

Why does Martial spend so much energy in assuring his readers that the targets of his skoptic epigrams are fictional (*hunc servare modum nostri novere libelli, / parcere personis, dicere de vitiis*, 10.33.9-10; cf. 7.12.3-4)? His disclaimers reflect recognition of, even anxiety about, two different interpretive practices of Roman readers.

One practice, which I will not address in this paper, is reader-initiated libel—taking an author's words out of context to criticize real contemporaries (*nec epigrammata mea inscribat*, 1.praef., with Citroni 1975 ad loc.). Various edicts against author-initiated libel had been passed in the early Empire (Suet. *Dom.* 8.3; *Aug.* 55, Mart. 5.15.2, *et queritur laesus carmine nemo meo*).

The practice that I do address in this paper is what I call the “biographical habit” of Roman readers of first-person poetry—that is, the propensity of ancient readers to assume that first-person poets such as Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid are concealing the names of real people behind literary pseudonyms (Lesbia, Cynthia, and the anonymous addressees of the *Tristia*, e.g., *Tr.* 4.4.1-10; see Wiseman 1985: 130-137, Skinner 1982, and Oliensis 1997: 172-181, *Apul. Apol.* 10.2). Furthermore, authors such as Ovid and Martial are willing to acknowledge, at least playfully, this supposed propensity (*et multi, quae sit nostra Corinna, rogant, Ars Am.* 3.538; cf. *Tr.* 4.10.59-60, Martial 2.23, 3.11). Awareness of this literary “biographical habit” of Roman readers adds force to Martial's disclaimers against libel.

In addition, by including Saturnalia and symposia among the models that he uses for his poetry (Citroni 1989), Martial invokes a general culture of guessing, circumlocution, and playful re-naming. The Saturnalian gift-tag collections (the *Xenia* and, especially, the *Apophoreta*), while not riddles *per se*, invite the reader to appreciate witty and surprising descriptions of gift items (cf. Petr. 56 and 58; Symphosius' later *Aenigmata*). Both Saturnalia and dinner-parties were, ideally, bounded occasions during which certain liberties could be taken with discourse; but, of course, these boundaries could be violated (Martial 1.27). A malicious reader could, then, “label” a real person with a skoptic epigram.

Martial's choice to write in epigram—especially epigram that, although a different genre, clearly draws on the poetry of Catullus and Ovid (see, most recently, Swann 1994 and Hinds 2007)—means that at least some of his intended readership will bring this supposed biographical propensity and Saturnalian license to his own poetry. A poet writing in a climate in which one already has particular reason to be wary of libel would do well to be sensitive to the interpretive habits of his readers.