting; in fact, they are often rather grim. The boy bitten by a snake hiding in the maw of a bronze statuary of a bear is a case in point. For further examples and some Greek precursors, see H. Szelest, "Martial's Epigramme auf merkwürdige Vorfälle," \textit{Philologus} 120 (1976) 251–57. A whole cycle of epigrams (1. 6; 14; 22; 44; 45; 48; 51; 60) is devoted to the strange relationship that could be fostered between a hare and a lion in the amphitheatre. Hairsbreadth escapes and startling deaths are also popular topics and often prompt a neat aphorism such as \textit{in medio Tibure Sardinia est} (4. 60. 6) or a well-tuned compliment to the emperor, which may be regarded as "wit" in the obsolete sense.
Quod numquam maribus iunctam te, Bassa, videbam
Quodque tibi moechum fabula nulla dabat,
Omne sed officium circa te semper obibat
Turba tui sexus, non adeunte viro,
Esse videbaris, fateor, Lucretia nobis:
At tu, pro facinus, Bassa, fututor eras.
Inter se geminos audes committere cunnos
Mentiturque virum prodigiosa Venus.
Commenta es dignum Thebano aenigmate monstrum,
Hic ubi vir non est, ut sit adulterium.

Other examples of paradoxes are those individuals who claim to be poets but
who don't write a line of verse or write only what is unreadable (cf. 3. 9). A
compliment to Domitian on his moral legislation ends in these lines (6. 2. 5-6):

Nec spado iam nec moechus erit te praeside quisquam:
At prius—o mores!—et spado moechus erat.

The incongruous antithesis between the healing arts of the doctor and
death-dealing skills of the gladiator or undertaker is played upon in a number
of epigrams (often based on Greek models) such as 1. 47:

Nuper erat medicus, nunc est vispillo Diaulus:
Quod vispillo facit, fecerat et medicus.

The strange contrast (cp. 1. 30; 39) between the behaviour prompted by
riches and that due to poverty is another fertile theme, often with sexual
overtones (cf. 6. 50; 9. 88; 11. 87). Comparisons between the poetic craft
and the vulgar arts of the zither-player or charioteer with their inequitable
pay differentials provoke a sour smile (3. 4). Similarly the money spent on
race horses is contrasted with more appropriate and charitable uses (5. 25; 10. 9).
A neatly balanced set of antitheses purport to describe a paradoxical
emotional state (5. 83):

Insequeris, fugio; fugis, insequor; haec mihi mens est:
Velle tuum nolo, Dindyme, nolle volo.

The upsetting of the reader's normal anticipations may be achieved
without perverting logical argument. It can be done merely by the
production of fresh evidence. The innkeeper's traditional habit of profitably
watering wine is found reversed in Ravenna, where they cheat by simply
serving it neat (cf. 1. 56; 3. 57; 9. 98). There are similar reversals of
expectation when the conduct of women who profess high ideals exemplifies
the opposite (1. 62; 5. 17). Another example is the unexpected judgment
on a dandy: non bene olet qui semper bene olet.

Obviously hypocrisy and pretence in general offer the requisite
conditions for such surprise endings. The Erwartung or “build-up” may then
consist of a more or less elaborate description of the hypocrite's overt
behaviour or public professions: this is then deflated without argument by the sudden revelation of the truth, but the Aufschluss purports to be empirical, not subjective. Martial's satiric observation and this mode of humour are highly compatible; hence the numerous examples of vice comically stripped of its disguises,\textsuperscript{15} as was seen earlier in the epigram on Bassa (1. 90). Martial can manage these effects on a small or large scale. If brevity be the soul of wit, the following is an excellent illustration:

Pauper videri Cinna vult—et est pauper!

More elaborate examples are to be found in the short cycle of epigrams on a cenipeta (2. 11; 14; 27), in which the deep mourning, the frenzied activity, and the extreme sycophancy of Selius are prompted merely by his desire to be invited to dinner.

