

# ‘ME MANUS UNA CAPIT’: MARTIAL AND THE CODEX

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**Summary:** This article examines the interplay between the text and the physical format of the book in Martial’s Epigrams. I argue that he published his codex edition of the Epigrams towards the end of his career, and that this edition was not intended for a broad readership. Instead, I suggest that it was an expensive luxury edition, a literary gimmick. Finally, I argue that Martial uses the roll and the codex as poetic devices.

The *Epigrams* of Marcus Valerius Martialis (ca. 38-101) is one of the most valuable sources to book culture in the 1st century AD. It has been estimated that roughly one in eight of the *Epigrams* are concerned with books.<sup>1</sup> Martial’s interest in books and reading was not limited to the text; throughout his work, he displays an unusual interest in books and publishing.

The *Epigrams* appeared at a time when books were written by hand, making mass production a highly onerous task. Instead of centralising the production and distribution of books by means of publishing houses, the responsibility fell upon the reader to acquire a book and have it copied. Copying books by hand furthermore meant in practice that no two copies contained an identical text. This was not only due to scribal errors but also because copying by hand allowed the scribe freely to exclude or change parts of the text. The concept of ‘publishing’ was far more ill-

1 The following is a slightly extended version of Fowler’s list of the most important epigrams on books and book culture: *Spect.* 31; *Xenia* (13) 1-3; *Apophoreta* (14) 1-11, 20, 21, 37, 38, 84, 183-96, 208, 209; **1. praef.**, 1-5, 16, 25, 29, 35, 38, 44, 45, 52, 53, 61, 63, 66, 70, 72, 91, 101, 107, 108, 110, 111, 113, 117, 118; **2.1.** 6, 8, 23, 48, 71, 77, 86, 88, 91, 93; **3.1.** 2, 4, 5, 68, 69, 86, 97, 99, 100; **4.6.** 8, 10, 14, 27, 29, 31, 33, 49, 72, 81, 82, 86, 89; **5.2.** 5, 6, 10, 13, 15, 16, 26, 30, 36, 60, 63, 73, 80; **6.1.** 60, 61, 64, 65, 85; **7.3.** 11, 12, 17, 26, 44, 46, 51, 52, 68, 72, 77, 80, 81, 85, 88, 90, 97, 99; **8. praef.**, 1, 3, 18, 20, 24, 29, 61, 62, 72, 76, 82; **9. praef.**, 49, 58, 81, 99; **10.1-4.** 20, 33, 45, 59, 64, 70, 74, 78, 87, 104; **11.1-3.** 15-17, 20, 24, 42, 94, 106-108; **12. praef.**, 1-5, 11, 63.

defined in antiquity than it is today.<sup>2</sup> Since the author had no control over his text once it became available to others, letting go of a single manuscript could, in theory, result in its ‘publication.’ Martial’s *Epigrams* underwent multiple stages of publication: some were recited, others were sent as gifts, celebrating particular people or occasions, and still others were composed for the purpose of appearing in the numbered books transmitted to us.

### The Roll and the Codex

The public primarily experienced the *Epigrams* as a written text.<sup>3</sup> In Martial’s time the predominant format of the book was the roll, and it was in this form that his *Epigrams* first became available to the wider public. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the *Epigrams* concerned with physical books thus allude to the roll, although the method of loose ‘leaves’ joined together in the spine, i.e. a codex, had long been known and employed in the form of wax tablets.<sup>4</sup> Amongst Martial’s first addressees, mentioned before any patron, is the book:

Argiletanas mauis habitare tabernas,  
cum tibi, parue liber, scrinia nostra uacent? (1.3.1-2)

Do you prefer to live in the shops of Argiletum, when there’s room for you, little book, in my bookcases?

