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Martial's Epi(c)grammatic Force

Recent research vindicating the all-inclusiveness of the epic genre has pointed to the role played by embedded epigrams both in constructing an epic's social memory and in putting the poet's poetic self consciousness on show. By contrast this paper will look at the relationship between epic and epigram from the opposite perspective, and consider how epigram appropriates epic and what epic can do for epigram. I shall argue that Martial reacts to and defends himself against the prestigious but aloof genre of epic and introduces in his *apologia pro opere suo* "social efficiency" as the main criterion for his literature.

In book 14, where Martial renounces epic topics (14.1.11f.), he presents to the reader epic after epic neatly wrapped up as presents (14.183-96). Homer, Virgil, Ovid and Lucan all appropriated to fit into two line epigrams thus serving as most striking examples that epic is indeed material epigram can handle. Moreover epic is depicted in (and reduced to) its social context, a desirable souvenir and suitable gift at the *Saturnalia*. Martial thus clearly does not avoid confrontation with epic but rather deals with it from a new perspective, contriving to appropriate without (dis)respect. This paper aims to show how Martial's major oeuvre, the 12 books of epigrams (the post-Virgilian "epic" number), constantly alludes to and plays with epic material which in his time had become the matrix of Roman culture.

A prime example of epic measured for its social efficiency is IX, 101 where Martial manages to squeeze two epics into 18 lines and weighs up the deeds of Hercules against those of Domitian. In fact Martial cheats on his readers as on the one hand his catalogue of Hercules' labours is incomplete and on the other Domitian's deeds are exaggerated. Yet from the perspective of social efficiency Martial certainly makes his point by dedicating the longest poem in book 9 - the epic among the epigrams so to speak - to Domitian and demonstrates that it does not take epic length but rather epic content to place a compliment advantageously. Additionally this flattering epigram is the last but also the longest and most extravagant eulogy on Domitian, a worthy climax and also when read from a historical perspective the epitaph on the relationship between poet and emperor.

Shortly afterwards in IX, 103, at the very end of the book, Martial shows delight in composing a non-event epic: beautiful Helen would have stayed at home and neither Iliad nor Odyssey would have been written. Instead twin slave boys star in a "Palinode", in which Martial's lyric narration of a real-life topos seems to demand the verdict that he not only imitates but actually supersedes what is told in epic. Thus in this epigram Martial employs epic in two socially efficient ways: on the one hand the epic background gives him a chance to make a courteous compliment to the owner of the slaves; on the other to end this book, he emphasises once more the pre-eminence of his writing, which derives its content from the real Roman world.

Finally in XI, 69 the dog Lydia pronounces her own epitaph and displays self-esteem stating: *non potui fato nobiliore mori*, thereby playing on the epic motif of the beautiful

death of young soldiers in battle. Accordingly she excels Odysseus's dog Argos who dies having spent his life waiting for the return of his master. Moreover following the motto "like master, like men" Lydia's self-epitaph is simultaneously a *laudatio* for her and her master. In the same way that the dog elevates herself through comparison with mythological and epic examples, so Dexter is by implication elevated to equal Meleager who hunted the Calydonian boar. Martial's technique of combining examples from epic myth with contemporary Roman praise is a challenging way for a small-scale text to tap into large-scale glory and fame.