

We do not usually think of More as a poet, yet as the recent appearance of the exemplary new edition of More's Latin poems¹ reminds us, he devoted considerable energy — and considerable skill — to composing his volume of Latin epigrams. And More's achievement in this area is not an insignificant one. It is easy to agree with the editors of the Yale edition that his is "incomparably the best book of Latin epigrams in the sixteenth century."² That we do not often think of More's poetry is at least partly due to the fact that in our age there is perhaps no traditional poetic form less congenial to our taste than the epigram, curious in an age that thinks of itself as having no time to waste.

The new Yale edition makes it very easy to track down More's borrowings and the influences upon his poetry, and I do not propose to repeat that effort here. Rather I intend to use the epigrams of the Roman poet Martial as a background against which to consider More's poems, a way of approaching them that More certainly would have intended.

Martial is not of course the main source for More's epigrams. More than a hundred of them (something like forty percent of the total) are translations or close adaptations from the Greek Anthology, as in fact certain of Martial's epigrams also are. There are a few borrowings and paraphrases from Martial, as the Yale edition shows, and one poem in which the Roman poet is mentioned, but the text of Martial does not often find its way into the verbal fabric of More's poetry. Yet his presence looms large as an implied point of reference for several reasons, as we shall see. In a sense, the very fact that he is not more often quoted or echoed is significant, as he is the giant who casts his shadow over all subsequent epigrams in Latin.

The most accomplished Roman epigrams that we have are those of Catullus and Martial. Renaissance Latin poets tended to view Catullus as a useful example of intense love poetry, and tended then to think of Martial as more purely a writer of epigrams. And the order of the arrangement of their poems is also a factor in their usefulness as models.

Following the example of Petrarch, who tinkered with the order of the poems in his *Canzoniere* down to the end of his life, the Renaissance tended to take a double view of a sequence of short poems. The individual poem stands up on its own as an independent unit, of course, but it was also seen as an element of meaning in a larger whole, and its position in a larger sequence often in fact gives it a resonance that it

does not have by itself. It would not be going too far to say that the poetic sequence in the Renaissance was generally read — and put together to be read — as one long poem. This is, I think, true of More's epigrams as well, especially in view of the poems the collection begins and ends with. It is a reasonable inference, as the Yale edition shows, that the epigrams were printed in an order More intended.³

The only thing that is certain about the arrangement of Catullus' poems in the one manuscript in which they have come down to us is that it is not likely to be his, since the poems are arranged according to their meter. Martial's poems however seem to be, for the most part, in an order the poet intended, and some poems even draw our attention to that fact by reminding us of their place in the ever growing collection. In the Renaissance, an age in which poets, especially poets in Latin, often saw themselves as competing with their ancient prototypes, Martial was therefore the master par excellence to be reckoned with by a poet composing and arranging epigrams.

Martial's production is notoriously extensive, coming down to us in no fewer than fourteen books. More's collection is not nearly as large. Epigrams, after all, were not his life's work, as they seem to have been Martial's. But while, as I have noted, quotations and direct paraphrases of Martial are relatively few,⁴ there are a number of suggestive points of contact.

Here we might diverge, but only apparently, for a moment, to consider a different question, but one that will lead us back to the matter of More as Martial's competitor. A reader familiar with More's life and reputation, a reputation especially far more than only a literary one, is very likely to be taken aback somewhat by the nature of More's collection. Here it is not so much the presence of anything — the few racy epigrams, mild in fact by current standards, can be attributed to differences between early sixteenth-century standards of decorum and those of subsequent times — but rather the absence of something that may be more surprising. Simply put, why didn't More write devotional poetry?⁵ We do have one such poem, number 272 in the Yale edition, interestingly enough describing the figure of a poet, which enjoins us to put our trust in God ("In permansuro ponite vota deo").⁶ Yet this is a poem which More chose not to include in his published collection. I think that viewing More's epigrams in the light of Martial's sheds some light on this question.