That the ‘little book’ addressed in this epigram is a roll is indicated by *scrinia*, most commonly used of bookcases for keeping rolls. As noted above, the book and, in particular, the text take on a life of their own as

2 Winsbury 2009: 11-18 argues that the term ‘publishing’ for the distribution of literature in antiquity is anachronistic. Although I largely agree with this, I shall, for want of any better terms, use the modern terminology of publishing.

3 As Fowler 1995: 31 points out, the epigram, as opposed to most other ancient literary genres, does *not* have its origin in oral performance.

4 The earliest preserved wax tablet was recovered from the Uluburun shipwreck and is dated to around 1300 BC. A detailed description of this tablet is given by Payton 1991.

soon as the work is published, an idea brought out here by the personification of the book: The text has a desire to be published, and the author has to let go of it.

Regardless of format, books have their limitations, for the roll the most distinctive being its length. Although in theory, there is no upper limit to the length of a roll, Greco-Roman rolls rarely exceeded 10-15 meters.<sup>5</sup> This compelled the author to compose their work with an implicit understanding of what length of text would be appropriate for it, a restriction referred to several times in the *Epigrams*, most notably in the closing of Book 4:

Ohe, iam satis est, ohe, libelle,  
iam peruenimus usque ad umbilicos. (4.89.1-2)

Oh, it's enough already, little book. We have reached the navels.

Although it is mentioned elsewhere that a roll could easily contain 300 epigrams (2.1), Martial indicates that he is forced to end the book here at 89 poems due to the physical limit of the very roll onto which the scribe copied the text. Since Book 4 consists of approx. 669 lines, making it one of the shorter books, Martial's concern about the limited length of the roll is in this context probably more poetic than genuine.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, constrained by the length of the roll, any author with the intention of composing a work exceeding this length had to settle for one of two options: dividing his work into parts, forcing the reader to acquire multiple rolls to fully comprehend the work, or composing each part of his work as a unified whole, able to be read and appreciated on its own.

5 Bülow-Jacobsen 2009: 21 notes a single instance of an Egyptian roll exceeding 40 metres in length. Most rolls of this length, however, were copies of the *Book of the Dead*, made to be buried rather than read. Janko 2002: 27 notes that two Herculaneum rolls, each containing a full book of Philodemus, were measured at 11.3 and 16 metres.

6 The average length of the individual books of the *Epigrams* is roughly 717 lines.

While we must assume that Martial wished for all of his books to be read, they do not need to be read consecutively and, according to my argument, were not meant to be read thus.<sup>7</sup> Although the numbered books of the *Epigrams* are arranged as coherent collections, the individual poems, all of which can be read and appreciated on their own, deserve greater recognition than they have received hitherto. Due to the often witty conclusions of the poems, a cursory reading of a full book is often a less suitable approach to the *Epigrams* than to most other Latin poetry. Likewise, a linear reading of multiple books adds little to the reading experience, and Martial was well aware that his reader did not necessarily have access to all of them at once:

‘Primus ubi est’ inquis ‘cum sit liber iste secundus?’  
 Quid faciam si plus ille pudoris habet?  
 Tu tamen hunc fieri si mauis, Regule, primum,  
 unum de titulo tollere iota potes. (2.93)

‘Where’s the first book,’ you ask ‘if this is the second?’ What can I do if the other is more shameful? If you wish, Regulus, for this book to be the first, remove an iota from the title.

Despite the fact that we hear in Book 1 that Regulus is presented with a book (1.111.3-4), albeit an unspecified one, he does not possess a copy of Book 1 according to this epigram. However, the appearance of this epigram in Book 2 poses an obvious problem: how can it appear in a book Regulus already possesses? There are at least two possible explanations: the first is that Martial, as he was preparing Book 2, already knew that Regulus did not have a copy of Book 1. In this scenario, the conversation in the epigram is purely fictitious, imagined to take place after Regulus has received a copy of Book 2. Alternatively, Martial had sent Regulus a preliminary draft of Book 2 and then added this epigram to the final version.<sup>8</sup> Since remarks suggesting pre-publication circulation of Martial’s poetry occur several times throughout the *Epigrams*, I prefer the second