II. Somewhat more convoluted than these are the number of the jokes that depend on logical (or invalid) deductions of the types expounded in Aristotele's Sophistiici Elenchi and perfectly familiar to Roman orators; they are humorous because the conclusion is more or less surprising or even shocking. So, for example, in 4. 21, Segius says there are no gods; if there were gods, Segius would be destroyed; Segius has not been destroyed, in fact, he prospers, so there are no gods. An unholy, but logical conclusion. Gallus, in another example, is now convicted of long-standing incest with his stepmother: she continues to live with him after Gallus' father is dead (4. 16). Lycoris has buried all her friends: I wish my wife were a friend of hers (4. 24). Again a scandalously logical argument. More commonly such jokes involve reductio ad absurdum, anti-climax, or bathos, or what might be described as "overkill."\textsuperscript{16} An epigram in which the climax goes beyond what would be anticipated is 4. 43 on Coracinus, where Martial denies he called him a cinaedus, he said he was rather a cunnilingus. Even more elaborate are the attacks on Vetustilla and Zoilus (3. 93; 82). In the first the old hag is shown to be so sexually insatiable that intrare in istum sola fax potest cunnum (3. 93; 27). In the second, Zoilus' intolerably anti-social ostentation has to be tolerated because the traditional revenge of irrumatio is excluded. Why? Fellat. This is reminiscent of the apparently paradoxical logic in the sadist's refusal to beat the consenting masochist. In these epigrams hidden premisses are invoked.

The derailment of logic which is initially concealed by an apparently artless, almost reasonable, form of expression provides the opportunity for a

\textsuperscript{15} It has been argued, not without justice, that this is the mainspring of Martial's humour; see T. P. Malnati, The Nature of Martial's Humour (Diss. Witwatersrand 1984). For examples of social hypocrisy, see pp. 22–84. Instances of sexual hypocrisy are especially numerous.

\textsuperscript{16} Quintilian takes note of the last two of these (Inst. 9. 2. 22–23); they exemplify sustentatio or παράδοξον, depending on whether one looks at the Erwartung or the Aufschluss.
variety of jokes.\textsuperscript{17} The amusement is provoked when "hidden nonsense is revealed as manifest nonsense," as in Wittgenstein's proposal for the dissolution of philosophical puzzles. Often the jokes are produced by setting up a logical chain of expectations which is dramatically uncoupled at its last link by an anticlimax or an incongruity, often in the form of a category mistake, or a hyperbolic (and often obscene)\textsuperscript{18} climax. A simple example is 10. 8:

Nubere Paula cupit nobis, ego ducere Paulam
Nolo: anus est. Velem, si magis esset anus.

Paula wants to marry the poet, but he is unwilling to accept the offer, since she's an old woman. He would, however, do so—if she were older. The reader had expected—if she were younger. The subtext is that Paula is undesirable but rich and, although Martial would not mind waiting a short time for his inheritance, Paula has too many years left in her. And, unlike the hideous Maronilla pursued by Gemellus, she doesn't have an ominous cough (1. 10).

A more elaborate twist may be seen in 1. 99, where a generous poor man becomes unexpectedly miserly after receiving several large legacies (cf. 1. 103). Martial then uses the \textit{reductio ad absurdum} for his imprecation:

Optamus tibi milies, Calene.
Hoc si contigerit, fame peribis.

Similar to these deformations of syllogistic reasoning is the misuse of analogical argument, which should perhaps be mentioned here. For example 10. 102 depends on a tendentious analogy:

Qua factus ratione sit requiris,
Qui numquam futuit, pater Philinus?
Gaditanus, Avite, dicat istud,
Qui scribit nihil et tamen poeta est.