Let us consider the points of contact between the two which I mentioned before. Martial's collection begins with a book of poems on

spectacula (thier traditional title, in fact) on the often bloody games the Romans enjoyed, and are a compliment to the emperor Domitian. It is interesting that More's collection begins with five poems in praise of a ruler, of Henry VIII on the occasion of his coronation. Especially interesting is that one of them (no. 22) compliments the king on the tournaments (*de spectaculis equestribus*) that he has provided for the public enjoyment and makes its central point that this *spectaculum* has been entirely free from any bloodshed or mishap.⁷ The contrast with the Roman games is perhaps not likely to be coincidental.

A traditional problem for admirers of Martial is the extravagant praise he showers upon Domitian, not one of the most admirable of Roman emperors. In More's epigrams, Henry VIII, to whom the collection is dedicated, is a good king who nonetheless disappears after the first five poems, and the treatment of kings thereafter is on the whole critical of royal abuse, although careful to distinguish between good and bad kings.⁸ The fact that death and sleep make a ruler no better than any man is more than once the subject of a poem, and one of them (no. 110) is neatly sandwiched in between a poem that distinguishes good and bad rulers and one on a good king. The role of bad king in More's epigrams is played by King James IV of Scotland, who although not a tyrant failed to keep his word, and was therefore a king who weakened the integrity of language (nos. 183-84; see also no. 271). The second poem is an epitaph spoken by King James himself, and the persona concludes by warning other kings not to empty language of its meaning, "Ne sit (ut esse solet) nomen inane fides" (not to let loyalty become, as it often does, an empty word). One other often discussed poem relevant to the theme of the ruler is the debate on the best form of government (no. 198), which rehearses the advantages and disadvantages of rule by a king or an elected assembly, only to break off short of a conclusion, perhaps another instance of the significance of what is not spoken. If More has Martial's unwearied praise of Domitian in the back of his mind, his poems on the subject of rulers can be seen as a response that corrects a simple rhetoric of unswerving praise with a more complex view.

As we see here, each point of contact between Martial and More yields both similarities and differences and I will not focus on two areas that seem to me especially central to our subject, the sense of the personal world that each collection of poems generates, and the figure of the bad poet.

The reader of Martial's epigrams gets a very strong sense of a personal

presence, all the more striking in a poetic form whose brevity and precision are so conducive to impersonality.⁹ We constantly hear a voice often good-natured but capable of sharp reactions when necessary, with an amused if cynical view of human foolishness. This world is a world of pretense, posture and deception, and it is language, the poet's language, that uncovers these false appearances. It is a world (to coin an oxymoron) full of lack of substance, one in which giving and receiving are of supreme importance. It is a mercenary world in which only the wretched work, and the rest are therefore patrons or clients. The patron bestows upon the client a tangible reward for an empty service.

In the midst of all this is the figure of the poet, who creates this world for us with his language. If on the one hand the poem is also a commodity, something without physical substance (and hence *inane*) like the other services clients bestow upon patrons, on the other hand it makes what it speaks of last, because the voice of the poet will last. If the poet-persona can at times be somewhat modest, "Non sum, Classicus, tam malus poeta" (I'm not, Classicus, such a bad poet),¹⁰ he can confidently predict the extent his words will reach in space, "Sed toto legor orbe frequens et dicitur 'Hic est,'" (But I am widely read in the whole world, and they say, "It's him"; V, 13) and also in time, as when he compares his art to that of the painter. He says of his song,

Casibus hic nullis, nullis debilis annis
vivet, Apelleum cum morietur opus.

(This will live safe from any chance or any number of years, when the work of Apelles dies.) VII, lxxxiv¹¹

Being a world of leisure and extravagance in the absence of substance, it is also a world of sexual activity with very little restraint, and Martial, from a cool distance ("Lasciva est nobis pagina, vita proba," What's on my page is sexual, my life is pure; I, iv) unblinkingly chronicles a wide variety of human sexual activity with witty malice.

