



Juvenal and Martial on Social Mobility

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JUVENAL AND MARTIAL ON SOCIAL MOBILITY*

Suetonius notes that Domitian, with the powers granted him as censor, issued an edict which revived the *lex Roscia theatralis* (Dom. 8.3). The law, which had been proposed by L. Roscius Otho in 67 B.C., reserved the first fourteen rows behind the orchestra in the theater for members of the equestrian order. The effect of Domitian's strict enforcement of this law provided Martial with the stimulus for the creation of a cycle of eight epigrams, the *lex Roscia* cycle of the fifth book: 8, 14, 23, 25, 27, 35, 38, and 41. Juvenal does not allow this topic of Martial's to remain unmentioned in his satires: he devotes several lines in the third satire to it. This gives us an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast the way the two poets handle the theme and to consider their attitudes to social mobility.¹

The comparison between Martial's V 8 and Juvenal 3. 153–59 has been made before. R. E. Colton believes that “both poets sneer at upstarts who have risen to equestrian status.”² I suggest the opposite, that the two poets display widely differing attitudes on the subject of social mobility. Let us first consider the Juvenal passage:

“exeat,” inquit,
“si pudor est, et de pulvino surgat equestri
cuius res legi non sufficit, et sedeant hic
lenonum pueri quocumque ex formice nati;
hic plaudat nitidi praeconis filius inter
pinnirapi cultos iuvenes iuvenesque lanistae”:
sic libitum vano, qui nos distinxit, Othoni. (3. 153–59)

Colton writes that Juvenal's Umbricius complains that, while those who do not have the equestrian census are removed from the front rows, insult is added to injury by the ushers, who admit those who are not knights but possess the equestrian census: sons of auctioneers, of procurers, of gladiators and of gladiator trainers. Nowhere, however, does Juvenal suggest that these well-dressed sons of procurers *et al.* are not equestrians. The important word is in line 155, *legi*. Those without 400,000 sesterces are not entitled *by the law* to sit in the first fourteen rows. Those whom the seating attendant allows to sit in the equestrian area do have the required property qualification. Juvenal's real

*This paper derives from my dissertation, *The Nature of Martial's Humour: an examination of the mechanism of Martial's humour and its socio-political significance* (diss. Univ. of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1985).

¹I am cautioned by J. P. Sullivan to define the term social mobility as it concerns Martial. I agree with Sullivan that Martial is a firm believer in the proper, respectful behavior of slaves and that he hates women who usurp the privileges of men, and particularly those women who cross class barriers to mate with household slaves. Women and slaves, however, are excluded from the free male citizenry. And social mobility does not refer to a civil servant ascending the *cursus*. It is rather something more basic, more like the sons of gladiators sitting *rightfully* in theater seats reserved for equestrians.

²See R. E. Colton, “Juvenal and Martial on the Equestrian Order,” *CJ* 61 (1966) 157–59.

complaint is against the law which favors money. In line 159 the satirist inveighs against the proposer of the law which divides Roman citizens.

E. Courtney's analysis of Juvenal's position is certainly right: Juvenal perceives that money is breaking up "the traditional framework of society in that *fortuna mutat genus*."³ For the satirist it is reprehensible that an ex-barber could challenge *patricios omnes* with his wealth (*Sat.* 1. 24 f.). He is wholly indignant that a wealthy freedman does not give way in a client's queue to a praetor of a noble but impoverished family (*Sat.* 1. 102 f.). The satirist takes a very snobbish view and sneers at the parvenu for no other reason than that he is a parvenu.

