Snickers and Sex:

Bawdy Humour in Three of Martial's Epigrams

Brandon Moores

Bawdiness of one sort or another – defined here as the use of erotic or titillating material in a lighthearted manner – is perhaps the world's most popular technique for getting a laugh or a smile (albeit a slightly shamefaced one). One ancient Greek legend has it that the tradition of bawdy and insulting (but amusing) epigrams began when a member of the goddess Demeter's retinue, to cheer her up following the abduction of her daughter, whispered something naughty to

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her: it worked, and Demeter laughed despite her grief[1] (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, lines 198-205, qtd. in Rosen 47-48). Why, even in legend, should this have worked when all else failed? Why do we even today find bawdy humour so compelling, and snicker or chuckle despite or because of its political, moral, and social incorrectness?

Definitive answers to these questions are perhaps still out of reach, but we can find some very suggestive hints by analyzing successful bawdy humour. This paper will attempt to shed at least partial light on the topic through an analysis and discussion of selected epigrams from one of the bawdiest and funniest poets of the Western canon, the silver-age Roman Marcus Valerius Martialis. In turn, that analysis can help explain why Martial's writings have been considered high-quality humour by so many subsequent peoples and

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[1] The member of Demeter's retinue is named Baubo in some versions, Iambe in others; these names were associated with the words "iambos" (describing an abusive style of poetry as well as a meter) and "baubon" (dildo) (Rosen 2007, 49). The story is also connected with the ritual composition and recital of insulting epigrams in some religious processions of the Ancient Greek world, particularly those associated with Demeter.

cultures. After briefly situating Martial (as he is now known) in his historical and literary context, I will discuss three epigrams: in order of ascending bawdiness, they are 2.52, 3.26, and 9.21. In the course of the discussion I will introduce some proposals and lines of enquiry into how and why bawdiness so effectively provokes laughter.

Marcus Valerius Martialis was born into a prosperous provincial family around the year 40 CE in what is today north-eastern Spain. Like many young men of means, he received a good education and then moved to Rome in 64 CE, a few years before the end of Emperor Nero's reign. Sixteen years later, in 80 CE, his first known book of poetry came out, written on the topic of the inaugural games sponsored by the Emperor Titus in the newly-constructed Colosseum. Five years later, he published another two books of thematic poetry, made up of epigrams meant to accompany gifts. A year later, in 86 CE, his first book of epigrams-at-large came out, followed by eleven more in the next fourteen years, containing about 1500 poems in total. Many of these epigrams are addressed to particular characters – in the epigrams discussed here, we will meet a Dasius, a Spatale, a Candidus, and a Lydia – but, with a smattering of notable exceptions, these names and people are almost certainly fictions, albeit inspired by everyday experience. While at Rome Martial tried to win the favour of the brutal Emperor Domitian through a number of flattering poems, a source of growing discomfort to him in the years after Domitian was assassinated. Martial remained in the city through the short reign of Nerva and into that of Trajan, but eventually returned to his hometown of Bilbilis in Hispania around 100 CE. He died around 104, never having returned – much to his disappointment – to Rome[2].

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[2] For a much more comprehensive and nuanced account of Martial's life and work, the reader should consult the first chapter of J. P. Sullivan's *Martial: The Unexpected Classic*.

Martial is an acknowledged master of the epigram – perhaps *the* acknowledged master – but he was far from its originator; he was, in fact, working within a long tradition. The ritual composition and recital of insulting and obscene poetry, including epigrams, had been a feature of some Greek religious processions, particularly those associated with Demeter, from at least the sixth century BCE (Gerber 2). Archaic Greek poets were already adapting the epigram to private as well as public ends; the outstanding example is Archilochus, whose literary venom was so potent that it was reputed to have driven several of his enemies (or, perhaps more accurately, victims) to suicide. Later poets and epigrammatists, particularly those of the Alexandrian school, placed greater emphasis on elegance and wit than on outrageous subject matter, though few of them abstained completely, and some of the best of them – especially Callimachus – indulged freely in literary insults high and low. Two hundred years later, and across the Mediterranean, Catullus in his turn drew heavily on both Alexandrian craftsmanship and Archilochian invective and obscenity, adapting them both to a uniquely Roman lifestyle and concerns. A hundred years after Catullus' death, following revolutions that transformed Rome from a republic to a mighty empire, Martial was born.