In this world of human vanity, of *inania*, it is only the words of the poet that turn out to have substance after all, for they will defeat time, and what Martial chooses to include in his poetry is a function of his desire to recreate life in language. Of his collection of poems he says, "Adgnoscat mores vita legatque suos" (Let life recognize and read about her own behavior; VIII, 3). And an essential part of this verbal world is *sal*, pungent wit. To a poet who writes epigrams that are "merely sweet" (*dulcia tantum*), Martial exclaims,

Nullaque mica salis nec amari fellis in illis
gutta sit, o demens, vis tamen illa legi.

(There's not a drop of pungency or bitter bile in them, you madman, yet you want them to be read.) VII, xxv

One is tempted to argue that it is precisely the presence of salt — and bile — that will preserve these words. The presence in More's epigrams of poems that joke about marital infidelity or even rape show him observing this precept of Martial.

Like Martial, More is a connoisseur of human foolishness. A poem like the one about the cynic philosopher gobbling up an onion (no. 43), not based on anything in Martial but rather on a poem in the Greek anthology, is in tone much like Martial. (We should note that although so many of More's poems are translations from the Greek, the fact of their selection and their location in the epigrams makes them as important as poems without classical models in our consideration of the world of More's epigrams.) More's world is also one in which the poet's language detects the emptiness beneath human pretension. But some qualities found in Martial are lacking here. Martial's poetry is highly self-referential. As we have seen, poems often refer to their own place in the collection, and often they mention their own poetic meter. The poet sometimes addresses them directly, and at times reminds them of their place in a physical object, the book. This kind of thing is largely absent in More's epigrams, which are more concerned about something else than about themselves. They direct attention away from, rather than toward, themselves.

The personal range of More's epigrams is quite different from Martial's. For the most part they are impersonal, until we near the end of the collection, and come upon the curious epitaph More composed for his first wife (no. 258).¹² Very striking, to say the least, is More's notion that he and his two wives could have lived happily together in a universe that must remain wholly imaginary, *si fatum religioque sinant* (if fate and religion permitted). Soon after we find some of More's most personal and most moving poems. He writes a poem to a woman on whom he had had a boyish crush years before (no. 263), noteworthy for its warm affection, and the very original way he reacts to the loss of the woman's beauty with time: a conventional conclusion drawn from that subject is pointedly lacking here.¹³ It is followed by a poem to his children (no. 264), even more affectionate, in which we do see one touch of self-reflexivity in the picture of More the poet composing these words as

his horse stumbles in the mud! This is followed by a poem about a lovely and charming Frenchwoman (no. 265) who calls on him while he is deep in conversation, but does not speak to him and so he does not see her. He addresses the person he was in conversation with to ask him to apologize to the lady since he himself can't speak French. It is amusing and characteristic that the accomplished language of the poem concludes by drawing attention to an absent language, the French that More does not speak, and focuses our attention on the efficacious language of the one whose words were so powerful that they caused More not to perceive the very material physical presence of the lady in the first place. These poems establish a tone of warmth and wit combined that has no exact equivalent in Martial.

What is remarkable about the poems in which More deals with overt human folly is that Martial's often tolerant good humor is lacking. There is a bite and an edge in More's world, and above all a grim obsession with human mortality quite unlike the Roman poet. The poems that deal with mortality conceive of man's life in physical terms only. Some of them are striking in their force. One, for instance, seems almost to parody Martial's interest in sexuality:

Quin si vera voles, audire, libidine foeda

Natus es a coitu, guttula et a misera.

(But if you want to hear the truth, you were born in intercourse of shameful lust, and from a pitiful droplet.) No. 59

Other remarkable examples of this emphasis reflect on the fact that our lives depend upon something as insubstantial as a breath of air,

Sic sumus ergo nihil, Plutoni pascimur omnes,

E flatu minimo nos levis aura fovet.

(This then is why we are nothing. We all provide food for death; what sustains us is a slight breath of thin air.) No. 130

and conceive of the world as a prison where we are the victims of a fiction our imaginations shape:

Iam quoque dum carcer non tamquam carcer amatur,

Hinc alijs alij mortibus extrahimur.