7 For a recent interpretation of the *Epigrams* as a coherent ‘dodecalogy’, see Holzberg 2002: 135-52 and 2004/05.

8 Citroni 1975: xvii suggests that Book 1 was not assigned a number.

explanation, which also offers an insight into his working method: The book described in the epigram is numbered with two iotas (i.e. ii), suggesting that Regulus received a full draft of Book 2, not just a shorter extract.<sup>9</sup> It is commonly accepted that minor collections of Martial’s poems entered circulation before they were compiled and published in numbered books, but the poem in question seems to suggest that full or near-complete drafts of the books circulated within his literary circle, presumably with a view to further revision.

The vast majority of Martial’s contemporary audience experienced the *Epigrams* as a written text, read from a roll, one book at a time, although not necessarily in succession. At some point, however, Martial made the rare decision to collect an uncertain number of his books and republish them in codex, a format hardly ever used for literature. It has been proposed (and is now widely accepted) that this edition was intended for the traveler, not the bibliophile, a claim I will reconsider later.<sup>10</sup>

The earliest surviving fragment of a parchment codex in Latin is a fragment from the late 1<sup>st</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century of *De Bellis Macedonicis*, possibly written by Lucius Arruntius.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the codex did not become the predominant format of the book until much later.<sup>12</sup> We can only conjecture why the codex did not immediately replace the roll, but, after all, the Romans were conservative by temperament, and the roll had done its job perfectly well for centuries. It has been suggested that the codex in its early years, perhaps because of its resemblance to the wax tablet, was associated with more trivial literary productions, such as letters, notes and shorter drafts.<sup>13</sup> It may be added that parchment also

9 Fowler 1995: 35: ‘Martial’s use of numbers rather than titles for his libelli is a strikingly original aspect of his practice, perhaps connected with his codex edition.’

10 Roberts 1987: 27.

11 The fragment is digitised by the British Library: [https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Papyrus\\_745](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Papyrus_745) For a discussion of authorship: Kouznetsov 2010.

12 We cannot establish exactly when the codex replaced the roll. A popular view is that the Christians’ fondness for the codex was important to its final triumph. Roberts 1987: 38–66; Casson 2001: 129–30. Also Harnett 2017.

13 Roberts 1987: 20.

shares with the wax tablet the ability to be reused, making it ideal as a material for literary drafts.<sup>14</sup>

The earliest testimony of literary codices occurs in the *Apophoreta*, a collection of 223 couplets describing Saturnalia presents.<sup>15</sup> In the introductory poem, Martial claims that the couplets are arranged alternately, some describing the rich man's gifts, others the poor man's.<sup>16</sup> This has been interpreted in different ways. Leary offers the most radical solution: that the couplets are arranged consistently throughout the book in pairs of expensive and cheap gifts.<sup>17</sup> While apparently attractive, this interpretation causes a number of problems for his reading of the section on book gifts (14.183-96). This group of poems consists of 14 couplets on books, of which 5 are explicitly specified as parchment codices (*in pugillaribus membranis*), which all seem to contain longer works of Classical literature. On Leary's interpretation, we have to accept, for instance, that a manuscript of Homer's *Batrachomyomachia* is more expensive than a parchment codex containing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Likewise, a manuscript containing only Vergil's *Culex* is categorised as an expensive gift, whereas a parchment codex containing the complete Vergil, adorned with a frontispiece portrait of the author, is presented as a cheaper gift. To explain this, Leary suggests that manuscripts containing a single work were more attractive and, for that reason, more expensive than manuscripts containing the collected works of an author.<sup>18</sup> Yet it is surely more reasonable to assume that codices with multiple works of an author were more valuable, as they would have cost more in materials and, necessarily, scribal hours.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Leary proposes the possibility that

14 This is pointed out by Martial in 14.7.

15 Roberts 1987: 28 notes the striking fact that no other reference to a literary codex is to be found until the 3rd century AD.