II

Novit loturos Dasius numerare. Poposcit
   mammosam Spatalen pro tribus: illa dedit. (Martial 2.52)

Dasius knows how to count his bathers. He charged big-bosomed Spatale for three. She paid. (Trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey)

Dasius knows how to count his customers:
   when Spatale Big-tits wanted in to the baths,

he charged her for three. She gave him what he wanted. (Trans. Brandon Moores[3])

The scene is at the entrance to a bathhouse, where a doorman, Dasius, charges Spatale three times the regular price – that is, presumably, one fare for her right breast, one fare for left breast, and one fare for the rest of her. She puts up no argument, apparently acknowledging the justice of his claim. Besides this somewhat unusual transaction, there is a definite innuendo in the Latin. To make this clearer I will provide a more strictly literal translation:

> Dasius knows to count the bathers. He asked Spatale
> Big-tits for three: she gave. (Trans. Brandon Moores)

The last phrase in Latin, *illa dedit*, "she gave," is frequently used by Martial and other authors to mean "she gave in to him," i.e. she had sex with him. The epigram thus contains at least a double-entendre and perhaps an allusion to Spatale's erotic escapades, in addition to the sheer grotesqueness of a woman whose breasts are so big they must be counted as individuals in their own right. It would perhaps be even better if the Latin for "He asked her for three" were as ambiguous as the English; unfortunately, *pro tribus* makes it clear that he is asking her to pay for three people, not to perform three sex acts. That does not, however, rule out Spatale choosing her own form of payment.

There are at least three moments in these short two lines that can bring a smile to the reader's lips: first, when Dasius has the temerity to charge Spatale a triple fare; second, when Spatale unexpectedly agrees to pay without apparent argument; third, when the reader realizes that we might not be talking about an exchange of coins at all. Why are *these*

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[3] This and subsequent translations by the author are intended to communicate clearly the bawdiness and humour of the epigrams; they are free translations, and where grammatical and syntactic precision are required the reader is invited to refer to Shackleton-Bailey.

three moments identifiable as humorous? And what role does bawdiness play in each of them?

To investigate these questions requires at least a cursory theory of humour. Most modern theories, especially those of verbal humour, propose that humour is caused by incongruity or dissonance of some sort[4]. Incongruity theories of humour suggest that humour is the product of the perception of a special kind of mismatch between objects, events, or ideas. The precise nature of this "mismatch" has been the source of endless discussion and speculation; the most highly developed and most discussed theory of verbal humour in circulation today, the General Theory of Verbal Humour proposed by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, grows out of the linguistic branch of the incongruity school, and proposes specifically that incongruity or dissonance at one or more of six particular cognitive levels, which Attardo dubs "Knowledge Resources," is the mechanism by which humour operates (Attardo 222-229). This and other contemporary theories, however, are generally engaged in a search for the sufficient conditions for humour rather than the limiting cases. This focus has its advantages, but also its drawbacks, as we can see if we try to apply it to this epigram.

Incongruity of some sort can indeed be found in almost every situation construed as humorous; it is also, however, found in many other situations, and too little attention is paid to explaining why those situations are *not* humorous. A statement from Dasius that was *only* incongruous and unexpected – "The stars are blue on Saturn tonight" – would not be funny, only bizarre. His request for payment from

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[4] See e.g. Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*; Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*; J.M. Suls, "A Two-Stage Model of the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons: An Information-Processing Analysis"; and Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. For a good overview of incongruity-based theories of humour, see pages 62-81 of R.A. Martin's *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*.

Spatale before she enters the bath is, on the contrary, a model of congruity, quite in keeping with his character and our expectations, since he is introduced as someone who keeps a careful eye on bathers as they enter. He fulfills those expectations with a twist, however: he is (or facetiously pretends to be) so careful a doorkeeper that he feels Spatale's over-sized bosom justifies asking her to pay for each of her breasts as well as the rest of her body. We anticipate in turn an angry riposte from Spatale; to our surprise, she pays without quibble, implying that Dasius's observation has struck her as being just rather than simply offensive. This is unusual, but not "incongruous" in the usual sense of the word: it is certainly acceptable as one of a range of possible reactions, and our ability to "get" the joke depends on whether we understand *why* it is reasonable. The double-entendre in "she gave" chimes with the fact that Dasius has been paying attention to her breasts, and suggests that she has not taken this entirely amiss. In sum, though we have been surprised by humour several times in the epigram, it is not incongruous or dissonant events that have surprised us, but events that are both unexpected *and* particularly consonant with what has come before.

