

‘TALKING TO WATER’:  
AN EPIGRAM-CYCLE IN MARTIAL, BOOK 4  
(4.18; 4.22; 4.63)

Given the sheer volume of Martial’s extant epigrammatic output, with its wide-ranging subject-matter and its varied prosopography of both real-life persons and fictitious satirical ‘types’, it is hardly surprising to discover that there is, in fact, in certain areas, a considerable degree of repetition and overlap, as far as certain individuals and situations are concerned<sup>1</sup>. These groups or ‘cycles’

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1) According to the distribution and numerical arrangement of D. R. Shackleton Bailey’s Teubner edition of the *Epigrams* (Stuttgart 1990), the corpus comprises 1,561 pieces. For named individuals in the poems (whether real, fictional, mythological) recourse may be had to L. Friedlaender, *M. Valerii Martialis Epi-*

of epigrams, in which such repetition and overlap occurs, are to be discerned with sufficient regularity throughout Books 1–12 as to suggest a conscious structural device on the part of the poet for the purpose of providing some sense of coherence and continuity within a framework of apparent diversity.

The principal epigram-cycles have already received learned attention, and at some length<sup>2</sup>. However, there is a mini-cycle, to be found in Book 4, which seems to have escaped the notice of scholars. And although these epigrams are not linked by a named individual as such, they are nonetheless united in a cyclic pattern by a common motif: namely the poet's concluding remarks, in each case made directly to water, the natural phenomenon which has figured significantly in the preceding narrative.

On three separate occasions in the fourth Book – each dealing with a very different incident – Martial speaks directly to water in formal, apostrophic vocatives<sup>3</sup>. Each address is to be found in the closing line of each epigram, and provides narratorial comment to complete the foregoing account.

In 4.18<sup>4</sup> a young boy is killed by a falling icicle<sup>5</sup> which pierces

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grammaton Libri mit erklärenden Anmerkungen (Leipzig 1886, repr. Amsterdam 1967) vol. II, 347–381, and the Index Nominum of I. Borovskij's 1976 'editio correctior' of W. Heraeus' 1924 Teubner text (both Leipzig) 380–417, which is reproduced in slightly modified form in Shackleton Bailey's text (see above, at 489–528). The latter's 'new' Loeb translation of the complete *Epigrams* (London/Cambridge, Massachusetts 1993) contains a very useful set of Appendices and Indices, vol. III, 317–390.

2) For a general study see principally K. Barwick, *Zyklen bei Martial und in den kleinen Gedichten des Catull*, *Philologus* 102 (1958) 284–318, and the other works cited there. Also, more specifically, there is the seemingly exhaustive treatment of the 'slain sow' epigrams from the so-called '*Liber de Spectaculis*' by B. Campbell, *Martial's Slain Sow Poems: An Esthetic Analysis*, *C&M* 30 (1969) 347–382, and the 'lion and hare' cycle in Book 1, for which see E. Lieben, *Ein Epigrammenkranz des Martial*, in: *Charisteria A. Rzach*, Reichenberg 1930, 131–135.

3) Unfortunately, Shackleton Bailey's renderings (above, n. 1) of the concluding lines of 4.18 ('Or where is death not present, if waters cut throats?') and 4.22 ('The pellucid waters forbade more.') fail to include any sense of second-person address to water, thus losing an important dimension of these poems in the cycle.

4) There is a curiously haunting Christian application of this epigram to be found in Peter Porter's 'translation' in: *After Martial* (Oxford 1972, repr. in: *Martial in English*, London 1996, 335–336) 8, where the image of blood and water pouring from the same wound recalls the Roman centurion's experience on Calvary (St John's Gospel 19:34).

5) Pierre Laurens is acute in his observation that "Martial ne nomme point le glaçon (en latin: *stirra*), préfère la périphrase qui conserve sa nature liquide à l'eau

his throat as he passes under the arch of the *Aqua Virgo*<sup>6</sup>. “Where is death not present”, asks Martial, “if you, water, are a cut-throat?”