16 14.1.5: *Divitis alternas et pauperis accipe sortes*.

17 Leary 1996: 13. Shackleton Bailey 1993: 2 argues that such an arrangement, if that was ever Martial's intention, can only be traced in some parts of the collection as it has been transmitted to us.

18 Leary 1996: 20.

19 Casson 2001: 129 suggested that scribes and book-makers were unaccustomed to producing codices, possibly increasing their price.

parchment was a cheaper material than papyrus, a yet more dubious assumption.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, for it to work, we must be prepared to accept that killing a great number of edible animals, removing and cleaning their skin via a time-consuming process, and, finally, stretching and scraping it neatly until the right thickness is achieved was a cheaper ordeal than the routine manufacture of papyrus. Furthermore, we would have to explain why the Romans used papyrus for most of their official documents if they had to hand this cheaper and far more durable alternative; and considering the importance of papyrus in public administration, it is not unlikely that the import of papyrus was publicly funded. Conversely, I prefer to believe that the parchment codex was an item of great luxury, a view that can easily be defended by the arrangement of the couplets in *Apophoreta*. Despite the fact that most of the expensive gifts are paired with a cheaper alternative, the value of the gifts seems to increase throughout the book. The book gifts are introduced close to the end of the collection, suggesting that any book, whether on parchment or papyrus, was considered a relatively expensive gift.

The first and, seemingly, the only certain allusion to a codex edition of the *Epigrams* is found near the opening of Book 1:

Qui tecum cupis esse meos ubicumque libellos  
 et comites longae quaeris habere uiae,  
 hos eme, quos artat breuibus membrana tabellis:  
 scrinia da magnis, me manus una capit.  
 Ne tamen ignores ubi sim uenalis et erres  
 urbe uagus tota, me duce certus eris:  
 libertum docti Lucensis quaere Secundum  
 limina post Pacis Palladiumque forum. (1.2)

You who wish to bring my little books wherever you go and be accompanied by them on a long journey, buy these books, compressed by parchment on small pages: give bookcases to the large books, one hand holds me. Lest you don't know where I can be acquired and wan-

20 Leary 1996: 19.

der aimlessly around all over town, I shall guide you: search for Secundus, freedman of the learned Lucensis, behind the entrance to the temple of Peace and the forum of Pallas.

Referring to more than one book (*libellos*), this epigram, together with the prose preface and 1.1, did most likely not appear in the original version of Book 1. The plural is supported by *libellis meis* in the preface, suggesting that we are dealing with the introduction to a collection of multiple books. The possibility of the plural referring to privately circulated drafts of Book 1 was convincingly turned down by Fowler, who pointed out that the preface and the first poems imply that Martial was already a famous poet at the time of publication.<sup>21</sup> When Book 1 of the *Epigrams* appeared in 86 AD, Martial had already published three other collections of poems (*De spectaculis*, *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*); but due to the nature of these works, it is hard to imagine that they brought him the level of fame implied in the introduction. A more reasonable explanation is that the preface, 1.1 and 1.2 constitute the introduction to a later edition of an uncertain number of books of the *Epigrams* in the form of a codex. Rolls are mentioned several times in all twelve books of the *Epigrams*, but since a brief remark in 1.2 (*quos artat breuibus membrana tabellis*), conceivably one of the last epigrams composed by Martial, seems to be the only allusion to a codex, I believe that this edition appeared at a time when all 12 books of the *Epigrams* had already been published individually, and that it contained the entire collection.