(Now too while we love the prison as if it were no prison, we are released from it, one way or another, by death.) No. 119

These epigrams unmask not specific human delusions, but the fact that human life itself for men is an illusion and the poet's language here tells us true things (*vera*) that most men do not want to hear.

Here we may raise our question of why More chose not to put more overtly Christian poetry into this collection. There are some poems in which members of the clergy figure, but insofar as their status as clergymen enters into the poems, it is because they discharge their offices ineptly. In this, another province of human delusion is unmasked, and these poems are what a poet like Martial might have written about Christian clergymen if he had known any.¹⁴ The most Christian poems in the collection are one about a monk thrown overboard by sailors (no. 175), which focuses on the burden of sin, and the two concerned with Erasmus' New Testament (nos. 255 and 256), poems therefore about restoring integrity to language. But anything we might call devotional is lacking.

Here it is helpful to look at More in the context of his times. A contemporary whom we are not inclined to associate with More is Niccolò Machiavelli, writing his *Prince* in Italy at about the time More is writing these epigrams and his *Utopia*. What Machiavelli did in *The Prince* that was truly shocking to his age and for a long time to come, was to posit a universe in which Christian morality itself is a delusion, a fiction shaped by men that does not correspond to the realities of the way the world is run by that incomprehensible force called Fortune. In Machiavelli's imagined universe, there is no Christian transcendent presence. All that men have to aid them in their struggle with fortune is their own intelligence. It is noteworthy that Machiavelli cannot sustain his vision of a world without the transcendent all the way to the end of his work. In his last chapters he invokes miracles and the coming of a savior.

When a Renaissance humanist confronted the world created by the language of classical literature, he confronted a world where the Christian God was absent, except where he could be read into it, as in Virgil most notably. But classical literature nevertheless showed that it was possible to imagine a non-Christian universe, even if such a thing were thought to be absolutely false. And More, so fond of exercises, especially in relation to classical culture, competes with Martial, on the whole, in Martial's own terms. Just as in his *Utopia*, he imagines as a kind of exercise a world as naturally good as possible in the absence of a knowledge of Christianity, so in his epigrams he imagines a world where men scarcely perceive any transcendental element. In this respect his fictional universe here is like that of Machiavelli, but there are profound differences. *The Prince* tells us, until the paradoxical despair of its ending, that the world it describes is really the world we live in.

More's epigrams, at their bleakest, create a world that we could scarcely bear to live in when we see how empty it really is. And it is the poet's language which reveals its emptiness to us. The epigrams create for us by and large a world as empty of Christianity in any operative sense as Martial's but their intent is to show that even the human qualities that redeem Martial's world for the reader — and perhaps even the purely human qualities that redeem the world of these epigrams — are based on delusions. They create a world of emptiness, expressed in empty language, and show that the world of Martial is not one we would choose to live in.¹⁵ This is the sense in which More would have seen himself as vanquishing Martial in their competition. No one I think would claim that Martial is not the greater poet, but it was not in aesthetic terms that More expected his Latin poetry to be judged in the most important way. These poems are then an exercise, but a most serious one.

We might conclude by considering the role of the bad poet. Martial is plagued by a host of bad poets, would-be poets, and plagiarists. More however has just one significant bad poet, the hapless Germanus Brixius, to contend with, and this curious figure is the last to appear in the *Epigrams*. With him the book ends.

Martial's epigrams as we have them do not seem to end but rather to trail off. The collection concludes with two books of distichs written early designed to accompany gifts. If the beginning of More's book parallels Martial the end does not. His collection begins with the presence of a good king who then disappears and ends with the presence of a bad poet.

There are a few other epigrams on anonymous bad poets (nos. 103, 147, 240), and More himself amusingly enough plays the role of bad poet when a bad poem is wanted as an epitaph instead of the good epitaph that More had written first (see nos. 159–61). No fewer than eleven poems however are dedicated to Brixius, who on the whole has the role of bad poet all to himself.

Two things are wrong with the poetry of Brixius. First, it does not tell the truth but consists of false things, the *falsa* as opposed to the *vera* that More's poetry is concerned with, and second, it is incompetently written. It is wanting therefore both in respect to form and substance.