For Juvenal social mobility is in itself a cause for indignation. Juvenal's attitude stems from an aristocratic ethos, an ethos which emphasizes the innate superiority of those of high birth. This might appear inconsistent with the way he reacts to the aristocracy of his day: *Stemmata Quid Faciunt?* Throughout the eighth satire he lambastes the aristocrats for their general corruption and degeneracy. One might think that Juvenal was promoting the ideal of meritocracy with his emphasis on *mores*. But Juvenal bases his judgement of the aristocracy on a higher set of criteria than he would apply to non-nobles. The fact that Juvenal is able to single out *novi homines*, such as Cicero and Marius, who were able to comply with the expectations set for and of the aristocracy, makes the aristocratic degeneracy all the more reprehensible. In this way Juvenal is making the point that the standards are not so high as to be unattainable. If the aristocrats fall short of this standard, this is no reflection on the standard.

In essence Juvenal is reproaching the aristocracy of his day for not displaying the proper *mores* to defend its position against the upstarts. His attack against the aristocracy is therefore wholly consistent with his contempt of the parvenu. From whichever perspective one approaches it, because of his adherence to an aristocratic ethos and for purely snobbish reasons, Juvenal is disturbed by and opposed to social mobility. Is this Martial's attitude? Let us consider the epigrams of the *lex Roscia* cycle.

Edictum domini deique nostri,
 quo subsellia certiora fiunt
 et pueros eques ordines recepit,
 dum laudat modo Phasis in theatro,
 Phasis purpureis ruber lacernis,
 et iactat tumido superbus ore:
 "Tandem commodius licet sedere,
 nunc est reddita dignitas equestris:
 turba non premimur, nec inquinamur."
 Haec et talia dum refert supinus,
 illas purpureas et adrogantes
 iussit surgere Leitus lacernas.

(V 8)

³See E. Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (London 1980) 27. Horace expresses the same sentiment that is found in Juvenal: *Sat.* II 5.8. *Et genus et virtus nisi cum re vilior alga est.*

In the first epigram of the cycle Martial focuses on an individual named Phasis sitting among the first fourteen rows. Phasis praises the edict for keeping the equestrian order pure, and arrogantly denounces those below the rank of *equus*. He sits there dressed in a purple cloak. Purple was a mark of dignity. A purple border on a tunic signified membership in the senate and in the patrician and equestrian orders. Higher senatorial officials wore togas with a purple stripe woven into them. The purple serves to emphasize the dignified appearance that Phasis wishes to give. Martial, however, does not refer to stripes or borders in togas or tunics; it is Phasis' *lacerna* that the epigrammatist mentions. This becomes crucial to the subsequent surprise in the poem. The *lacerna* was a cloak that was worn originally over the toga in inclement weather. It later became popular as an all-weather cloak. Augustus took offence that its use was altering the traditional and unique dress of the Romans and prohibited anyone wearing it from entering the forum or the circus (Suet. *Aug.* 40.5). The toga over a tunic was the traditional dress of a Roman and conveniently marked out the individual's membership in a particular order. The *lacerna* does not fit into the scheme. Anyone could wear any color or design of *lacerna*.⁴

In epigram V 8, just as Phasis is lying back getting comfortable, the seating attendant, Leitus, "ordered that purple and arrogant cloak to get up." Martial saves the operative word of the surprise twist for last. The *lacerna* with which Phasis hoped to "cloak" his plebeian status fails him. Ironically, it is the cloak which marks him out as pretentious and facilitates his removal from the *pulvini equestres*. Phasis is not an equestrian and is, therefore, not permitted to sit in the first fourteen rows.

The only similarity between epigram V 8 and Juvenal 3. 153–59, other than the obvious fact that both passages deal with the seating arrangements in the theater, is that there is a strict adherence to the law. The law stipulates that one must possess the equestrian census to be allowed to sit in the front rows. As mentioned above, Juvenal is upset that the law favors money. This does not worry Martial; for him the law is simply the law. The dandified Phasis is not like the well-dressed sons of gladiators who are allowed to sit in the first fourteen rows. Phasis might appear to resemble the *culti iuvenes*, but he is only a *would-be* parvenu. He does not have the required census and is therefore removed from his seat. Because he *pretends* to be an equestrian, he becomes the butt of Martial's humor. Juvenal does not focus on pretence. The satirist's indignation comes to the fore, and he even sympathises with those who are removed from the front rows. There is no sympathy in Martial's epigrams on Phasis' behalf, and there is no genuine parvenu here for Martial to sneer at.

