

**Martial**

**Selected Epigrams**

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## **De Spectaculis:1 The New Colosseum**

Barbarian Memphis be mute re the pyramids' wonders,  
and you *Assyrians* stop bleating of Babylon;  
no praise for tender Ionians, and Diana's *trivial* temple,  
and may Apollo's many-horned altar bury Delos deep;  
don't let the Carians cry extravagant words to the sky  
regarding the Mausoleum that hangs in vacuous air.  
All efforts now give way to Caesar's new amphitheatre,  
Fame can speak of the one, and that can do for them all.

## **De Spectaculis:2 Rome restored**

Just here, where Nero's skyey colossus sees stars,  
and the scaffolding towers up high, right in the way,  
once shone the nasty halls of that cruel king,  
and only the one Golden House in all of Rome.  
Just here, where the Amphitheatre's honoured pile  
rises, towering before our eyes, was Nero's lake.  
Just here, where we gaze at Titus's thermal baths,  
swift gift, proud acres razed the poor man's roof.  
Where the Claudian colonnade spreads wide its shade,  
that golden palace's outermost corner came to an end.  
Caesar, Rome's back to herself, now you're in charge,  
and the master's pleasures are the people's now.

## **De Spectaculis:6 On display**

Pasiphae really was mated to that Cretan bull:  
believe it: we've seen it, the old story's true.  
old antiquity needn't pride itself so, Caesar:  
whatever legend sings, the arena offers you.

## **Book I:1 He's here**

Here's the one you read, and you demand,  
Martial, who is known throughout the land  
for these witty little books of epigrams:  
to whom, wise reader, you keep giving,  
while he still feels, among the living,  
what few poets merit in their graves.

## **Book I:32 I don't love you...**

I don't love you, Sabidius, no, I can't say why:  
All I can say is this, that I don't love you.

### **Book I:34 Lesbia**

Doors open wide, unguarded, when you sin  
Lesbia, you don't conceal your tricks,  
you like a watcher better than a lover  
you're not thankful for obscure delights.  
Whores conversely don't want witnesses,  
curtains, bolts, no cracks, reveal the brothels.  
At least you might learn modesty from them,  
the foulest find a place behind the tombs.  
Do you really think that what I say's too harsh?  
I don't say don't fuck, Lesbia: don't be *seen*.

### **Book I:77 Charinus, exhausted**

He's quite well, Charinus, still he's pale.  
Hardly drinks, Charinus, still he's pale.  
A fine digestion too, Charinus, still he's pale.  
He takes the sun, Charinus, still he's pale.  
He dyes his skin, Charinus, still he's pale.  
Eats pussy, yet, Charinus, still he's pale.

### **Book I:91 The critic**

You don't write poems, Laelius, you criticise  
mine. Stop criticising me or write your own.

### **Book I:94 Changed**

Aegle, when you were fucked you sang badly.  
Now you sing fine, though never to be kissed.

### **Book I:115 A certain girl**

She desires me – Procillus, envy me! –  
one whiter than a new-wet swan,  
than privet, lilies, silver, snow:  
but I desire one dark as night,  
cicada, black ant, pitch, or crow.  
You thought to hang yourself:  
I know you well, Procillus, oh, you'll live.

### **Book II:25 Promises**

When I ask, you always promise, Galla, never give.  
If you're always to prevaricate, Galla, please, say no.

### **Book II:38 A fine view**

You ask what I see in my farm near Nomentum, Linus?  
What I see in it, Linus, is: from there I can't see you.

### **Book II:87 Amazing**

You say pretty girls burn with love for you, Sextus,  
with *your* face too, like a man swimming underwater.

### **Book III:9 A silent critic**

They say Cinna writes little poems about me.  
He's no writer, whose verse nobody reads.

### **Book III:26 Possession**

Only you have land, then, Candidus,  
Gold plate, cash, and porcelain, only you,  
Massic or Caecuban wine of famous vintage,  
only you judgement and wit, only you.  
You have it all – well say I don't deny it –  
But everyone has your wife, along with you.

### **Book III:27 Dinner invitations**

Though I invite you, Gallus, you never invite me back:  
I'd forgive you, Gallas, if you never invited a soul.  
You do, though: we both have faults. 'Which?' you ask,  
I've no sense, Gallas, and you've no shame.