It seems from this that humour may have less to do with incongruity *per se* than with the reader or audience forming an expectation or perceiving a pattern, and then seeing that pattern *fulfilled* in an unusual or unexpected manner. Taking this line also goes at least some distance to addressing the ubiquity of humour and how it varies from person to person and culture to culture. We are all cognitively prejudiced to sift out patterns from our experiences and memories, to the point that we often "see" non-existent patterns into random data (shapes in clouds, lines and pictures in the static on a television screen, voices in the sound of wind and trees, etc. On a more complex, social level, one might include the paranoiac's conviction that everyone around him or her is

behaving in just such a way as to provoke without becoming straightforwardly hostile). This is a universal feature of our species; though different people and cultures will perceive different patterns, there will always be *some* attempt at a rationale or schema. They are ubiquitous, and wherever they exist there is an opportunity for humour. The pattern that one person reads into a given situation, however, need not and perhaps cannot be the same as the one another reads into it, and, despite the universal character of this faculty, differences in language, culture, and experience will tend to increase differences of interpretation. Since humour is sensitive, in this model, to an audience's ability to see why a surprising event is nonetheless consistent with a pattern, differences in interpretation can easily lead to one person getting a joke while another does not.

As obviously incomplete and sketchy as this gesture towards a theory is, it will be the basis for my comments below.[5]

What about bawdiness? What is its role here? In incongruity theories of humour, sexuality generally comes up, if at all, only as a prominent facet of human life and hence somehow more "available" for humour (see e.g. Raskin 113-114). Other theories of humour – particularly those that point to physiological arousal as an important factor – highlight the constant reappearance of bawdy humour, identifying it either as something that stimulates physiological arousal and hence heightens the experience of humour (see Cantor, Bryant and Zillman), or as either a "safe" manifestation or leakage of underlying drives that produce tension and physiological arousal as a prelude to laughter (see Freud). Since the theory I have outlined above is closer to incongruity theory than arousal, superiority, or other theories, its perspective on bawdiness is similar (though hopefully more clear and

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[5] A much more fully worked-out version will appear in my forthcoming dissertation.

specific) to the attitude of incongruity theorists, at least in that it treats bawdiness as essentially similar to other forms of human activity rather than a category unto itself. To spell it out: human beings spend a significant amount of time thinking of sex and entertaining bawdy (in one sense or another) thoughts. We have, correspondingly, a large amount of experience to draw upon when trying to guess where a bawdy suggestion will go, and in trying to fit a bawdy interpretation to innocent-seeming comments or actions. In other words, we have broad and deep experience in picking up on (or imagining) bawdy patterns or forming bawdy expectations. Neal Norrick cites a very interesting example of how we pick up on even the faintest of hints in the direction of sex and understand them in an unambiguously racy way. He begins with an apparently straightforward statement about a bakery: "Jenny Schwarz made the best muffins in town, but it was her father's luscious buns that kept the crowds coming." What follows is an equally straightforward statement, with only the names reversed: "Lenny Schwarz made the best muffins in town, but it was his daughter's luscious buns that kept the crowds coming" (Norrick 1351). It seems clear that the second statement is naughty (and perhaps also amusing), though the first is not. A very small change in the names has produced a very large change in the interpretation, and it is plausible that this is due in large part to our readiness to understand a phrase as having a bawdy meaning at the slightest cue.

If one accepts that humour is about the satisfaction of expectations in a surprising manner, then it is reasonable to suggest that a field of human activity which contains such a huge library of expectations will be particularly conducive to humour. That peoples and cultures around the world are preoccupied with sex partially explains the appeal of bawdy jokes and references, and Martial's skill at building up these and other expectations, even in readers unfamiliar with

Roman mores, partially explains his continued success – as
we shall see in the following two examples.