*Qua vicina pluit Vipsanis porta columnis  
et madet assiduo lubricus imbre lapis,  
in iugulum pueri, qui roscida tecta subibat,  
decidit hiberno praeegravis unda gelu:  
cumque peregisset miseri crudelia fata,  
tabuit in calido vulnere mucro tener.  
quid non saeva sibi voluit Fortuna licere?  
aut ubi non mors est, si iugulatis aquae?*

In 4.22 a radiant but timid young bride, in an attempt to escape the ardent advances of her groom, seeks refuge in a pool, and hopes in vain that the water will conceal her presence. Betrayed by her own beauty in the water’s transparency, however, Cleopatra is soon discovered and joined by her husband who, inhibited by the clear water, is able only to snatch reluctant kisses from his nervous bride<sup>8</sup>; for, as the poet rebukes: “You, pellucid water, forbade anything more<sup>9</sup>.”

*Primos passa toros et adhuc placanda marito  
merserat in nitidos se Cleopatra lacus,*

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qui ne s’est congelée que le temps de tuer, puisqu’elle fond aussitôt dans la plaie brûlante. Or sur cette métonymie (eau pour glaçon), c’est-à-dire sur cette légère tromperie poétique repose la pointe de l’épigramme, le paradoxe que l’eau égorge”, in: L’Abeille dans l’Ambre: Célébration de l’Épigramme de l’Époque Alexandrine à la Fin de la Renaissance (Paris 1989) 256.

6) Topographical details are provided by K. Balogh, *Martialis és a régi Róma topografiája*, EPK [= Egyetemes Philologiai Közlöny] 64 (1940) 138–167; F. Castagnoli, *Roma nei versi di Marziale*, *Athenaeum* 28 (1950) 67–78; G. Lugli, *La Roma di Domiziano nei versi di Marziale e di Stazio*, *Studi Romani* 9 (1961) 1–17; J.-M. Pailler, *Martial et l’espace urbain*, *Pallas* 28 (1981) 79–87. This particular epigram is discussed as belonging to a special category of epigrams which deal with accidental happenings, in: H. Szelest, *Martials Epigramme auf merkwürdige Vorfälle*, *Philologus* 120 (1976) 251–257.

7) Cf. *Anth. Pal.* 9.56

8) Cf. *Ov. Met.* 4.357–358: *mediis immittitur undis / pugnanteque tenet luctantiaque oscula carpit.*

9) In his concise study ‘Martial’ (Heidelberg 1988) 50 Niklas Holzberg points out that “von herkömmlichen Sexualpraktiken zweier Partner verschiedenen Geschlechts, wie sie z. B. Gegenstand der Elegien und erotischen Lehrgedichte Ovids sind, nur in 6 Epigrammen die Rede ist (IV 22, IX 67, X 78, XI 78, 104, XII 65).”

*dum fugit amplexus. sed prodidit unda latentem;  
 lucebat, totis cum tegeretur aquis:  
 condita sic puro numerantur lilia vitro,  
 sic prohibet tenuis gemma latere rosas.  
 insilui mersusque vadis luctantia carpsi  
 basia: perspicuae plus vetuistis aquae.*

In 4.63<sup>10</sup> a mother, Caerellia, is drowned in rough seas during a crossing from Bauli to Baiae<sup>11</sup>. Martial underlines this crime of nature and its injustice with an allusion to a similar occurrence of recent historical memory: "Once, water, though ordered, you refused to do this monstrous thing for Nero<sup>12</sup>."

*Dum petit a Baulis mater Caerellia Baias,  
 occidit insani crimine mersa freti.  
 gloria quanta perit vobis! haec monstra Neroni  
 nec iussae quondam praestiteratis, aquae.*

Three contrasting scenarios, then, but all united by a common motif: that water is – at least in these particular incidents – a negative element which brings about destruction or deprivation of some kind or another. In 4.18 and 4.63 water is a cruel and unjust taker of innocent, virtuous (and therefore valuable) life. In 4.22 water is seen as a frustrating spoil-sport and kill-joy: the barrier which obstructs the path to pleasure and, ultimately, to sexual fulfilment.

Martial's stance in 4.18 and 4.63 is that of reflective by-stander, of objective and subjective narrator, the voice of universal feeling. In 4.22 he appears to be at the same time both narrator and narrated. But whatever the relative ambiguity may be<sup>13</sup>, the

10) See Szelest (above, n. 6).

11) Friedlaender (above, n. 1 ad loc.) observes the reversal of detail in the journey made by Agrippina who sailed from Baiae to Bauli; Caerellia from Bauli to Baiae.