It has been the general assumption that the codex edition was written on parchment, a view recently challenged by Blake who pointed out that the evidence of a codex with *pages* of parchment is poor. Apart from the parchment codices of the Classics (Homer, Vergil, Cicero, Livy, and Ovid) mentioned in *Apophoreta*, the rather obscure phrase *quos artat breuibus membrana tabellis* is the only explicit reference to parchment used as the material for the pages of a book.<sup>22</sup> Blake notes that parchment was often used as a wrapper for rolls, suggesting the possibility that Martial is not referring to longer codices with parchment pages but rather tablet-style

21 Fowler 1995: 33.

22 Blake 2014: 77.



notebooks or papyrus rolls covered in parchment.<sup>23</sup> However, this poses two problems: as we have seen, Martial refers in 1.2 to a collection of more than one book, and it seems unlikely that the text of multiple books of *Epigrams* would fit into a notebook or a single roll. That he is not referring to a collection of rolls is clear from the fact that the edition he is introducing can be held in one hand and need not be kept in a *scrinium*. Moreover, we find in *Apophoreta* allusions to parchment pages:

*Homerus in pugillaribus membranis*  
 Ilias et Priami regnis inimicus Vlixes  
 multiplici pariter condita pelle latent. (14.184)

*Homer in parchment notebooks*  
 The *Iliad* and *Ulysses*, enemy of Priam’s kingdom, collected in manifold skins.

Martial never uses the word *codex*.<sup>24</sup> In the lemma above, composed by Martial,<sup>25</sup> it is specified that the copy of Homer is *in pugillaribus membranibus*, certainly alluding to pages of parchment as opposed to a wrapper, supported by *multiplici pelle* in the pentameter. Earlier in *Apophoreta*, *pugillares membranei* occurs as the lemma to a couplet describing a blank parchment notebook in the form of a *codex* (14.7). Due to the emphasis in this couplet on the material’s ability to be reused for writing, there can be no doubt that Martial refers to pages of parchment. In the remaining four couplets on parchment books, they are specified simply as *in membranibus*. However, there is no reason to suppose that these are not *codices*:

*Ouidi Metamorphosis in membranibus*  
 Haec tibi, multiplici quae structa est massa tabella,

23 Blake 2014: 77. For parchment used as a wrapper for rolls: Cat. 22.7 *noui umbilici, lora rubra membranae*; Tib. 3.1.9 *lutea sed niueum inuoluat membrana libellum*; Pers. 3.10-11 *iam liber et positus bicolor membrana capillis | inque manus chartae nodosaque uenit harundo*.

24 For its early use, see Roberts 1987: 12-14.

25 14.2.3-4: *lemmata si quaeris cur sint adscripta, docebo | ut, si malueris, lemmata sola legas*.

carmina Nasonis quinque decemque gerit. (14.192)

*Ovid's Metamorphoses in parchment*

This mass, constructed of multiple leaves, carries for you the fifteen songs of Naso.

Again, the book described in this couplet consists of multiple leaves, a clear indication of a codex; and since it is implied that it contains all 15 books of the *Metamorphoses*, it must be a codex of significant size, not a shorter notebook. Blake sees *gerit* as a vague word and suggests the possibility that Martial refers to a book carrying the title *Carmina Nasonis XV*.<sup>26</sup> I struggle to understand how this reading supports Blake's argument since this title would imply that all 15 books were contained in the book. Nevertheless, construed with *tibi*, omitted in Blake's translation, I fail to see the vagueness of *gerit* and find it safe to conclude that Martial must refer to the content of the book although the title might have been the same. Blake proceeds to conclude that the codex poems 'should not be read as advertisement of a novelty form for the book; they are 'advertised' in the same way that Martial advertises, for example, a pot of beans, a fly-swatter, a cleaning sponge and other familiar, everyday objects of the *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*.<sup>27</sup> According to this argument, we need not doubt that parchment codices of the Classics were ordinary gifts, albeit highly expensive. Martial did not invent the codex; his innovation was to publish his own writings in this form.