### **Book III:53 Sorry Chloe**

Chloe, I could live without your face,  
without your neck, and hands, and legs  
without your breasts, and ass, and hips,  
and Chloe, not to labour over details,  
I could live without the whole of you.

### **Book III:79 Incomplete**

Sertorius starts everything, finishes nothing.  
When he fucks, I suspect, he never ends.

### **Book III: 90 Uncertainty**

Galla wants, yet doesn't want, to give: and I can't say,  
since she wants and doesn't want to, what she wants.

### **Book IV: 76 Half measures**

When I asked for twelve thousand you sent me six,  
Next time, for twelve, I'll ask for twenty-four.

### **Book V:34 Erotion the slave-girl**

To your shades Fronto, and Flacilla, this child  
I commend: she was my sweet and my delight.  
Little Erotion shall not fear the darkened shades  
nor the vast mouths of the Tartarean hound.  
She'd have completed her sixth chill winter,  
if she'd not lived a mere six days too few.  
Now let her frisk and play among old friends  
now let her chatter, and so lisp my name.  
And let the soft turf cover her brittle bones:  
earth, lie lightly on her: she lay lightly on you.

### **Book V:47 It's logical**

Philo swears he never eats in: it's true:  
he never eats when nobody invites him.

### **Book V:58 Carpe diem**

Postumus, tomorrow you'll live, tomorrow you say.  
When is it coming, tell me, that tomorrow?  
How far off, and where, and how will you find it?  
In Armenia, or Parthia, is it concealed then?  
Your tomorrow's as old as Nestor or Priam.  
How much would it cost you, tell me, to buy?  
Tomorrow? It's already too late to live today:  
He who lived yesterday, Postumus, he is wise.

### **Book V:64 The Mausoleum of Augustus**

Pour me a double measure, of Falernian, Callistus,  
and you Alcimus, melt over it summer snows,  
let my sleek hair be soaked with excess of perfume,  
my brow be wearied beneath the sewn-on rose.  
The Mausoleum tells us to live, that one nearby,  
it teaches us that the gods themselves can die.

### **Book V:66 Ave, Pontilianus**

You're often greeted but never the first to greet:  
if that's so, Pontilianus, then *vale* forever.

**Book V:81 It's a law**

Aemilianus, you'll always be poor if you're poor.  
These days they only give wealth to the rich.

**Book V:83 Contrary**

You chase, I flee; you flee, I chase; it's how I am:  
what you wish I don't, Dindymus, what you don't I wish.

**Book VI:40 Tempus fugit**

No woman was to be preferred to you, Lycoris:  
To Glycera no woman's to be preferred.  
She'll be as you are: you'll never be as she is.  
What power time has! I want her, wanted you.

**Book VI:60 My books**

Rome praises, loves, and quotes my little books,  
I'm there in every pocket, every hand.  
See them blush, turn white, stunned, yawn, disgusted.  
I like it: now's when my poems give me delight.

**Book VI:90 Bigamy**

Gellia only has a single lover.  
The sin is worse then: she's married twice.

### **Book VII:3 No thanks**

Why don't I send you my little books?  
Pontilianus, lest you send me yours.

### **Book VII:14 True loss**

Aulus, atrocious tragedy's struck my girl;  
she's lost her plaything and her fond delight:  
not such as Catullus' tender mistress wept for  
his Lesbia, bereft of worthless sparrow,  
nor, sung by Stella, his Ianthis grieves for,  
whose black dove wings it through Elysium:  
She's not won by such loves, such nonsense,  
*mea lux*: they don't stir my lady's heart:  
she's lost a slave boy hardly twelve years old,  
his member not yet eighteen inches long.

### **Book VII:30 Hard to please**

You do Germans, and Parthians, and Dacians, Caelia,  
you don't scorn Cappadocian, Cilician beds;  
and fuckers from Memphis, that Pharian city,  
and Red Sea's black Indians sail towards you.  
You'd not flee the thighs of a circumcised Jew,  
not an Alan goes by, with Sarmatian horse too.  
What's the reason, then, since you are a Roman,  
not one Roman member pleases you, woman?

### **Book VII:73 Tell me, Maximus**

You've a house on the Esquiline, house on the Aventine,  
and Patrician Street owns a roof of yours too;  
add one with a view of poor Cybele's shrine,  
one Vesta's, one Jupiter's old, one his new.  
Tell me where to meet you, tell me where to find you:  
Who lives everywhere, Maximus, lives nowhere at all.