\textsuperscript{17} It is characteristic of Irish bulls ("If this letter offends you, please return it unopened"), of certain types of ethnic humour, and, in the ancient world, of Abderite jokes; cf. B. Baldwin (trs.) \textit{The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover} (Amsterdam 1983) 21–24. Plass (\textit{supra} n. 5) 190, draws attention to Quintilian's remark: \ldots \textit{eadem quae si imprudentibus excidant studia sunt, si simulam venusta creduntur} (Inst. 6. 3. 12). The particular derailment of logic which consists in seizing on the wrong element in a complex proposition was singled out by William Hazlitt as an effective form of wit, which he described as "diverting the chain of your adversary's argument abruptly and adroitly into another channel." He instances "the sarcastic reply of Porson, who hearing someone observe that 'certain modern poets would be read and admired when Homer and Virgil were forgotten,' made answer—'And not till then!'" (\textit{Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Lecture I} [London 1819; repr. 1910] 17). A more familiar instance is Robert Benchley's retort to a lady who pointed out to him that alcohol was a slow poison: "Who's in a hurry?"

\textsuperscript{18} As Plass (\textit{supra} n. 5) 195 notes, citing 4. 43; 50. Cf. also 2. 73; 3. 74; 4. 84; 9. 27; 12. 79 for similar endings.
To claim to be a poet without proof may be pretentious, but it is in the realm of the conceivable; Philinus' paternity, however, is quite impossible and the analogy discredits Gaditanus' claims. A similar epigram (1. 72) about a would-be poet who hopes plagiarism will get him the title follows the analogies of denture wearers and white lead on dark skin to conclude:

Hac et tu ratione qua poeta es,
Calvus cum fueris, eris comatus.

A similar false analogy provides the point in 6. 17:

Cinnam, Cinnam, te iubes vocari.
Non est hic, rogo, Cinna, barbarismus?
Tu si Furius ante dictus esses,
Fur ista ratione diceris.

Cinna and Furius are both respectable names: *fur* is not.\(^{19}\)

Under the heading of twisted logic also must be classified the *non sequitur*, most often found in the snappy retort, *Tu quoque*. Martial, for instance, is accused of writing bad verses, his response is, you don't write any at all (1. 110); his epigrams are too long; a mere distich, however, from Cosconius would be too long (2. 77; cf. 6. 65); his dress is shabby; well, at least it's paid for (2.58). In forensic terms, this is distracting the jury from the issue.

Logic is defied in 4. 69: the rumours that Papyulus' fine wine is lethal are rejected—and so is Papyulus' invitation to have a drink. Here a premiss is accepted, but the appropriate conclusion is denied.

III. Particularly pervasive in Martial's *oeuvre* are the various forms of wordplay.\(^{20}\) The most obvious is the simple pun (*calembour* or *Kalauer*) in the lexicographical sense of the use of one word or phrase to convey two different senses in the same context or the use of a homophone (or near homophone) with different meanings. Quite apart from our lack of "inwardness with the living voice," punning has ceased to be a fashionable form of making jokes in comparatively recent times, if we except the work of James Joyce. It was not always so; James Boswell declared: "A good pun may be admitted among the small excellencies of lively conversation."

\(^{19}\) This epigram is imitated very effectively by Johannes Burmeister in his *Martialis Renatus* (Luneburg 1618), an amusing collection of "sacred parodies of Martial," to produce an anti-Papist joke turning on *Pontifex faex*.