12) Tac. Ann. 14.5; Suet. Nero 34.

13) The ambiguity lies in the shift from the narrator's third-person reference to *marito* in line 1 to the narrator's first-person involvement in line 7 *insilui . . . carpsi*. The husband is "presumably the poet (cf. v. 7) for the purpose of this epigram" – so Shackleton Bailey's note in his Loeb translation. Guido Ceronetti, in his complete edition of the *Epigrams* (Marco Valerio Marziale Epigrammi, Turin 1979) has the following footnote to 4.22.1 (p. 249): "Qualcuno ha congetturato qui un'allusione ad una prima notte nuziale di M. Maritus ha però spesso il senso di

words spoken to water at the end of the epigram quite clearly indicate exasperation, disappointment, and reproach.

All three poems are in elegiacs of eight, eight, and four lines respectively. In each case Martial prepares the way for his final comment by setting a watery scene, with varying amounts of descriptive information. Thus in 4.18 we have a mosaic of references to wetness: *pluit*; *madet*; *lubricus*; *imbre*; *roscida*; *gelu*; *unda*; *tabuit*. Similarly, in 4.22: *meraserat*; *lacus*; *unda*; *aquis*; *mersus*; *vadis*. 4.63 has fewer preparatory references: *mersa*; *freti*; while *petit* and the place-names *Baulis* and *Baias* provide an implicit maritime flavour (the two latter by virtue simply of their coastal positions)<sup>14</sup>.

Finally, each situation points up a basic irony. In 4.18 water, in the form of ice, causes the cruel death (*crudelia fata*) of an undeserving, hapless child (*pueri miseri*), where the final *ingulatis* picks up *ingulum* of line 3. This lethal weapon then melts in the warm wound which it has made, and returns to its original liquid form, eliminating the ‘murder weapon’. In 4.22 the water’s sparkling clarity and limpid qualities are emphasized (*nitidos*; and, by association, *puro ... vitro, tenuis gemma*), which allow Cleopatra’s natural radiance to shine out<sup>15</sup>. But, ironically, the very limpidity which gave her away subsequently prevents and forbids anything more than the most rudimentary foreplay<sup>16</sup>. In 4.63 “by drowning Caerellia, the waters lost the honour which they had gained by sparing Agrippina<sup>17</sup>.”

These three examples from Book 4, then, provide us with a further, comparatively unusual example of the epigrammatist’s acknowledged fondness for cyclical arrangement. They are noteworthy in that the addresses to water contained in them neither arise from a sense of nostalgic appreciation of some idyllic

amante, *fututor*, e anche un caprone era chiamato marito. L’epigramma non mi pare rifletta lo stile di vita di M., che l’avrà composto per qualche amico.” And see J. P. Sullivan, *Martial, the Unexpected Classic* (Cambridge 1991) 25–26.

14) Both were resorts on the Bay of Naples, Bauli being a town between Baiae and Misenum.

15) Cf. *Ov. Met.* 4.354–355: *in liquidis translucet aquis, ut eburnea si quis / signa tegat claro vel candida lilia vitro*.

16) The subject of ‘water sex’ has been treated by A. Cameron, *Sex in the Swimming Pool*, *BICS* 20 (1973) 149–150, and B. Baldwin, *Aquatic Sex*, *LCM* 6 (1981) 25. See also N. M. Kay, *Martial Book XI: A Commentary* (London 1985) on 11.21.11, p. 117.

17) Explanatory note given in the translation ‘The Epigrams of Martial’ (London 1860) 208.

watering-place, nor constitute the formal invocation of a hymn or prayer to a sacred spring or the like<sup>18</sup>.

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18) Perhaps the example from Roman poetry which comes most readily to mind is Hor. Od. 3.13, the hymnic *O fons Bandusiae*. There are in fact occasions in Martial on which the poet addresses water, but not in the same manner of our three 'cyclic' pieces: e. g. *ergo sacri fontes et litora grata valete*, 4.57.7; *fons dominae [...]* // *cum tua [...]*, 7.50.1; *mitte tuas messes, accipe, Nile, rosas*, 6.80.10; *numquid et hoc, fallax Nile, negare potes?*, 10.26.8; and cf. Pliny, Epist. 1.9.6 *O rectam sinceramque vitam! O dulce otium honestumque ac paene omni negotio pulchrius! O mare, o litus*, etc.