In Juvenal the emphasis is on the fact that decent, wellborn Romans who do not have the equestrian census are replaced in the front rows by dandified upstarts. One of the epigrams of the *lex Roscia* cycle deals with an impoverished aristocrat:

⁴The distinction between the *lacerna* and *toga* is made in two other epigrams: II 57 and V 26. There a certain Cordus used his magnificent cloak to obscure his impoverishment.

Ingenium studiumque tibi moresque genusque
 sunt equitis, fateor: cetera plebis habes.
 Bis septena tibi non sint subsellia tanti,
 ut sedeas viso pallidus Oceano.

(V 27)

The epigrammatist acknowledges the man's equestrian talent, eagerness, character and birth, yet all the rest is plebeian, that is to say, he does not have enough money to qualify for equestrian status. This is the type that Juvenal writes about, the type whose removal from the front rows makes the satirist so indignant. Martial again takes a straightforward, legalistic approach: this man does not have the required census and, therefore, neither is an equestrian nor is he allowed to sit in the front rows. Martial is not interested in any other criterion. Money is the only criterion that counts. In the punchline Martial casts doubt even on the other criteria to which this man lays claim. The very fact that the man tries to escape the usher's notice and turns pale in the process negates any claim to superior *mores*. Martial is not sympathetic to this man. As far as he is concerned, this type is just as much an impostor as the Phasis type. Martial's attitude remains different from Juvenal's.

There is an epigram in which Martial appears to speak up for a worthy Roman who is going to be expelled from the seat he has taken in the front rows:

“Quadringenta tibi non sunt, Chaerestrate. Surge,
 Leitus ecce venit. Sta, fuge, curre, late.”
 Ecquis, io, revocat discedentemque reducit?
 Ecquis, io, largas pandit amicus opes?
 Quem chartis famaеque damus populisque loquendum?
 Quis Stygios non volt totus adire lacus?
 Hoc, rogo, non melius quam rubro pulpita nimbo
 spargere et effuso permaduisse croco?
 Quam non sensuro dare quadringenta caballo,
 aureus ut Scorpi nasus ubique micet?
 O frustra locuples, o dissimulator amici,
 haec legis et laudas? Quae tibi fama perit!

(V 25)

As the poem begins, Chaerestratus is already seated and some individual informs him of the approach of Leitus. The very first words that this man utters are that Chaerestratus does not have the amount of money required to be an equestrian. The anonymous individual appears to display a great concern that Chaerestratus not endure the embarrassment of being removed from his seat. It is at this point that Martial cannot contain himself and cries out to ask if there is any “friend” who would convert his concern into hard cash and give Chaerestratus the amount he needs to qualify for equestrian status.

Martial intimates that Chaerestratus, like the unnamed plebeian in V 27, has a character and breeding worthy of recognition. Nevertheless, without sufficient funds he does not qualify for a seat in the *prima cavea*. In V 25 a different point is added, that Chaerestratus' “friends” are only prepared to “mouth” their friendship. They display only mock concern. Even the reward of a glowing mention in Martial's epigrams does not stir the rich to part with

any of their excessive wealth. In this epigram Chaerestratus fades into the background. His pretence is not the focus of attention. Rather Martial castigates those sitting around Chaerestratus who make the pretence to friendship. Although Martial does seem to sympathize with Chaerestratus, he does *not* suggest that he has a right to sit in the front rows. Martial's indignation does not stem from the enforcement of the law which favors money. Martial's indignation is created by the *pretended* concern of the rich who are more willing to spend lavish sums on a senseless horse than a comparatively modest amount on a worthy friend. One must note that Martial does not distinguish between the new-rich and the old-rich who are sitting around Chaerestratus, nor does he indicate whether Chaerestratus is an impoverished aristocrat or a would-be parvenu. Once again Martial is not sneering at the upstarts.