It remains uncertain what led him to publish the codex edition. He advertises the codex as a handy format that can be held in one hand and brought along on a journey. Roberts takes this at face value: 'Martial's codices would seem to have been designed for the traveler rather than the bibliophile.'<sup>28</sup> But as we have seen, a parchment codex could hardly have been a cheap alternative to a papyrus roll, and this premium cost alone must have appealed at least to some bibliophiles. If Martial regarded travelers as his target audience for the codex edition, it must have been travelers of significant wealth, for whom more convenient options

26 Blake 2014: 87-88.

27 Blake 2014: 89.

28 Roberts 1995: 27.

already existed. Pliny the Elder, for instance, was famously accompanied at almost all times by slaves and secretaries carrying his books and reading them out for him.<sup>29</sup> For people like him, there was no obvious reason to replace the roll with a new and more expensive format to which they were unaccustomed.

Contrary to Pliny, who was clearly more interested in the content of his books than their physical being, Martial was a bibliophile at heart, with a keen interest in the anatomy of the book; and although he introduces his codex edition as a user-friendly pocketbook, pointing out its many advantages over the roll, I suggest the possibility that this edition was an attempt to bring a new format of the book into the literary world, not primarily for the sake of practicality, but to create an elegant interplay between the text and the physical book.

### Writing the Book

Reading from a roll is different from reading from a codex. To understand the awkwardness most Romans would have felt the first time they handled a codex, you simply have to imagine reading the text in front of you from a papyrus roll.<sup>30</sup> Although the text may be the same regardless of the format, reading is an embodied experience, highly dependent on the particular copy from which the text is read. Script, smell, condition, and the materials from which the book is made contribute each in their own way to the reading experience. Martial was well aware of the difference between reading from a roll and a codex and plays on this in the *Epigrams*:

Quo tu, quo, liber otiose, tendis  
cultus Sidone non cotidiana?  
Numquid Parthenium uidere? Certe:  
uadas et redeas ineuolutus. (11.1)

29 Plin. *Ep.* 3.5.15.

30 For an recent attempt to use the roll in education, see Abegglen et al. 2019.

Where are you heading, leisurely book, dressed extraordinarily in Tyrian purple? Are you going to see Parthenius? You would certainly go in vain and return unopened.

The book addressed here is a roll, indicated by the prediction that it will return ‘unopened’ (*ineuolutus*). From looking at a codex, it is not possible to tell whether it has been read or not, whereas a roll, unless it has been rolled back again, will be unrolled to the end of the text. By placing this epigram at the opening of the book when the reader has just begun to unroll the text, the poem is played out physically in the hands of the reader, serving as a witty encouragement to read on. This interaction between text, book and reader is taken up at the end of the same book:

Explicitum nobis usque ad sua cornua librum  
 et quasi perlectum, Septiciane, refers.  
 Omnia legisti. Credo, scio, gaudeo, uerum est.  
 Perlegi libros sic ego quinque tuos. (11.107)

You bring back the book to me, Septicianus, unrolled to its navels as if you had read it through. You have read it all. I believe it, I know it, I’m happy, it’s true. I’ve read your five books in the same way.

The epigram is deliberately placed as the penultimate poem of the book, at which point the reader has unrolled the text completely. A similar effect is obtained at the end of Book 4, quoted above. The reader has reached the end of the roll (*peruenimus usque ad umbilicos*), and the text must come to an end. Arranging the epigrams thus, Martial creates an interplay, inevitably lost on the codex reader, between his text and the physical book.

It is uncertain how many of Martial’s contemporaries ever read his work from a codex. I argued above that a parchment codex was an item of great luxury, a rare curiosity rather than a reading copy. Accordingly, it is reasonable to suppose that most readers, even after the appearance of the codex edition, continued to read the *Epigrams* from rolls. In Martial’s own words, the new edition could be acquired from ‘Secundus, freedman of the learned Lucensis, behind the entrance to the temple of

Peace and the forum of Pallas’ – an irrelevant piece of information to anyone who had already bought the book, but relevant to the bibliophile who had come across it on a friend’s coffee table and wished to get a copy for himself.