III

Praedia solus habes et solus, Candide, nummos,
aurea solus habes, murrina solus habes,
Massica solus habes et Opimi Caecuba solus,
et cor solus habes, solus et ingenium.
Omnia solus habes – hoc me puta nolle negare –
uxorem sed habes, Candide, cum populo. (Martial
3.26)

Nobody but you has land, Candidus, nobody but you has
cash, nobody but you has gold plate, nobody but you has
murrine, nobody but you has Massic and Caecuban of
Opimius' vintage, nobody but you has intellect, nobody
but you has talent. Nobody but you has everything—
suppose I don't choose to deny it: but you share your
wife, Candidus, with the public. (Trans. D.R. Shackleton-
Bailey)

You keep your coins and your cottages to yourself,
Candidus; your gold plates are for your eyes alone,
your incense is never burned for guests; the Massican
and Caecuban wines are well-hidden in your cellars.
Everything here is yours and yours alone, Candidus –
don't imagine I'll deny it; but your wife, Candidus –
your wife shares everything. (Trans. Brandon Moores)

The thrust of this poem is straightforward, quite different
from that of 2.52. Rhetoric dominates: two words – *habes*,
which means "you have," and *solus*, which means "alone" or
"only" – are repeated so often that they account for over a
third of the total words in the poem (*habes* is used seven
times, and *solus* nine; together they make up 16 of the 41
words used). *Habes* also does double duty, like *dedit* in 2.52:
the first six times that it is used, it means "you have;" on the
seventh occasion, however, when Martial says, literally, "you

have your wife with the people," it takes on a rather lewder sense. It is just possible to interpret this last line as meaning that Candidus *voluntarily* shares his wife with the public – that is, that he is prostituting her; this, however, does considerable violence to the usual senses of *habes*, even when interpreted very liberally, and would make the poem into an acid but uncomplicated commentary on Candidus' unsavoury habits, removing some of the "sting in the tail" that is the mark of a good epigram. On the whole, it is more likely that the interpretation of the last line should be that Candidus is unaware – up until now – of the fact that he has been "sharing" his wife, whether because of massive self-absorption (as Shackleton-Bailey interprets it) or obsessive miserliness (as I interpret the poem in my translation).

This epigram's formal style fits well enough with the model of humour proposed above: it establishes a very clear narrative and rhetorical pattern and expectations through its repetitions, but the last line, though consistent with what has come before, turns the situation on its head. Candidus is a man very impressed with his possessions and himself, so selfish and self-absorbed that he has eyes for nothing else. If one interprets him as a miser, we can read the mini-narrative as showing that he though he succeeds in his mission to safeguard his precious wines and plates and even, so he believes, his *gravitas*, the celebrated Roman weight and self-regard (see line 4), he has made an embarrassing error; in his zeal to protect his possessions, he has overlooked his people, and his wife has strayed. If, on the other hand, one follows Shackleton-Bailey's interpretation, we come to a slightly different but still effective narrative: it seems that all Candidus' efforts to blot out the world outside of himself are in vain, for in the end the *populus* – a word with associations of *hoi polloi*, the common and not the aristocratic Romans – has appeared in his very *sanctum sanctorum*. In either case,

Candidus ignores the welfare of others throughout the poem, and it comes back to bite him, in bawdy form, in the end.

How precisely does bawdiness function in this poem? The epigram is far less concerned with the corporeal body than 2.52; we have no idea of what Candidus or his wife look like, and even the notion that the wife is sleeping around is conveyed through a clever play on words rather than an explicit statement. On the other hand, even the hint of bawdiness suffices to spoil the perfect little world that Candidus has built up for himself. He has tried to exclude other people insofar as possible; his wife's behaviour has brought them in, and in the most intimate way imaginable. Bawdiness here functions mainly as the mirror image of Candidus' cold selfishness; bawdiness bursts his bubble. Martial has carefully built up Candidus' character as a pattern of obsessive purity; that a major flaw would appear is at once a surprise and a confirmation of what we already know – that the world (and the wife) has a way of bucking off those who try to control it.