There is an epigram in which Martial rails against a man who is genuinely entitled to sit among the equestrians:

Spadone cum sis eviratio fluxo
 et concubino mollior Celaenaeo
 quem sectus ululat matris enthae Gallus,
 theatra loqueris et gradus et edicta
 trabeasque et Idus fibulasque censusque
 et pumicata pauperes manu monstras.
 Sedere in equitum liceat an tibi scamnis
 videbo, Didyme; non licet maritorum. (V 41)

The *eques* in question is named Didymus, and he is more unmanly than a frail eunuch, more effeminate than the male concubine, Attis. Nevertheless, this Didymus talks of theaters, the different levels, edicts, the cloak of the *equester ordo* and its distinctive clasp, the annual equestrian parade and the property qualification. All these are reserves of the equestrian order.⁵ Didymus is stressing his right to sit in the first fourteen rows, but Martial has already set up the antithesis between his rank as an *eques* and his unmanliness. It is at this juncture that Didymus with an effeminate hand points at men of lesser means behind the equestrian rows. This puny man flaunts his economic superiority over the plebeians behind him. But in the penultimate line Martial prepares Didymus for a fall: “Whether you are permitted to sit on the equestrian benches, I shall consider, Didymus.” Martial is baiting Didymus by seeming reluctant to grant him his “rightful” place among the equestrians at the theater. Then, in the last three words, *non licet maritorum*, Martial pounces on Didymus. Augustus decided to honor married men from among the plebeians with their own seating area at the theater (Suet. *Aug.* 44). But this seating area would have been in the *media cavea* behind the equestrians and along with the rest of the plebeians. It is apparently an inferior position to the one to which Didymus rightly has a claim. Martial presents a paradox. Didymus is allowed to sit in the best seats in the house, but he is not allowed to sit in the ones that

⁵The points listed are: Domitian's edict reviving the *lex Roscia*, the *trabea* and *fibula* worn by the equestrians in the annual parade of the equestrians held on the Ides of July and, finally, the property qualification for membership in the equestrian order.

are not so good. Didymus actually has the equestrian census; he is not pretending to be wealthy. However, it is a reflection on him that he cannot sit among the *mariti*. Martial does not ridicule Didymus because he has money. Nor does Martial intimate whether he is a parvenu or comes from a family of long-standing wealth. The joke does not rely on these particulars.

The next epigram, V 38, is similar in that it is addressed to a verified equestrian, but Martial introduces a new element:

Calliodorus habet censum (quis nescit?) equestrem,
 Sexte, sed et fratrem Calliodorus habet.
 “Quadringenta seca,” qui dicis, σῶκα μέριζε:
 uno credis equo posse sedere duos?
 Quid cum fratre tibi, quid cum Polluce molesto?
 Non esset Pollux si tibi, Castor eras.
 Unus cum sitis, duo, Calliodore, sedebis?
 Surge: σολοικισμὸν, Calliodore, facis.
 Aut imitare genus Ledae: cum fratre sedere
 non potes: alternis, Calliodore, sede. (V 38)

The phrase *quis nescit* suggests that Calliodorus is the bombastic, pretentious type who boasts of and flaunts his wealth whenever he gets a chance. But Calliodorus has a brother who is not so fortunate and whom he insists on bringing to the theater. Martial’s reaction to this is to ask if on *one* horse there can sit *two*. It would seem that Calliodorus’ wealth is enough to enable only one person to qualify for equestrian status. In the fifth line Martial brings in a new idea. He compares Calliodorus and his brother to Castor and Pollux. The comparison is particularly apt. Castor and Pollux were brothers who shared one life and there is also the pun on *equus* insinuated in line six. Only one of the mythological brothers was an *equus*, a horse-rider.

