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Martial's *Lectrix Studiosa*: What Men Can Learn by Watching Women Read in Book Three of the *Epigrams*

This paper will look at how Martial uses the figure of a specific category of reader--the female reader--to think about the role of the general reader and the activity of reading in Flavian Rome. For Martial, the published text is the primary act of communication, rather than a transcript of an oral performance. Recent scholarship has focused on his new (to elite Latin literary culture) way of thinking about the book (Citroni, *Arachnion* 1: 1995; Roman, *JRS* 2001). This, in turn, leads to a new way of thinking about the anonymous general reader. What does a poet now gain by representing his readers as readers?

Martial has inherited from Ovid's exile poetry (an important intertext for the *Epigrams*--Pitcher in Grewing, ed., 1998, with references) the *topos* of the female reader who can be corrupted by reading lascivious poetry. The female reader allows poets to talk about who should read their poetry and who actually does. Through a cycle of epigrams in book 3 (3.68, 3.69, and 3.86), Martial addresses an anonymous *matrona* who has been reading the text of Book 3. In the first epigram (3.68), she represents, at first glance, prudishness, but Martial debunks this myth when he has her disobey his mock-warning not to read further. She becomes a figure for any reader who responds libidinally, not aesthetically, to a text. By reading in private, a reader can indulge his or her involuntary reactions to a text without being seen by any other readers. The following epigram (3.69) is supposed to represent the first of the epigrams in the "obscene" second half of book 3 that the *matrona* goes on to read, but in fact does more to talk about obscenity (*lascivia*) than to represent it. In the last epigram of the cycle (3.86), Martial pretends to be able to "see" the *matrona* when she reads the obscene section of Book 3. This gives all of his readers the sense that they can know something about one another and that they are engaged in the same private activity.

Martial uses the female reader and her desire to read obscene poetry as a way to talk about censorship and reception in an apolitical context. Sex is a "forbidden" topic for a *matrona* to read about. Once the *matrona* reads the forbidden epigrams, Martial negotiates her reception of them by saying that his epigrams are no worse than the mime actors the *matrona* may have watched. Ever since Ovid, a poet needs to defend lascivious poetry against charges that it will corrupt certain types of readers (especially respectable women). The topic of obscenity and its reception is a "safe" forbidden topic that serves as an alternative to the real, unspoken forbidden topic under Domitian--political criticism. The Romans of the Principate lived in a climate in which they could not talk about certain things, and, furthermore, could not even talk about the fact of censorship (Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience*, 1995). The figure of the female reader indulging in the *libertas* of obscenity gives elite readers of Martial a safe, apolitical sphere into which to transfer and play with their anxieties about censorship and repression.