Jan-Wilhelm BECK, *Quid nobis cum epistula?* Zum Anfang von Martials erstem Epigrammbuch. Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2002. 32 pp. (= AAWGö, phil.-hist. Kl., Jg. 2002, Nr. 3, pp. 171-202).

Improbe facit qui in alieno libro ingeniosus est.

The main scope of the slender booklet under review here at first glance seems modestly narrow: Beck (henceforth B.) proposes a new approach to the introductory unit (*extra-ordinem-paginarum* preface and prefatory epigram) of Book 1 of Martial's collections. As the implications and consequences, however, greatly affect our understanding of Martial, a detailed discussion is called for.

B.'s main focus is on the mention of Cato Uticensis at the very end of the preface and, again, as the addressee of the prefatory poem. To paraphrase Martial's argument: 'Epigrams are written for those who like watching the performances at the *Floralia*; there's no room for Cato, the grim kill-joy, in *my* theater, that is, in the world of my verse.' Needless to say, scholarship up to the present day has univocally and most rightly viewed this as an open reference to the notorious anecdote according to which, during the *Floralia* of 55 B.C.E., good old Cato, full of embarrassment, left the theater on account of the uninhibited on-stage nakedness: if we follow Valerius Maximus (2.10.8), he did not want to check the excessive license of the dancers. That was surely fair enough: by freeing the location from his presence, the stern moralist saved his own honorable decency and, at the same time, permitted the crowd to have their usual fun. The implications for the poetics of Martial's epigrams are straightforward and need not be explicated further.

B., however, argues (13) that Martial introduces Cato as the Stoic and republican (which, of course, he was) of decidedly anti-Caesarean principles; consequently, he takes Cato at the beginning of Book 1 to represent a strong member of the Stoic opposition, who is intellectually as well as politically anti-Domitianic (15); thus, the argument continues, at the very opening of his dozen of epigram collections, Martial expressly dissociates himself from those enemies of the regime in general and of the emperor in particular.[1]

[1] It might have been worthwhile to include the depiction of Cato in other imperial writers. Seneca, e.g., at *epist.* 14.13 is a little reserved as to Cato's heroic republicanism, precisely *because* Cato was *a priori* unable to tolerate any system other than the republican. There is no reference whatsoever in B.'s study to P. Pecchiura's *La figura di Catone Uticense nella letteratura latina* (Torino 1965).

I do take B.'s point that, in contrast to the account of the *Floralia*-story as related by Valerius Maximus and others, Martial does indeed suggest that Cato, even before entering the theater, cannot possibly have been so naive as not to know (by hearsay) of the unrestrained goings-on in such a show: *nosses iocosae dulce cum sacrum Florae | festosque lusus et licentiam vulgi*, that is, 'even though you knew of sprightly Flora's delightful ritual and the festive jests and the crowd's license' – you couldn't help but come and watch. For sure, Martial by imputing a good deal of hypocritical innocence to the master of morality inverts the common perception of Cato as an ideal *exemplum*. However, I disagree with B.'s contention that this inversion serves political purposes. In imperial literature, the mention of Cato does not automatically presuppose a register of oppositionist, anti-Caesarean tendencies. At any rate, a sub-text reading of Martial's preface would require detectable textual markers in order for the recipient to get such a message. I can see none. On top of that, B. confines his explication to Cato's role only in Book 1, despite the fact that the same Cato re-appears not infrequently in other books of Martial's. Finally, I certainly do not deny the impact of Stoic oppositionist activities in the reign of Nero and subsequent emperors, including Domitian (Suet. *Dom.* 10.3, Tac. *Agr.* 2), but the role of Stoics other than Cato in the epigrams ought to be included.[2] For a well-balanced account of Cato's role in Martial (with the relevant references), see S. Lorenz' recent book on Martial's panegyrics, at 138-142.[3] I cannot detect in the Cato of 1 *praef*. anything more than one of Martial's favorite anti-epigrammatic, non-Saturnalian characters, "a frequent model of (ridiculous) *gravitas*" (Kay on 11.2.1).[4] Martial may be criticizing the Stoic principles that lead to suicide (1.8); on the other hand, however, he can utilize

---

2 B. does not make use of any works that deal with the Stoics in imperial Rome, e.g. O. Murray's piece in *Historia* 14 (1965), or P.A. Brunt's in *PBSR* 43 (1975).