A first group of seven epigrams (nos. 188–195) is concerned with Brixius' *Chordigera*, a poem that does not tell what really happened. How could it, since it describes an event with no survivors? And Brixius' description of his hero is so inept that he seems at one point to

have five arms and at another to be wearing his shield on his head. More does not fault Brixius for borrowing from classical authors since this is a normal and even desirable procedure, but for his ineffective use of them. The emphasis is on what is absent in these poems: the truth, and art. This group concludes with words placed in the mouth of Apollo which tell us that what is ultimately lacking in Brixius' text, a kind of counter-text to More's, is *mens* (intelligence), a word itself absent in what Apollo says, and indirectly indicated by word-play.

Brixius is thus a counter-figure to More himself, a role he has assigned himself as indicated by the title of his other work here mentioned, the *Antimorus*. Bits of his text find their way into More's text, and the last two epigrams are concerned with one of them, a hendecasyllable with thirteen syllables, a bad line of verse by this bad poet. The last poem in fact mathematically deconstructs Brixius, whose final fault is that he cannot count. So the last poem is a kind of count-down, beginning with the ten years of the Trojan War and the nine Muses and so on down to Brixius' two eyes, and then the one that will be left when the other is gouged out. "Vnum ego patiar perterebretis ei" (I'll let you gouge out one of his), the last line of the last poem, with its second person plural form of address, suggests that it will be the reader's response which performs this operation. And after this there is nothing left but the empty word *finis*.

It is appropriate then to end by dismantling a bad poet in this collection that sounds the tradition of classical epigram and ultimately finds emptiness there, an absence of something that could only be a presence in some other literary tradition, or perhaps in something other than a literary tradition. For More, the fullness of the word is the crucial absence here. In this sense the trivial figure of Brixius, whose badly formed linguistic constructs correspond to no pre-linguistic reality, is a fitting one to conclude with. His posturing before a void that his pretensions are intending to conceal is not wholly unlike the posturing we often see in Martial. In both cases it is language that finds them out. It is the task of More's epigrams, however, to suggest for the discerning reader the emptiness that lies beyond.

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Notes

1. *Latin Poems*, ed. Clarence H. Miller, Leicester Bradner, Charles A. Lynch, and Revilo P. Oliver, Vol. 3, Part II of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).
2. p. 63.
3. My discussion is based on the final edition in More's lifetime published in 1520, for which he made revisions of the earlier edition of 1518. These earlier editions lacked the final poems subsequently discussed here, and ended with the epitaph for his dead wife (no. 258). See pp. 7-9 of the Yale edition.
4. The commentary in the Yale edition notes about a dozen "echoes" of Martial in More's epigrams.
5. The editors of the Yale edition raise the question, for instance, on p. 54.
6. The text and numbering of the Yale edition are used throughout this article. I have used the translations of the Yale edition, modified at times for emphasis.
7. See no. 37 for a poem on a similar subject.
8. The Yale edition notes that More's epigrams are unique among sixteenth-century epigrams in using kingship as a subject, p. 62.
9. For a superb late Renaissance example of the impersonal epigram, see those of John Owen, *Ioannis Audoeni Epigrammata*, ed. John R. C. Martyn, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1976-78).
10. II, viii. The text and numbering are from *M. Val. Martialis Epigrammata*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965). The translations are my own.
11. See More's reflections on the transience of the painter's art in his epigram on the paintings of Quentin Metsys of Erasmus and Peter Giles (276/31-39), an epigram also not included in the published collection.
12. The 1518 editions ended with this poem. See note 3 above.
13. For poems that do draw the conventional conclusion see Villon's "Regrets de la belle Hëaulmiere" or Ronsard's "Quand vous serez bien vieille . . ." (*Sonnets pour Hélène* II, xliii).
14. See especially no. 71 as an example.
15. This is of course more true of the 1518 editions, which lack the personal poems at the end. Perhaps More found that the bleakness needed some balancing.