In line seven Martial again changes the thrust of his attack. He points out the fraud by casting it under a different name, solecism. To translate it into English: “Although you two are one, you sit as two!” With this solecism Martial gets across the idea that what Calliodorus is doing is not correct.

The punchline is an unexpected one and even dulls the inherent wit of the solecism, but Martial has a point in doing so. It is the brother who sits wrongfully in the front rows; yet the poem is directed against Calliodorus. The brother is insignificant, and the poet leaves him unnamed. Why does Martial do this? The brother is not the prime mover of the fraud. Calliodorus wants his brother to accompany him so as to give the impression that he is more than just another parvenu. Now that he has “arrived,” Calliodorus feels that he must pretend to be of an established family.

Most of the poems set in the theater are directed against those who pretend to be equestrians. The remaining epigrams of the cycle are in this category.

Dum sibi redire de Patrensibus fundis
 ducena clamat coccinatus Euclides
 Corinthioque plura de suburbano
 longumque pulchra stemma repetit a Leda
 et suscitanti Leito reluctatur,

equiti superbo nobili locupleti
 cecidit repente magna de sinu clavis.
 Numquam, Fabulle, nequior fuit clavis. (V 35)

Martial places Euclides dressed in a dark red *lacerna* in the theater talking to Leitus. Euclides tells him of the income from his farms and suburban estates and of his noble background. Then the surprise turn: “suddenly out of the pocket of this arrogant, noble and rich equestrian fell a big key.” A Roman of any account would be accompanied by a slave who would attend to such things as keys. As the key falls, all of Euclides’ pretensions are deflated. Martial’s build-up to this turn is superb.

To end the epigram, Martial works in a play on the word *nequior* as a description of the key itself. A key could be *nequam* for being faulty and not unlocking the door it was meant for. But this particular key is *nequior* because of its ability to unlock Euclides’ secret. Furthermore, Martial may be working in a play on the name Euclides, εὖ + κλείω: well locked. The incongruity of describing a key as faulty *because* of its ability to unlock the truth of Euclides’ (well-locked) circumstances is cleverly snatched up by Martial and is used to round off the epigram.

Herbarum fueras indutus, Basse, colores,
 iura theatralis dum siluere loci.
 Quae postquam placidi censoris cura renasci
 iussit et Oceanum certior audit eques,
 non nisi vel cocco madida vel murice tincta
 veste nites et te sic dare verba putas.
 Quadringentorum nullae sunt, Basse, lacernae
 aut meus ante omnis Cordus haberet equum. (V 23)

Before Domitian revived the *lex Roscia* Bassus used to attend the theater dressed in green. Green was a color worn by women and effeminate males. After the edict, however, Bassus went to the theater dressed in scarlet or purple. Martial suggests that Bassus hoped to fool the seating attendant by appearing to be rich. Martial’s punchline drives home the point: “No cloak is worth 400,000 sesterces.” Like Phasis and Euclides, Bassus hoped to cloak his real status with expensive, pretentious clothing.

Sedere primo solitus in gradu semper
 tunc, cum liceret occupare, Nanneius
 bis excitatus terque transtulit castra,
 et inter ipsas paene tertius sellas
 post Gaiumque Luciumque consedit.
 Illinc cucullo prospicit caput tectus
 oculoque ludos spectat indecens uno.
 Et hinc miser deiectus in viam transit,
 subsellioque semifultus extremo
 et male receptus altero genu iactat
 equiti sedere Leitoque se stare. (V 14)

Twice, even three times, Nanneius is roused from his seat and is forced to “move camp.” When he is forced into the aisle, he perches himself on the very

edge of the last equestrian bench. To the equestrian sitting next to him he pretends to be sitting; to the usher he pretends to be standing.

There is no punchline nor is there any witticism in this epigram. For the humor Martial relies to a great extent on the very ludicrous nature of Nanneius' behavior. Here Martial approaches the kind of humor that is found in a scene from a Charlie Chaplin film. Martial describes a vaudeville character who, by adopting the ruse of half standing, half sitting, thinks he can outwit the seating attendant. His pretence, however, gains him nothing, for his removals would have been noticed by all the equestrians and plebeians whom he is trying to impress. He only succeeds in so far as the usher is concerned, and he is not an important individual in himself.