3 *Erotik und Panegyrik: Martials epigrammatische Kaiser* (Tübingen 2002). Lorenz (at 139 n. 111) also refers to M. Lausberg, *Gymnasium* 87 (1980), 411-430 (see esp. 428-429). Similarly, H. Szelest's interpretation of Mart. 1.78 (*Eos* 62 [1974], 107-108) as a pro-republican and, thus, anti-Domitianic epigram cannot stand to reason either, as Lorenz at 139 correctly emphasizes.

4 In this context (now, of course, without any political dimensions), B. also draws attention to Catullus, *c.* 56 (*o rem ridiculam, Cato, et iocosam* […]). One may or may not follow his conviction that Catullus, there, can only be addressing the same Cato as Martial rather than the neoteric poet P. Valerius Cato, since "nur so gewinnt das Gedicht […] Sinn und Reiz" (14); the address to the Stoic moralist in a poem in which the speaker relates that he caught a little boy wanking and so banged him "with his hard cane – in tandem" (in Goold's transl. of line 7) would then surely be a spicy element of irony. It is, however, not true that, except for V. Buchheit (*Hermes* 89 (1961), 345-356 at 353) and B. himself (*'Lesbia' und 'Juventius'* [Göttingen 1996], 212-213) Catullan scholarship universally ignores this option. Kroll *ad loc.* is skeptical; Quinn *ad loc*. is aware of a possible "provocation of Cato"; and Godwin's recent commentary (Warminster 1999, *ad loc*.) may

the same Stoics as generic examples of virtue, e.g. Thraesea Paetus' *constantia* at 4.54.7.

Most of the remaining parts of B.'s study heavily depend on, and circle around, the allegedly political implications of the first preface with its Cato-epigram.

If you accept B.'s standpoint, what follows seems (!) to be obvious: 1 *praef. epigr.* anticipates the adulatory epigrams of the same book, especially the notorious and more-than-enough disputed 'hare-lion cycle' (15-21). B. seems (!) to reject previous attempts of showing anti-Domitianic undertones in that cycle (and I would readily follow him), while on the other hand he refuses to positively abandon this possibility (18). That indecisiveness leaves the reader in the lurch; and those who continue reading finally discover that that strategy obviously serves dramatic purposes.[5] For, at 21-26, B. makes a U-turn and follows those scholars whose views he has just rebutted.[6] By accepting J. Garthwaite's theory of 'safe-criticism' (especially in the evaluation of Books 6 and 9) at 23-24 – and by passing over in silence the manifold caveats raised against such an approach[7] –, he now speaks of the poet's "Technik der Kontrastierung und damit [?] Relativierung" also in Book 1 (24, and "relativierende Kontrastierung" at 27). The frequent recurrence of the hare-lion theme, B. argues, demolishes its panegyric tone (25); this subversion, he continues, is made explicit in Martial's play with the very idea of repetition at item 1.44: *lascivos leporum cursus lususque leonum / quod maior nobis charta minorque gerit / et bis idem facimus, nimium si, Stella, videtur* […] ('if it seems too much to you,

be quoted as a specimen of the status-quo: "Cato was either the poet […] or else the stern moralist […]; the first of these seems more likely in view of line 3 – though there might be a point in dedicating this obscene poem to the stern moralist." It simply goes without saying that, *if* one takes the Catullan Cato to be the Stoic, *then* the poet refers to the *Floralia*-story (as Buchheit 355 makes explicit). As a whole, Buchheit's explication of *c.* 56 leaves quite a number of issues unanswered; for instance, at 348 n. 2, he apparently rejects the wordplay in *protelo* (line 7), 'one behind another' and 'as / in place of a weapon' (*pro telo*), for which see Godwin *ad loc.* (and most likely many others).

5 I dare say that such a tactic is a little awkward in a scholarly treatise. The reader shouldn't be forced to read between the lines and, in a desultory manner, jump from one horse to another and back again. But that may well be a matter of personal taste.

