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**Victoria E. Rimell, *Martial's Rome. Empire and the Ideology of Epigram*.
Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
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After years in the wasteland, Martial is undergoing somewhat of a revival of late, with Victoria Rimell's book the third in as many years to try to 'explain' Martial and his *Epigrams*.¹ As she comments in her introduction, Martial is once again 'being rehabilitated', with a 'rush of new commentaries, translations, books and articles' (p. 2).² In a modern, punchy style, Rimell sets out her approach to Martial, focusing on the way in which the poems are created by Rome, and the way in which, for his readers, Rome is created by his epigrams. Rimell sets out to achieve this through the following of 'themes' or tropes throughout Martial's books: contagion, copyright, life and death, 'counting' in epigram, the Saturnalia, and the space of the city.

Rimell begins, as she says, at the 'beginning', with the focus of the first chapter being the first numbered book of the *Epigrams*. She explores the way in which Martial uses discourses of sickness and health, overcrowding and social interaction to 'enact an extreme experiment in poetic *variatio*, and vice versa', and 'creates' an image of the crowded, dirty city of Rome (p. 15). Continuing the theme of disease, Rimell argues that this is used by Martial to emphasise the lack of space within the city and the book itself – just as people rub up against each other and interact, so do the epigrams within the corpus. She connects the theme of plagiarism through a slightly tenuous link with *tangere*, linking this with Martial's 'view' of the city: 'Martial's city overlaps the vocabulary and imagery of

¹ Fitzgerald 2007, Spisak 2007. Cf. also Howell 2009.

² See, for example, Holzberg 2002, Galàn Vioque 2002, Lorenz 2004, Williams 2004, Coleman 2006, Hinds 2007.

reading, writing, publication, sex and slavery, all of which involve grasping, violent, caressing hands, or pointing, careful or delving fingers' (p. 32).

Chapter two explores the interaction between epigram's roots in inscription, and the immortality of the text. Situating this within what Rimell sees as the inferiority complex of post-Augustan writers, Martial is seen to present epigram as 'a comment on and culmination of a labyrinthine history of links between writing and death, text and epitaph in the ancient world, and in Roman imperial poetry especially' (p. 54); she argues that in this post-Augustan age, 'there is no escaping the web of associations between writing poetry and (transcending) death' (p. 57). Focusing on the *de Spectaculis*, she points to the intertextuality with Augustan poetry around the theme of death, arguing that this book emphasises to his readers just how much he will be influenced by his predecessors, and yet how he is still reluctant to 'enter Flavian Rome and the Rome of epigram' (p. 65). Rimell then moves on to the tenth book of the *Epigrams*, always a difficult choice as it is widely considered to be a second edition which has survived from antiquity. Rimell argues that this book not only continues this theme of death and the original setting of epigram, but also encourages us to 'keep looking backwards and forwards, to (re) read *everything* differently' (p. 65, original italics). In Rimell's analysis, Book 10 becomes strongly intertwined with Ovid, especially the exile poetry, such that, just like the *Metamorphoses*, 'Martial in Book 10 returns to and writes a work which...is a half-dying, living, growing organism', and yet allows the author to also contrast himself with Ovid – he is able to do what Ovid never could and re-write the offending material (p. 78). Rimell also looks at two epigrams from Book 4 (4.32 and 4.59), and returns again to Book 1 with a brief analysis of 1.88. Through all of these brief glimpses at epitaphic poetry within Martial's work, Rimell sees a dialogue with the poets of what she refers to as the 'Golden Age' of Latin poetry, a constant intertextuality with, in particular, Ovid, trying to bury the past, while at the same time using it for his own purposes (cf. p. 21).

Chapter three expands a theme Rimell has looked at for some time, the idea of 'counting' in Martial's poetry. This is not only in specific numbers, but the way in which epigram simultaneously attempts to shrink big to small and yet magnify the small. She argues that 'Martial's corpus churns up a universe of numbers and counting games that span epic poetry...Greek epigram, Roman erotic verse, ancient histories, calendars, textbooks and satire' (p. 98). Again, she focuses on the intertextual relationship between Martial and Ovid, and uses poems from throughout the corpus, including those outside the numbered 'epic', to show Martial's focus on numbers and size.

Chapter four moves to what Rimell describes as the Saturnalian world of epigram, and argues that this is 'one of the most immediate ways in which epigram inhabits and sinks into the world of Rome' (p. 140). Seeing the *Epigrams* as 'holiday poems', written for the Saturnalia in particular, Rimell attempts to show the way in which Martial's poetics become part of the topsy-turvy world of imperial Roman carnival. Focusing on the *Xenia* (Book 13) and Book 11 of the main corpus, Rimell argues that these 'festival' books are Martial's way of 'showing off and testing out the relationship between book and city, poet and patron' (p. 161).