\(^{20}\) The standard discussion is that of U. Joepgen, *Wortspiele bei Martial* (Diss. Bonn 1967); see also E. Siedschlag, *Zur Form von Martialis Epigrammen* (Berlin 1977) 86. On puns, the most comprehensive recent study is W. Redfem, *Puns* (Oxford 1984), although this concentrates on French literature for examples. The importance of word-play in general in Martial may be gauged from the frequency of their occurrence: cf. 1. 20; 30; 41; 45; 47; 50; 65; 79; 81; 98; 100; 2. 3; 7; 43; 67; 3. 25; 34; 42; 67; 3. 78; 4. 9; 52; 5. 26; 6. 6; 17; 7. 41; 57; 71; 8. 16; 19; 22; 9. 72; 95; 12. 39. It is interesting that Martial uses this form of jocularity less and less as he grows older.
Writers as different as Shakespeare and Thomas Hood made no apology for them. For the modern reader, however, to treat an accidental or external relationship, verbal or aural, as having conceptual significance is merely a poor joke. Nevertheless philosophers and critics from Plato (particularly in the Cratylus), Aristotle (Rhet. 1400b), Lucretius, and Varro to Freud and Derrida have regarded puns as valuable ways to ferret out “truths” about the physical and psychological world in general and about literary texts in particular. It is against this intellectual background that the Greco-Roman fascination with homophones, homonyms, and etymologies (true or false) must be set. Homer and Heraclitus were acutely aware of the linguistic possibilities in puns. The belief that words relate closely to things, indeed reflect their very essence, rather than being arbitrary symbols for them was deep-rooted in ancient thinking. Varro certainly believed that there is verum in the verbum and his work is full of false, speculative etymologies (Lucus a non lucendo, and the like). Names and nouns could illuminate the nature of things or reflect actual characteristics hidden in them. This is not to say that Martial is interested in such theories, but simply that the poet and his audience would attribute far greater significance to puns and wordplay in general than we would, and so they would be far more acceptable as a form of humour. One obvious type of punning (annominatio) is playing on the signification of elements in proper names. This often provides the point of a poem. Sometimes the play is bilingual, as in 5. 35, the case of the impostor Euclides and the treacherous key, which reveals that he is a slave—nequior clavis puns on κλεῖς, Greek for “key,” although Martial must have known that the name derives from εὐκλεής, “famous.” Snow-White (Χιόνη) is jeered at for her dark complexion and sexual frigidity (3. 34), the latter being then contrasted with the fieriness of Phlogis (derived from φλόξ, “fire”). A very artificial pun, combined with a defective anagram, provides a complex play on Paulinus/PAlineus, alluding to Aeneas’ drowned helmsman and Paulinus’ desire to micturate twice from a moving boat, incorrectly etymologizing the name from πάλιν and οὐρεῖν instead of οὐρος, “watcher.” “Gallus” as a name, an ethnographical description and the title of a eunuch priest of Cybele offers fertile material for sexual jokes (e. g. 11. 74; 3. 24).

Real names could also be used for bantering wordplay, as in the case of Domitian’s favourite, Earinus (9. 13). Since ἐκφινώς is the adjective for “spring,” which in Latin is verna (which also fortuitously, but here conveniently, means “home-bred slave”), Martial can joke on the

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21 See J. M. Snyder, Puns and Poetry in Lucretius’ “De Rerum Natura” (Amsterdam 1980) on the importance of word-elements (e. g. the ignis in ignis); F. M. Ahl, Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets (Ithaca, N.Y. 1985) discusses their literary implications in Latin poetry, even suggesting that Roman poets might overlook the difference between diphthongs, long and short vowels, and aspirated and unaspirated words (p. 56); cf. 2. 39. 4.

22 See further J. M. Giegengack, Significant Names in Martial (Diss. Yale 1969) 22–51.
possibilities of other Greek seasonal names for such a slave, Oporinos (autumnal), Chimerinos (wintery), Therinos (summery).

Simpler plays are possible with Maternus by implying that he is effeminate (1. 96); Panaretus does not have all the virtues as the meaning of his Greek name might imply—he drinks too much (6. 89). Hermogenes is a real son of Hermes, god of thieves—he snitches napkins (12. 29). No wonder one Phileros is, as the literal meaning of his Greek name implies, fond of love—he’s buried seven rich wives on his property (10. 43). Another Phileros has got through the besotted Galla’s dowry (2. 34). So even when not directly punning, Martial tries for allusive humour in chosen fictitious names that will fit, sometimes by contrast, the point of the epigram. Historical connotations attached to a name may similarly reinforce, directly or indirectly, the thrust of the humour or satire. The literary technique is most obviously seen in Petronius, in Shakespeare, or in Charles Dickens: we know what will be happening in Dotheboys Hall or what behaviour to expect from Toby Belch or Mr. Gradgrind. So the name Lesbia, with its Catullan reminiscences and its overtones of λεοβιάζειν (to fellate), is appropriate for one who practices fellation (2. 50), is an exhibitionist (1. 32), sexually aggressive (6. 23), and an old hag (10. 39), who has to pay for sex (11. 62). The historical connotations of Lais and Thais, the names of the great Greek courtesans, work in the same symbolic way, as do such historical names as Sardanapallas, or such mythical names as Hylas, Hyacinthus and Phoebus. Typical slave names also invite conceptual or literary wordplay (cf. Mistyllos/Taratalla, 1. 50).