6 At 22, B. rightly reminds us that only a fragmentary portion of panegyric poetry under Domitian (and other emperors) has actually come down to us; apparently, Martial and Statius were among the 'better poets' of that flavor – "und ist gute Literatur nicht oft auch politisch?" Well, does that mean we can mechanically utilize those poets as political weapons to make them fit our interpretation?

7 A careful evaluation of Books 6 (*lex Iulia de adulteriis*) and 9 (Earinus-poems), with up-to-date literature, can be found in Lorenz [n. 3], 152-162 and 191-198.

Stella, that my larger and smaller pages contain the gamesome runs of hares and the plays of lions and that I am doing the same thing twice […]'). But that is pure speculation beyond reason; plus, B. is only partially aware of the multi-layered intricacies of that poem and the complex discussion it has evoked in the past 100 years or so.[8] For sure, I agree that the *published book* should be in the focus of our interpretation.[9] But why, then, ignore the epigram that immediately follows, i.e. 1.45: *Edita ne brevibus pereat mihi cura libellis | dicantur potius* 'τὸν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος'. ('Lest my labor go to waste, published in small books, let me say 'to him in answer.'') The fact that, as Fowler [n. 9], 43-44 (followed by Lorenz [n. 3], 132) has pointed out, item 45 *continues* the theme of repetition, urges one to view 45 in conjunction with 44. Then, the epigrammatic reiteration of the hare-lion theme is compared to the reiteration of epic formulas (in Homer and beyond), that is, epigram and the possibilities of epigrammatic panegyrics are metapoetically compared to epic (panegyrics).[10] This, I think, does not affect, let alone diminish, the adulatory force of the hare-lion poems.

However, once the gates of forced interpretation are open, other poems of the same cycle easily become the target of scholarly arbitrariness as well: At 1.6 and 1.14, Martial emphasizes the emperor's achievement as a successful lion-tamer, whereas at 1.22 and 1.60, as B. (25-26) points out, the perspective is 'crucially' different: there, the harmlessness of the lion is owed to its natural instincts rather than to the emperor. This, according to B., neutralizes Domitian's accomplishments to such an extent that it likewise undermines the poet's flattery of the *princeps*. My deduction, then, would be: If that were the case, the allegedly anti-Stoic attack of Cato would no longer serve as a means of 'imperial panegyrics'.

The reader is now prepared to return once more to the preface of Book 1: B. maintains (27) that, by mocking Cato, Martial violates his own programmatic rule set out at the very beginning, i.e. not to openly attack real people. I am

---

8 What is exactly meant by *maior charta* as opposed to *minor charta*? At 24 n. 44, B. records only a (not representative) 'selection' of previous research; it is imperative here that one be alert to the entire debate; again, most references can easily be found in Lorenz [n. 3], 132 nn. 84-85.

9 B. does not say so explicitly, though, but his explication is based on the published book rather than the book's interrelation with pre-published collections. Most important is the debate between P. White (*JRS* 64 [1974], 40-61; *EMC* 40 [1996], 397-412) and D.P. Fowler (*Ramus* 24 [1995], 31-58).

10 For epic panegyrics under Domitian, see K.M. Coleman, *AJAH* 15 (1990 [2000-01]), 19-39 at 28-31.

worried about this argument for various reasons: (i) What is the definition of 'attack'? Is Cato really being "aufs schärfste angegriffen"? (ii) Shouldn't there be a difference between attacking the living and attacking the dead? (iii) There is no discussion of genre in B.'s argument. Harshly criticizing and ridiculing real people, that is *contemporaries*, is since Lucilius a stock theme of programmatic Satire. Juvenal, at the end of *Satire* 1, is quite explicit when he says that he will unmask the personal failings of only the dead (*experiar quid concedatur in illos / quorum Flaminia tegitur cinis atque Latina*, 170-171), and interestingly, that very close of his 'program' seems to contradict his earlier implication that he *will* attack his contemporaries.[11] (iv) The Cato of 1 *praef.* is a generic character anyway; for sure, he is not fictitious, since he did exist and since the reference to the *Floralia* is concrete enough; and yet, he stands for a particular type of man with a special mental and moral disposition that is as alien to the writer and the reader of epigram as it is to those who enjoy Floralian nakedness.

