

MARTIAL (A.D. 38/41 - c. 102)

Marcus Valerius Martialis was a Roman poet who brought the Latin epigram to perfection and provided a picture of Roman society during the early empire. Martial was born in a Roman colony in Spain. In his early 20's he made his way to the capital of the empire and attached himself as client to the powerful and talented family of the Senecas, who were Spaniards like himself. But little is known of Martial's life or precisely how he lived between A.D. 65 and 80.

When he first came to Rome, Martial lived in rather humble circumstances in a garret on the Quirinal Hill. He gradually earned recognition, however, and was able to acquire, in addition to a town house on the Quirinal, a small country estate near Nomentum (about 12 miles northeast of Rome). In time Martial gained the notice of the court. As his fame grew, he became acquainted with the literary circles of his day.



Martial's first book, *On the Spectacles* (A.D. 80), contained 33 undistinguished epigrams celebrating the shows held in the Colosseum. These poems are marred by a gross adulation of the emperor Domitian. In the year 84 or 85 appeared two undistinguished books that consist almost entirely of couplets describing presents given to guests at the December festival of the *Saturnalia*. In the next 15 or 16 years, however, appeared the 12 books of epigrams on which his fame rests.

After 34 years in Rome, Martial returned to Spain, where his last book was published, probably in A.D. 102. He died soon after in his early 60's.

Martial is virtually the creator of the modern epigram. Though some of the epigrams (1,561 in all) are devoted to scenic descriptions, most are about people. Martial made frequent use of the mordant epigram bearing a "sting" in its tail, *i.e.* a single unexpected word at the poem's end that completes a pun, antithesis, or an ingenious ambiguity. Poems of this sort would later greatly influence the use of the epigram in the literature of England, France, Spain, and Italy.