Beyond plays on names, Martial has a wide variety of common words whose possible ambiguity in the right contexts leads up to sexual innuendo or double entendres (Aristotle’s ὑπόνοια and Quintilian’s emphasis). A good example, whose subtility is less likely to offend a modern sense of humour, is 4. 39, which is presented almost in the form of a riddle, a not uncommon technique of Martial’s to build suspense before a climax:

Argenti genus omne comparasti,
Et solus veteres Myronos artes,
Solus Praxitelus manum Scopaeque,
Solus Phidicii toreuma caeli,
Solus Mentoreos habes labores.
Nec desunt tibi vera Gratiana,
Nec quae Callaico linuntur auro,
Nec mensis anaglypta de paternis.
Argentum tamen inter omne miror
Quare non habeas, Charine, purum.

Here Martial is feigning surprise that a rich connoisseur of wrought silver objets d’art and tableware has no argentum purum in his collection. The surface meaning of “unadorned” yields the hidden suggestion that Charinus’
propensity for oral sex leaves none of it untainted (*purus*; for this implication, cf. 3. 75. 5; 6. 50. 6; 6. 66. 5; 11. 61. 14; 14. 70. 2).

Similar double entendres are generated by *soror/frater*, male or female siblings or lovers (2. 4); *ficus* (figs or hemorrhoids, 1. 65; 7. 71); *dare* (of innocent gifts or sexual favours, 2. 49; 56; 7. 30); *irrumare* (of consensual oral sex or insulting humiliation as in 2. 83; 4. 17). Martial is particularly fond of ambiguous possessives. Poems I write are *yours* if you buy them or recite them so badly that I disclaim them (1. 29; 1. 38; 2. 20); false teeth, false hair, and such things are *yours* (implying natural), if you purchase them (5. 43; 6. 12; cf. 9. 37; 12. 12; 14. 56). But unvarnished and often frigid puns are found in such epigrams as 1. 79 (different usages of *agere*); and sometimes the joke hinges only on the supposedly correct use or form of words (e. g. 2. 3, *debere*; 1. 65 *ficus/ficos*).

Somewhat better are the pointed homophones (Fronto's *paronomasia*) found in such epigrams as 1. 98 (*podagra/cheragra*). Although a whole epigram may be built around a favourite ambiguous word such as *purus*, sometimes a pun is used simply to terminate, more or less satisfactorily, an otherwise humorous poem. An example of this may be seen in Martial's fictive description of a tiny farm given him by Lupus, which, he claims, is no bigger than a window box (11. 18). The poem now generates a series of amusing meioses and comparisons (cf. IV below): it could be covered by a cricket's wing; it could be ravaged by an ant in a single day; a cucumber couldn't grow straight in it; a caterpillar would famish and a gnat would starve to death in it; a mushroom or a violet couldn't open in it; a mouse would be like the Calydonian Boar if it ravaged it; its harvest would scarcely fill a snail shell or make a nest for a swallow; its vintage fits into a nutshell; and a half-size Priapus, even without his sickle and phallus, would be too large for it. Obviously the joke could continue, but a crowning hyperbole (or meiosis) would be hard to find, so Martial resorts to a pun: Lupus should have given him a *prandium* instead of a *praedium*, a lunch instead of a ranch, a sprec instead of a spread.

Under wordplay may be subsumed such jokes as that in 10. 69, where an incorrect and unexpected usage of a verb leads to the point:

> Custodes das, Polla, viro, non accipis ipsa.
> Hoc est uxorem ducere, Polla, virum.