In chapter five Rimell looks at the way Martial's epigrams use space, how his poetics 'emerge from, and merge with, the 'realities' of the poet's existence and life on the streets of Rome', and the relationship between the books of poetry and Flavian Rome (p. 181). She also shows the way in which Martial interacts with the pastoral genre, arguing that in Martial's world 'Rome' has spread, the world no longer consists of the public space of the city and the private space of the country – in Martial's world 'the distinction between private and public space can be seen breaking down' (p. 206).

Rimell concludes that Martial 'puts on a seductive display [of] epigram's ambition to enact the sociality of urban life' (p. 209). This emphasises the role of the

reader, making Martial not only an important commentator on Flavian Rome, but allows him to create a 'bright news empire of entertainment, and ingenious possibilities for metamorphosis' (p. 210).

Rimell's book does indeed add a significant contribution to the growing new wave of analysis of the poetry of Martial. However, it is not without its problems. As with any book which attempts to comment on such a large amount of material, Rimell is naturally selective in what she chooses to look at, a point which she does not shy away from.³ However, there are issues with this approach. Rimell, following the recent scholarship in terms of reading the numbered twelve books of Martial as a whole, often refers to this 'epic'.⁴ However, we are then faced with a situation where much of the analysis is focused on the *De Spectaculis* and the *Xenia*, two of the previous books of epigrams, and mostly understood to not be part of the same series. This confuses the argument she is making – are we talking about an twelve-book epic, which appears to be a line she is pushing, or are these themes which can be seen in Latin epigram more generally, which is the impression this confusion seems to indicate?

Further, Rimell ignores current scholarship on the role of persona within the epigrams, and continually presents Martial the poet as representing the reality around him.⁵ Rimell seemingly accepts that Martial is writing 'reality' - the epigrams are a true reflection of this man's life in the city of Rome, and outside, over a period of about twenty years.⁶ Given epigram's closeness to satire, which

³ In the introduction, Rimell admits that there is an 'undisguisable and inevitable randomness about the thematic approach of chapters in this book' (p. 17).

⁴ Cf. Holzberg 2002, Lorenz 2004.

⁵ This can be seen especially in the introduction. For example: 'Like one of his first-century groupies, I have often carried Martial around today's Rome, which thanks to Domitian is mostly a Flavian, not an Augustan, capital. You feel you can see, hear and smell the city in Martial – he is, and has been, brilliant fodder for all those "everyday life" books about ancient Rome' (p. 4).

⁶ Cf. pp. 7-8: 'Martial makes epigram define and perform a Zeitgeist: his poetry *is* Rome, both the city itself (a mass of streets, buildings, monuments and people) and Rome as concept and dream

she herself acknowledges, the lack of any discussion about the possibility of the poetic persona is surprising, and seems old fashioned. However, in light of the title of the book, it can perhaps be understood – how can this be Martial's Rome if the very situations the epigrams describe are fiction? Can we really conclude that Martial is the 'most interesting commentator we have...on the city of Rome in the first century AD' with a completely straight face (p. 209)?

Despite the idea of interacting themes of large and small within the books of epigrams, Rimell seems reluctant to see anything beyond overarching themes as structuring devices within the *Epigrams*. In the opening chapter, Rimell looks at two allegedly interacting themes: illness and plagiarism. She presents an impressive list of epigrams which focus in some way on sickness or disease in Martial's books. However, while this is obviously a theme which *does* run through the poems, she has ignored the possibility of a more complex structuring device created by Martial for his books. What Rimell has identified as one theme is actually several interlinking themes, with the most obvious discrepancy here being the almost complete disregard of the importance of *os impurum* in the *Epigrams*, ignoring the work of Obermayer (1998) and Williams (2004). This issue is probably caused in part by her reluctance to see within Martial's work the use of cycles as further structuring devices. She argues that 'critics' attempts to fence off 'cycles' in Martial's books have tended to oversimplify the modality of interaction in the *Epigrams*' (p. 87 n. 70), but misses the point. Cycles and themes interact as structuring devices: there are overarching themes within and between books, but individual cycles of poems also act to lead the reader and encourage the re-reading of each book and the corpus as a whole.

Finally, while there is no denying the intertextuality between Martial and Ovid in the *Epigrams*, having read this book one might believe that it was the only

– the epicentre and embodiment of a vast, complex empire. All 'reality' is here, and nothing is left out.'

intertextuality of any great importance. Rimell seems determined to keep Martial's references within a certain period of Roman literary history, and by doing so ignores the way in which the poems have a strong dialogue with those of Catullus, and the further parallels with other authors, such as Vergil and Statius, and, in particular, the way in which Martial has been heavily influenced by Greek epigram.

Rimell's book is an interesting discussion of the way in which the reader can 'create' a Rome out of the *Epigrams* of Martial. Despite some of the issues with the analysis which have been raised, this is still an important book for the study of Latin epigram, as well as exploring new issues in the interaction of the literary world and the world around it in Augustan and imperial poetry.

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