Be that as it may, the reader who still accepts B.'s train of thought might perhaps even appreciate the final conclusion of the study: The fictitious setting of the prose preface to Book 2 (actually the starting-point of B.'s analysis, pp. 3-6) aims at demonstrating that there is no need for Martial to communicate any programmatic messages through such prefaces. True. And indeed, the reader will not find any such prose intro for the next seven years or so, up until Book 8 of 93 C.E., when Martial resumes this practice. According to B., this return to an already rejected format is highly significant (29); so it looks like an almost natural consequence that the strong imperial panegyrics conveyed in 8 *praef.* may perhaps be considered as insincere and elusive as the literary program at the very opening of Book 1.[12] May I doubt that?

Decoding the sub-text of a poem or collection is as difficult and dependent on careful methodological principles and tools as the explication of an item as allegorical. It surprises me that, in a booklet that is so acrobatic in its methods, B. (at 20) so downright rejects, e.g., a 'sexualized reading' of Mart. 1.6 as repeatedly proposed by N. Holzberg (followed by S. Lorenz), a reading that J.P. Sullivan wouldn't have discarded either.[13] For sure, I do realize an inclination

---

[11] See S. Braund's instructive essay in her commentary (Cambridge 1996), 110-121 at 117-120, for a discussion of the literary tradition and for further references.

[12] For the peculiarities of Book 8, see (again) Lorenz [n. 3], 166-187, esp. 166-175. The political circumstances of the year 93 and Martial's book are carefully explicated by K.M. Coleman, *PLLS* 10 (1998), 337-357.

[13] See N. Holzberg, *WJA* 12 (1986), 210-211; *Martial* (Heidelberg 1988), 77-78; most recently again in his *Martial und das antike Epigramm* (Darmstadt 2002), 66-67; see the de-

in modern research to 'over-sexualized' literary criticism, but methodologically, the 'phallic approach' to 1.6 seems to be more rainproof and less twisted than B.'s own view of Martial's prefaces.[14]

To sum up: If it comes to appreciating or censuring Martial's verse, the republican moralist and the emperor have much more in common than B. admits.[15] For sure, *any* literary-critical approach, aiming at whatever conclusion, is to be welcomed. However, as we all know too well from previous research on 'safe criticism' (in Martial and beyond), the major problem with political readings of Martial's verse at a sub-text level is that the methods of decoding such a reading have failed to be convincing. Unfortunately, B.'s study is no exception.

Dr. Farouk F. Grewing
Institut für Altertumskunde
Universität zu Köln
D–50923 Köln
e-mail: f.grewing@uni-koeln.de

---

tails in Lorenz [n. 3], 127-128, and cf. J.P. Sullivan, *Martial: the unexpected classic* (Cambridge 1991), 207 with n. 35.

[14] The uncompromising denial of sexual and/or obscene implications is likely to be as much the result of personal taste as its opposite. In his book on Catullus [n. 4], at 264-265, B. enthusiastically follows H.D. Jocelyn (*AJPh* 101 [1980], 421-441) in categorically rebutting any erotic interpretation of Catullus' *Passer*. Regarding Mart. 1.6, we may not have ancient evidence to support Holzberg-Sullivan's view (but of course we don't even need it); for Catullus, however, the story is entirely different, since we can make use of evidence prior to him (Meleager) and, no less importantly, subsequent to him (Martial) to demonstrate the legitimacy of an erotic reading of the *Passer*; see above all R. Thomas, *Helios* 20 (1993), 131-142 (repr. in his *Reading Virgil and His Texts* [Ann Arbor 1999], 52-67).

[15] Note that Martial addresses Domitian at 1.4.1-2 by saying 'should you happen to light upon my books, *terrarum dominum pone supercilium*'; likewise, at 11.2.1-2 he speaks of "the gloomy brow and stern countenance of unbending Cato" (in Shackleton Bailey's rendering of *triste supercilium durique severa Catonis | frons*); cf. also the *Palatinum supercilium* of 9.79.2.