The substitution of *ducere* for *nubere* implies that Polla "wears the trousers" in the household, providing the point of the misogynistic joke. The idiom can be reversed to mock a macho homosexual (1. 24).

IV. Martial's imagery is a large topic. Lord Macaulay singled out this aspect of Martial's art for special praise: "His merit seems to me to lie, not
in wit, but in the rapid succession of vivid images."  

And he must have known that to Aristotle the mastery of metaphor was the chief token of the true poet (cf. Poet. 1459a: πολὺ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ μεταφορικὸν εἴναι). Here we must limit ourselves to the humorous metaphors, similes and symbolic instances that occur in the satiric epigrams. Macaulay's commendation, however, is well illustrated by the epigrams of witty and sustained invective against Vetustilla (3. 93), Zoilus (3. 82), the anonymous forger of his verses (10. 5), Hedylus' cloak (9. 57), Lydia (11.21) and Nanneius (11. 61), and also by the ingenious string of belittling comparisons Martial uses to describe the pettiness of the gifts given him, a subject which invariably elicits his most pointed sallies. Worth notice are the epigram on a gift of a tiny cup (8. 33) and that on his little farm (11. 18, discussed above). The hyperbole of the imagery used in such epigrams is best illustrated by the abuse aimed at the loose cunnus of the hapless Lydia or the vile smell of Thais:

Tam male Thais olet, quam non fullonis avari
Testa vetus, media sed modo fracta via,
Non ab amore recens hircus, non ora leonis,
Non detracta cani transtuberina cutis,
Pullus abortivo nec cum putrescit in ovo,
Amphora corrupto nec vitiata garo.
Virus ut hoc alio fallax permutet odore,
Deposita quotiens balnea veste petit,
Psilothro viret aut acida latet obliata creta
Aut tegitur pingui terque quaterque faba.
Cum bene se tutam per fraudes mille putavit,
Omnia cum fecit, Thaida Thais olet.

(7. 93)

I cite this somewhat gross epigram because it highlights a specific feature of Martial's imagery, its highly specific, almost palpable quality, and its dependence not only on visual stimuli but also on the evocation of physical smells. The Swiftian revulsion is pervasive in large and small ways in his work—note the casual comparison in an otherwise innocuous poem on Martial's rejection of the rich repasts pressed upon him by captatores:

Quod sciat infelix damnatae spongia virgae
Vel quicumque canis iunctaque testa viae:
Mullorum leporumque et suminis exitus hic est,
Sulphureusque color carnisficesque pedes.

(12. 48. 7–10)

23 G. O. Trevelyan, The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay (London 1878) 458. See also T. Adamik, "Die Funktion der Vergleiche bei Martial," Eos 69 (1981) 303–14, who counts three hundred or so similes in the oeuvre, a high proportion by comparison with other Latin poets. Via enumeratio, they often occur in clusters.
Such imagery is frequently connected with food, excretion or cosmetics as in the list of Vacerra’s possessions as he moves house:

Ibat tripes grabatus et bipes mensa,
Et cum lucerna corneoque cratere
Matella curta rupta latere meiebat;
Foco virenti suberat amphorae cervix;
Fuisset geres et inutiles maenas
Odor inpudicus urcei fatebatur,
Qualis marinae vix sit aura piscinae.
Nec quadra deerat casei Tolosatis,
Quadrima nigri nec corona pulei
Calvaeque restes aloioque cepisque,
Nec plena turpi matrisolla resina,
Summemmianae qua pilantur uxorès.24

(12. 32. 11–22)

It is interesting to contrast the offensive and earthy images directed against female physical deficiencies with the imagery of sweet scents, redolent flowers, and soft textures used to describe beautiful boys such as Diadumenus (3. 65) and Amazonicus (4. 42), or young Eros (5. 37). He criticizes the breath of crapulent Fescennia (1. 87) and Myrtale (5. 4), but it is the natural stink of women that he finds particularly revolting; he castigates their sexual pheremones, invoking images of old boots, stale urine, sulphur pits, unirrigated fishponds, the post-coital reek of goats, various reptilian and vulpine smells, and so on. In these poems the imagery works largely through olfactory associations, but visual associations are just as common. Phaethon’s fiery doom prompts several “twists.” A bad poet should choose such a mythological subject — then appropriately burn his verses (5. 53). An encaustic painting of Phaethon constitutes double jeopardy (4. 47). A coarser visual image is conjured up by Philaeis’ physical appearance: she is bald, red, and one-eyed: the resultant innuendo is inescapable.