Although Martial must have been well aware that the comportment of his codex reader was different from that of his roll reader, and that the interplay between text and roll displayed throughout his work would be less effective for the codex reader, nothing indicates that he made any significant changes to the text in order to adapt it to its new format, beyond adding a prose preface and two introductory poems. A single remark in 1.2, quoted in full above, appears to be the only explicit attempt by Martial to create an interplay between text and codex: *me manus una capit*. Similarly to the interplay between text, book and reader in the roll edition, this poem interacts with the reader, who as he reads is doing exactly what the poem describes – holding a small parchment codex, presumably in one hand.

The epigram as a literary genre was largely ignored by the Romans or, at best, seen as ‘an elegant waste of time not intended to outlast its occasion’.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the *Epigrams*, Martial repeatedly defends his choice of genre, although he often jocularly refers to it as trivial:

Saepe mihi dicis, Luci carissime Iuli,  
 ‘scribe aliquid magnum: desidiosus homo es.’  
 Otia da nobis, sed qualia fecerat olim  
 Maecenas Flacco Vergilioque suo:  
 condere uicturas temptem per saecula curas  
 et nomen flammis eripuisse meum. (1.107.1-6)

You have often said to me, my dear Lucius Julius: ‘Write something grandiose. You’re a lazy man.’ Grant me leisure, such as Maecenas once gave Flaccus and Vergil, then I would attempt to compose something that would survive for centuries and save my name from the flames.

31 Fitzgerald 2007: 3.

Martial claims that he has no time for more serious genres than the epigram; but as a poet who composed more than 1,500 epigrams, approx. 9,500 lines in total, it seems unlikely that lack of time prevented him from pleasing his highbrow critics with a more grandiose work. Though consistently referred to as nothing but a collection of ‘little books’ (*libelli*), the *Epigrams* certainly qualify as *aliquid magnum*. Throughout his oeuvre, Martial wittily plays on the conventions and characteristics of the epic.<sup>32</sup> The division of the *Epigrams* into 12 books is alone an unmistakable allusion to the *Aeneid*, the greatest Roman epic. A similar effect is obtained through his interplay between text and format. By publishing his work in a lavish edition, written on the most sought-after writing material in the world of bibliophilia, Martial puts his *Epigrams* on a par with the Classics; and that he was indeed entitled to appear in a deluxe edition of this kind, ironically advertised as a simple pocketbook, is made clear in the opening poem:

Hic est quem legis ille, quem requires,  
 toto notus in orbe Martialis  
 argutis epigrammaton libellis:  
 cui, lector studiose, quod dedisti  
 uiuenti decus atque sentienti,  
 rari post cineres habent poetae. (1.1)

Here is the man you read, the man you request: Martial, world-famous for his witty little books of *Epigrams*. He still lives and feels, and yet you have given him, studious reader, a fame, rarely granted to poets, even after their death.

The reader is addressed here as *lector studiose*, interpreted by Fowler as a reader already familiar with Martial’s work, i.e., someone re-reading the *Epigrams*, this time in a different format.<sup>33</sup> Although Fowler is probably right in assuming that the codex edition was primarily acquired by people who had already read the work from rolls, I believe that Martial’s irony has fooled his modern interpreters. The *lector studiosus* is, before

32 For a detailed study of the *Epigrams* as an epic, see Sapsford 2012.

33 Fowler 1995: 34.

anything else, a possessor, a connoisseur interested in a nice copy. When Martial addresses the reader of his codex edition as *studiosus*, he is well aware that the audience for this edition would be far more limited than that of his rolls, and that the majority of his codex readers would read this edition less studiously. This might also be an explanation as to why he did not undertake the time-consuming task of adapting his whole text to its new format, but merely added a preface and a couple of introductory poems. The *lector studiosus* is addressed only once elsewhere:

*Vergili Culex*

Accipe facundi Culicem, studiose, Maronis,  
ne nucibus positis ‘arma uirumque’ legas. (14.185).