### **Book VII:76 The reality**

If powerful men take you up,  
at meals, theatres, and porticos,  
like riding and bathing with you,  
wherever you happen to go,  
don't be too proud, Philomusus:  
you give pleasure, it isn't love.

### **Book VIII:13 False description**

They said he's an idiot: I paid twenty thousand.  
My money back, Gargilianus: he's no fool.

### **Book IX:8 Double negative**

Fabius, to whom I think you used to give, if I recall,  
six thousand a year, Bithynicus, leaves you nothing.  
No one else has had more: don't moan, Bithynicus:  
he leaves you, after all, six thousand a year.

### **Book X:14 Stop complaining**

Though a fitted carriage bears your painted servants,  
though a Libyan horseman sweats in a trail of dust,  
and purple draperies dye your Baian villas  
and Thetis' waters yellow with your creams,  
though draughts of Setine brim your lucent crystal,  
and Venus sleeps beneath no softer down,  
still at night you lie at a proud girl's threshold  
drenching, alas, her mute door with your tears,  
while ceaseless sighs burn through your wretched breast.  
Want to know your curse, Cotta? You're too well off.

### **Book X:29 My gifts**

That dish you'd send to me on Saturn's day,  
you send to your mistress now, Sextilianus:  
that green outfit you gave her on the Kalends,  
those called after Mars, *that* my toga's paid for.  
Your girls begin to cost you nothing now:  
Sextilianus, you're fucking with my gifts.

### **Book X:32 Marcus Antonius Primus**

This portrait I deck with violets and roses,  
do you ask whose face it is, Caedicianus?  
It's Marcus Antonius Primus in his prime:  
in this the old man sees his younger self.  
If art could show his mind and character!  
No picture in the world would show lovelier.

### **Book X:33 The hidden rule**

Munatius Gallus, of Sabine simplicity,  
in kindness of heart outdoing Epicurus,  
by your daughter's eternal marriage torches,  
chaste Venus grant you preserve that fair tie:  
if foul envy claims by chance that verses  
tinted with green verdigris are mine,  
deny them, as you do, and contend  
that no-one who is read writes such things.  
This law my little books know how to keep:  
to spare the person, ah, but speak the vice.

### **Book X:47 The good life**

These, my dearest Martialis, are  
the things that bring a happy life:  
wealth left to you, not laboured for;  
rich land, an ever-glowing hearth;  
no law, light business, and a quiet mind;  
a healthy body, gentlemanly powers;  
a wise simplicity, friends not unlike;  
good company, a table without art;  
nights carefree, yet no drunkenness;  
a bed that's modest, true, and yet not cold;  
sleep that makes the hours of darkness brief:  
the need to be yourself, and nothing more;  
not fearing your last day, not wishing it.

### **Book X:50 Too soon**

Sad Victory break your Idumaeen palms,  
Fame beat your naked breasts with savage hands;  
let Honour dress in mourning, grieving Glory  
throw your wreathed tresses in the hostile flames.  
Ah! Scorpis, cheated of your first youth, you die  
and all too swiftly yoke the coal-black horses.  
That goal, your speeding chariot always touched,  
why was your life's goal, like to it, so near?

### **Book X:97 Expectations dashed**

While the frail pyre was built, with flammable papyrus,  
while his weeping wife was buying cinnamon and myrrh,  
there, with the grave, the bier, the undertaker ready,  
Numa created me his heir: and then – recovered!

### **Book XI:3 Now, a patron would be nice!**

Not only idle Rome rejoices in my Muse,  
my fragments don't just fall on empty ears,  
no, my book's thumbed by rigid centurions  
stuck to their Martial standards in Getic frost,  
and they even say the Britons recite my verse.  
What's the good? My purse would never know it.  
And yet, what excellent pages I could scribble,  
what battles my Pierian trumpet could blow,  
if while re-incarnating Augustus here on earth,  
the kind gods had sent Rome a Maecenas, too!