The kinetic images and imaginary instances used to describe Hermogenes’ thieving propensities are particularly amusing: he is pictured as a deer sucking up frozen snakes and a rainbow catching the falling raindrops; if he can’t steal a napkin, he’ll steal a tablecloth, the awnings of the amphitheatre, the sails of a ship and the linen robes of Isis’ priests (12. 28).

V. Finally, there are the jokes or subsidiary aids to joking that depend essentially on “the rediscovery of the familiar,” in Freud’s terminology.25

24 For a supercilious description of the cheap comestibles presented by clients to an advocate, see 4. 46; disgusting cosmetics and artificial aids to beauty are the subject of 11. 54; 9. 37; compare Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1730).
25 See Freud (supra n. 6) 120–22.
Here the techniques used are metrical rhythms, repetition of words or phrases, modifications of familiar saws, allusions to quotations, historical or topical references, and such rhythmic devices and tropes as alliteration, rhyme, assonance, anaphora, *enumeratio, accumulatio*, and others. The most ingenious example in English of the playful use of alliteration is Poulter's rhymes beginning

An Austrian Army awfully arrayed
Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade.

Martial's *tour de force* here is 5. 24, in which each line begins with the name of the gladiator Hermes; this is underscored by further alliteration within the lines. The repetition of a telling phrase or question is very effectively deployed in 7. 10, where the rhetorical *Ole, quid ad te?* recurs four times; it is then reprised by four variations on *hoc ad te pertinet, Ole* in a crescendo of insults until the dismissive climax is reached. Similar to this are 1. 77 (..., *Charinus et tamen pallet*) and 11. 47 (*ne futuat*).

A clever mixture of punning, assonance, rhyme, alliteration and anaphora together is offered in 12. 39:

| Odi te, quia bellus es, Sabelle. |
| Res est putida bellus et Sabellus. |
| Bellum denique malo quam Sabellum. |
| Tabescas utinam, Sabelle belle. |

Parody, which above all relies on the comfortable feeling of recognition and familiarity, is an infrequent humorous device in Martial. The most successful example (2. 41) is based on perverting an untraceable or adapted line of Ovid's, *Ride si sapis, o puella, ride,* by a series of amusingly sarcastic images into the advice, *Plora, si sapis, o puella, plora.* The setting of proverbial saws in humorous or incongruous contexts provides a similar type of amusement, as in 1. 27, 1. 45. In 11. 90 the citing of Lucilius' famous epitaph on Metrophanes and a line-ending of Ennius serve as sardonic rebuke to the admirers of archaic poetry.

Here the investigation may stop. What is clear from it, I believe, is that it was the sheer range of Martial's techniques that made him the primary model for Elizabethan and Jacobean imitators, whose sense of humour differed radically from ours. Harington's judgment was shared by earlier Elizabethans such as the Reverend Thomas Bastard, who in his collection *Chrestoleros. Seven Bookes of Epigrammes* (London 1598) wrote (Epigr. 17 de poeta Martiali):

Martial, in sooth none should presume to write,
Since time hath brought thy epigrams to light.

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26 The closest analogies are AA 3, 281 ff., 3. 513.
27 For further investigation of the rhetorical aspect of Martial's wit, see K. Barthwick, *Martial und die zeitgenossische Rhetorik* (Berlin 1959).
Yet through our writing, thine so prais'd before
Have this obtain'd, to be commended more:
   Yet to ourselves although we win no fame,
   We please, which get our master a good name.

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