*Vergil’s Culex*

Accept eloquent Maro’s *Culex*, studios reader, so you don’t have to read ‘Arms and the man’ when the nuts have been put away.

Again, *studiosus* in this context describes not a studious reader but one who wishes to read something less demanding than the *Aeneid*. Likewise, we must imagine in 1.1 that the reader is addressed as *studiose* in jest as his reason for acquiring the book was not to peruse Martial’s poetry but rather to get an attractive copy of a text he already possesses.

Finally, one question needs to be addressed: If we accept that Martial’s codex edition was an expensive curiosity of which only few copies were produced, is it, then, purely coincidental that the text transmitted to us appears to descend from this rare edition? I have proposed that the codex edition was published late in Martial’s career and that it contained all 12 books of the *Epigrams*. Accordingly, I suggest that this was the last edition approved by Martial, which alone made it attractive for others to copy. Additionally, it is not unlikely that copies of the codex edition ended up in larger private collections and public libraries where apographs were then produced; and since it contained multiple, if not all, books of the *Epigrams*, it was an obvious text to copy. Since rolls remained by far the most common format of the book well after Martial’s time, it

is a reasonable assumption that apographs of the codex edition were copied out on rolls, thus preserving the text despite the limited number of codices in existence.

### Concluding remarks

Books and reading are recurrent themes in the *Epigrams*. By creating a sophisticated interplay between the text and the book, Martial forces his reader to engage with his work, not just as a text but also as an object. Originally written to suit the format of a roll, the *Epigrams* were later republished in a codex edition. That this must have been a highly unusual publication at the time is clearly indicated by the exceedingly scant archaeological and literary evidence of parchment codices. Nevertheless, it does not seem all that surprising that the text transmitted to us can be traced back to a rare edition of which only a very limited number of copies existed.

The purpose behind the codex edition remains a matter of speculation and ongoing scholarly debate. His advertisement of it as a convenient pocketbook has commonly been taken at face value. Though a codex can indeed be carried around more easily than a stack of rolls, I have suggested that it was first and foremost a valuable collector's item used for luxury editions of the classics. Thus dressed as a classic, the *Epigrams* made a joke of their second (and final) appearance on the market.

In any case, facilitating moving quickly back and forth within a text, the codex opened up a new way of engaging with literature, a way that suits a work like the *Epigrams* particularly well. Despite some linear structure of the individual books, reading the *Epigrams* from cover to cover may not necessarily be the best way of reading them. In his book on Martial, William Fitzgerald quotes an anonymous critic as saying that 'reading Martial is like eating a whole box of bonbons at one sitting'.<sup>34</sup> As tempting as it may be to devour a whole box of Martialian bonbons at one sitting, the *Epigrams* are better savored if read slowly, in small bites.

34 Fitzgerald 2007: 1.



Nor do they call for a consecutive reading. In fact, Martial repeatedly encourages his readers to skip any poem that might not be pleasing.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the individual epigrams often conclude with an unexpected twist or punchline. Poems following this pattern are naturally more effective for first-time readers, but read from a codex, which allows the reader to easily skip large sections of the text or indeed to jump into the work at a random epigram, the surprising denouements of Martial's satirical closures are preserved even for those already familiar with the work.

Excepting digital versions, the *Epigrams* are nowadays read exclusively from codices. Martial was clearly aware of the advantages of the codex, but to give a definite answer to the question of why he decided to publish a new edition of his work in this format, further evidence is needed. Nonetheless, I hope that I have convinced the reader that the codex, in addition to its practical advantages, has certain literary advantages, often taken for granted by modern readers. Martial did not invent the codex, nor did he make the Romans give up the roll, but he undeniably gave to the world a work that would live on *per saecula*.

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35 See, for instance, 6.65, 11.106 and 13.3.

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