## **Book XI:7 Paula's strategy**

When you want to go visit a distant lover, for sure, now,  
Paula, you'll not be telling that stupid husband of yours,  
'Caesar's ordered me off to Alba tomorrow first thing,  
Caesar: Circeii.' The age of such tricks has gone.  
Under Nerva's rule it's all right to be a Penelope:  
but those 'needs' of yours, your true nature, won't let you.  
Bad girl, what can you do? Discover an ailing friend?  
Your husband would stick fast to his lady himself  
and go with you, if it were brother, mother, or father.  
So, my ingenious one, what ruse do you consider?  
Some other adulteress would say, for her nerves,  
she needed to take the waters at Sinuessa.  
You do better, Paula, when you want to go fucking,  
you choose to tell that husband of yours the truth!

## **Book XI:8 The Boy**

Odour of dried balsam from last night's vases,  
the last scent that falls from the saffron's arc;  
that of apples ripening in winter storage,  
or a field luxuriant with spring's green shoots,  
silks from our Empress's Palatine presses,  
or amber warmed there in a young girl's hand;  
or a shattered jar, not too near, of dark Falernian,  
or a garden where they keep Sicilian bees;  
what the alabaster boxes Cosmus sells, smell of,  
the god's altars, a wreath slipped from perfumed hair –  
why speak of them? None will do, mingle them all:  
and that's the fragrance of my boy's dawn kisses.  
You wish to know his name? If it's re: kisses, I'll tell you.  
You swear it! Sabinus, you're far too anxious to know.

### **Book XI:13 The tomb of Paris the actor.**

Traveller, who treads the Flaminian Way,  
don't pass this noble marble by.  
the wit of the Nile, the city's delight,  
grace and art, and pleasure and play,  
the worth and grief of the Roman stage,  
and every Venus, and every Cupid,  
here in Paris's tomb, together, buried, lie.

### **Book XI:16 I'm readable**

You can leave now, Reader, over-severe,  
go, where you please: I write for the city;  
my page, now, runs wild with Priapic verse,  
strikes the cymbals, with a dancing-girl's hand.  
O, how you'll beat your cloak in rigid vein,  
though you're weightier than Curius, Fabricius!  
You too, that read naughty jokes in my little book,  
you'll be wet, girl, though you're from moral Padua.  
Lucretia would have blushed, and shut my volume,  
while Brutus was there; but when he left: she'd have read.

### **Book XI:19 Galla, the eloquent**

You ask me why I don't want to marry you, Galla?  
You're so eloquent, and my pen is often in error.

### **Book XI:25 Beware!**

That hyper-active member known to so many girls  
has ceased to rise for Linus. Tongue, beware!

### **Book XI:62 On the nail**

Lesbia swears she's never been fucked for free.  
True. When she wants to be fucked, she has to pay.

### **Book XI:71 A weighty cure**

Leda tells her aged spouse she suffers from nerves,  
and cries that she absolutely has to be fucked;  
but, with tears and moans, sighs nothing is worth that,  
and declares she's reconciled to dying instead.  
He begs her, live, not lose her years of youth,  
and lets be done what he can't do now himself.  
The female doctors leave, males take their place,  
her knees are raised. O weighty remedy!

### **Book XI:92 Zoilus**

Zoilus, he lies: the man who says you're vicious.  
You're not vicious, Zoilous, you're vice itself.

### **Book XII:21 Marcella**

Marcella, who'd think you hailed from frozen Salo,  
that you were born in those haunts of mine?  
So rare, so sweet: your flavour. The Palatine,  
hearing you once, would name you for its own;  
no one born in Subura's midst, no daughter  
of the tall Capitoline Hill could rival you;  
nor will a glory of foreign birth, soon show  
more worthy of becoming a Roman bride.  
You tell me to quell my longing for the City:  
you, of yourself, create a Rome for me.

### **Book XII:58 Two for a pair**

Your wife says you're fond of slave-girls, she's fond of  
boys,  
the ones who carry her litter: Alauda, you're two for a  
pair.

### **Book XIV: Us pipes**

The tipsy flute-girl blows us with moistened cheeks:  
sometimes she blows just one, often both together.

**Coda: Book XI:2 Freedom! Thanks to our Emperor  
Nerva**

You, sad brow, and harsh look, of Cato the severe,  
or of Fabricia, impoverished ploughman's daughter,  
and you, pride in character, and you, the moral law,  
and whatever we're not, in the darkness, off with you!  
Behold my verses crying: 'Io, for the Saturnalia':  
Nerva it's fun, under you, to do, and freely done.  
You, gloomy readers, go learn Santra's jerky lines:  
nothing of yours, for me: this little book is mine.