IV

> Lydia tam laxa est equities quam culus aeni,
>> quam celer arguto qui sonat aere trochus,
> quam rota transmisso totiens intacta petauro,
>> quam vetus a crassa calceus udus aqua,
> quam quae rara vagos expectant retia turdos,
>> quam Pompeiano vela negata Noto,
> quam quae de pthisico lapsa est armilla cinaedo,
>> culcita Leuconico quam viduata suo,
> quam veteres bracae Brittonis pauperis, et quam
>> turpe Ravennatis guttur onocrotali.
> Hanc in piscine dicor futuisse marina.
>> Nescio; piscinam me futuisse puto. (Martial 9.21)

Lydia's beaver is as loose as a horse's rear,
as a swift-spinning bronze hoop,

as the wide wagon-wheel through which the acrobat
leaps,
   as an old shoe soaked in a foul puddle,
as the meshes of the net fowlers use,
   as the folded-up awning of the Pompeian theatre,
as the armlet dropped off the skinny arm of a syphilitic,
   as a mattress emptied of its stuffing,
as the old trousers of a British pauper, and
   as the sagging neck of a pelican from Ravenna.
They say I fucked her in a pool by the sea-side;
   I can't be sure; I think I fucked the pool. (Trans.
Brandon Moores)

Lydia is as wide and slack
As a bronze horse's cul-de-sac,
Or sounding hoop with copper rings,
Or board from which an athlete springs,
Or swollen shoe from muddy puddle,
Or net of thrushes in a huddle,
Or awning that won't stay outspread,
In Pompey's theatre, overhead,
Or bracelet that, at every cough,
From a consumptive poof slips off,
French cushion, where the stuffing leaks,
Poor Breton's knackered, baggy breeks,
Foul pelican-crop, Ravenna-bred!
Now there's a rumour – he who said
I had her in the fish-pond joked;
It was the pond itself I poked. (Trans. Olive Pitt-Kethley)

This poem, for all its whimsical tone, is perhaps better
characterized as obscene than bawdy, and is unmistakably
the most malicious of the three; its humour, nevertheless,
does not come from the discomfiture of its target, whose
reaction we never see. I argue instead that there are two
distinct sources of humour: The first is the series of one-

liners, unlikely but evocative comparisons that run from line 2 to line 10. Each of these scores points through its elaborate extravagance, and even though they are grotesque they can still elicit admiration for the poet's invention. We laugh partly because, for all their outlandishness, they have a certain aptness; they surprise us and yet manage to stay on the boundaries of the imaginable. But we also laugh because of the sheer (and very bawdy) virtuosity that Martial displays in piling them up one after the other. By the time we've absorbed the first few comparisons we're waiting as much to see whether Martial will be able to top himself as to see whether the line stands in its own right.

The last couple of lines are the second source of humour, and even though they also serve to illustrate Lydia's peculiar attribute, they are different from those that come before them in several ways. They introduce the narrator directly and use a markedly different language register – the Latin verb *futuere* has, like the English verb "to fuck," very coarse connotations, emphatically at odds with the elegance of the previous lines; and, most importantly, they tell an abbreviated story, rather than providing a simple physical description (though note that it still contains a comparison, this time between Lydia and the pool). The addition of personal experience on the part of the poet is the capstone to all the previous outrageous comparisons, and the change in register lends an extra nudge – we have suddenly the speech not of the high-flying poet but of a slightly puzzled and annoyed and very corporal man.

Bawdiness plays a central role in each of these constructions: in the first, it provides the substance and structure for the comparisons that build and build to the climax; in the second, the introduction of a bawdy story effectively alters the tone and complements the comparisons that have come before. Bawdiness is here used even more brazenly than in 2.52, but

it has the same basic role, confirming that each of the ordinary objects to which Lydia's anatomy is compared *could* be thought of in that light. In this sense, the epigram depends on a series of small twists, rather than one large one that comes later on and changes our interpretation of all that has come before.

V

It need hardly be pointed out that the above is no more than a few notes on how bawdiness might fit into a modified version of the incongruity theory. My goal has, of necessity in a short paper, not been to furnish proofs but to provoke thoughtful discussion, and I will consider myself fortunate if a reader chooses to address these problems at some future point. ◎

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