Now that the epigrams of the *lex Roscia* cycle have been considered, we can come to some conclusion about Martial's attitude to social mobility. Does Martial sneer at the upstarts in the same way as does Juvenal? Does Martial take a snobbish approach, attacking well-dressed sons of gladiators merely for being well-dressed sons of gladiators? No, Martial does not attack one who is genuine but a parvenu; he does *not* take a snobbish approach. In V 8 Martial focuses on Phasis not because he is an upstart who, as Juvenal would think, does not "really" belong on the front rows; Phasis is the butt of Martial's humor because he *pretends* to be an equestrian. He ridicules Phasis for a reason, his pretence. Most of the epigrams in the cycle ridicule the Phasis type, the one who pretends to be rich, but is not. Into this category Martial places those with whom Juvenal sympathizes, people whose *mores* and *genus* the satirist believes ought to earn for them a place in the front rows, but who do not have the equestrian census.

Martial is not concerned in the slightest about one's birth.⁶ It is not often that he gives his reader a clear-cut indication as to whether he is dealing with a *libertus* or a *liber* of humble origin or an impoverished *generosus*. As far as Martial is concerned, no one without the equestrian census is permitted to sit in the first fourteen rows. Martial can and does make a parvenu the butt of his humor, but never does he ridicule an upstart merely for being an upstart. Martial attacks the parvenu when he makes the pretence to being something more than a rich man, such as when the upstart makes the pretence to high birth.⁷

⁶That is, in so far as he was not born into slavery.

⁷In a paper delivered at the *Conferencia sobre Marcial Calatayud* (May 1986), J. P. Sullivan expresses a very different opinion on the subject of Martial's attitude toward social mobility: "The satiric energy [of Martial] is stimulated by the shock he feels at the disregard of the conventional ordering of his ideal Roman society" (p. 25). "In the class-conscious world in which Martial moves the stigma of lowly birth remains" (p. 19). (I would agree with this statement if to be born into slavery is what is meant.) And Sullivan particularly alerts us to the *cerdo* epigrams of book three: 16, 59 and 99 (pp. 18 f.). Sullivan would suggest that Martial conveys a resentment that the shoemaker usurps magisterial privilege by putting on games and spectacles and that this is evidence for concluding that Martial is basically a conservative social critic who disapproves of social mobility. But is there anything in the *cerdo* epigrams to suggest that Martial contradicts the impression he gives in the *lex Roscia* cycle? To test my analysis of the *lex Roscia* cycle in light of the *cerdo* epigrams one need only ask if Martial ridicules the shoemaker *merely for being a rich man and therefore an equestrian*? The answer is that he does not. In III 16 and 59 he ridicules the

Juvenal and Martial then do not share the same attitude to social mobility. Juvenal's position is clear: in accordance with an aristocratic ethos, he disapproves of it. For Martial social mobility is not a problem; it is not in itself a cause for indignation. This very fact is proof that Martial does not adhere to an aristocratic ethos. Martial does not appear interested in promoting aristocratic ideals; his main concern is to expose pretence.

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cerdo for producing gladiatorial shows. Then why does Martial say in III 99 that it is his *ars* and not his *vita* that he ridicules? The cobbler makes the *pretence* to being a civic leader: it was normal for games to be produced by officeholders. Hypocrisy and pretence are the objects of Martial's ridicule, not social mobility. The revelation of hypocrisy and pretence is the basis of the mechanism Martial employs to create his humor. Thus there is no inconsistency between the *lex Roscia* cycle and the *cerdo* epigrams. In both groups of epigrams Martial creates his humor through revealing or highlighting pretence, and he neither concerns himself with nor is bothered by social mobility.