Martial, Part I: Epigrams

Marcus Valerius Martialus (ca. 45-104 CE) was the poor man’s poet. He held no official post and was often in need of a daily hand-out (sportula) from his patrons. But because of his skill as an epigrammist (a writer of short witty poems), Martial traveled in the circle of other famous authors of the Roman Silver Age (1st and 2nd centuries CE). Among his friends were Juvenal, Pliny and Quintilian, and he eventually obtained favor from the emperor Domitian as his reputation increased. His life at Rome was the usual social round, often described in his poems. His verses are vigorous, polished, and of great variety as the following selections will show.

Text and Translation

1.47

Nuper erat medicus, nunc est vispillo, Diaulus:
Not long ago Diaulus was a doctor, now he is an undertaker.

Quod vispillo facit, fecerat et medicus.
What the undertaker (now) does, the doctor also had done.

nuper: (adverb) not long ago
medicus: medicus, -i, m.: doctor
vispillo: vispellio/vispillo, -onis, m.: undertaker

7.3

Cur non mitto meos tibi, Pontiliane, libellos?
Why do I not send my little books to you, Pontilianus?

Ne mihi tu mittas, Pontiliane, tuos.
In order that you, Pontilianus, not send yours to me.

Pontiliane: Pontilianus, -i, m.: a man’s name
libellos: libellus, -i, m.: little book (diminutive of liber)
5.81
Semper pauper eris, si pauper es, Aemiliane:
You will always be poor, if you are poor, Aemilianus:

dantur opes nulli nunc nisi divitibus.
Wealth is given nowadays to none unless to the rich.

pauper: pauper, pauperis: poor
Aemiliane: Aemilianus, -i, m.: a man’s name
opes: opes, opum, f.pl.: wealth
nisi: unless
divitibus: dives, divitis: rich

5.43
Thais habet nigros, niveos Laecania dentes.
Thais has black, Laecania, snow-white teeth.

Quae ratio est? emptos haec habet, illa suos.
What is the reason? The latter has purchased (teeth), the former, her own.

Thais: Thais, -is, f.: a woman’s name
nigros: niger, nigra, nigrum: black
niveos: niveus, -a, -um: snow-white
Laecania: Laecania, -ae, f.: a woman’s name
dentes: dens, dentis, m.: tooth
emptos: emo, -ere, _mi, emptum: purchase
1.19
Si memini, fuerant tibi quattuor, Aelia, dentes:
If I remember, you had four teeth, Aelia:

expulit una duos tussis et una duos.
One cough expelled two and one (cough) another two.

Iam secura potes totis tussire diebus:
Now safely you are able to cough all day long:

nil istic quod agat tertia tussis habet.
A third cough has nothing which it can do there.

memini: memini, meminisse: remember; translate perfect as present
quattuor: (indeclinable) four
duos: acc. pl. masc. of duo, duae, duo: two
tussis: tussis, -is, f.: cough
secura: securus, -a, -um: safe; here, used as an adverb
totis diebus: all day long; literally, “in whole days”
istic: (adverb) there
tertia: tertius, -a, -um: third

4.41
Quid recitaturus circumdas vellera collo?
Why, (when you are) about to recite, do you put a woolen muffler around your neck?

Conveniunt nostris auribus ista magis.
Woolen mufflers are more fitting for our ears!

quid: why
recitaturus: recito (1): recite
circumdas: = circum (“around”) + do (1): put (accusative noun) around (dative noun)
vellera: vellus, -eris, n.: fleece; literally, “pieces of wool”; here, wool muffler
collo: collum, -i, n.: neck
auribus: auris, -is, f.: ear
conveniunt: convenio, -ire, -veni, -ventum: be fitting (+ dative)
magis: (comparative adverb of magnopere) greatly; here, more