Throughout his epigrams, the Latin poet Martial expresses nostalgia for his hometown Bilbilis. Born between 39 and 41 A.D. Martial grew up in Bilbilis, which in the ancient world was a municipium in Hispania Tarraconensis, near modern Saragossa, Spain. Although he lived in a rural area, Martial's parents were Roman citizens and could afford to give him a standard education, including knowledge of Greek and an acquaintance with Homer and Virgil. They named him Marcus Valerius Martialis after his birth month March.

Martial's move to Rome shaped the nature of his poetry, the bulk of which satirizes city life. "As charming as Bilbilis may have been, Rome no doubt radiated in antiquity the same allure which today characterizes New York or San Francisco". Martial left Bilbilis for Rome in his early twenties (63-64 A.D.) and remained there for the next 34 to 35 years. He arrived when Rome was under the emperor Nero, who gave generously to the arts and to Martial's new friends and prospective supporters, Lucan and Seneca. Unfortunately for Martial, Lucan and all the Senecas died about one year after his arrival in Rome as a result of the Piso rebellion in 65. Martial disliked the idea of becoming a lawyer or school teacher; and consequently, it is "small wonder that Martial's early years in Rome were lean ones". "He never attracted the spectacular patronage afforded to Horace or Virgil. He had instead the ordinary client's role: be part of some patron's entourage, witness documents, come to dinner and often drink lesser wine than was served at the head table, provide witty table talk, be a bought but poorly paid companion". As a result, Martial centers many of his epigrams around the insolent behavior of the rich and the treatment of their clients. "The patron-client system affected Martial's works as it affected all the literature of the day, and while he was a cynical and astute observer of Roman society and its ills, Martial's art was tailored to flatter his patrons and to assure his protection at imperial court".

Martial did live as a client, but his poverty should not be exaggerated. Domitian granted Martial equestrian status and gave him a town house in Rome. It seems that Martial scraped by during his early years in the city, but slowly gained favor, and thus money, by ingratiating himself with the emperors of the Flavian Dynasty.

Scholars know little about the twenty years between Martial's arrival in Rome and the publication of his first epigrams the *liber spectaculorum* in 84 or 85. Martial wrote the *liber spectaculorum* ("The book of games") in honor of the Coliseum's dedication in 80 A.D. After this success, Martial wrote two books, *Xenia* ("Gifts for guests") and *Apophoreta* ("Gifts for guests to take home"), which contained light, short poems that he intended for gift-givers to attach to their gifts during the Saturnalia. These were later appended to his collection of epigrams as Books XIII and XIV. Though not as accomplished as his later works, they earned Martial literary fame and spurred him on to publish Books I and II in 85 or 86. Martial released Book III in 87 or 88 while he was in France "on some semi-official tour of duty". The twelve books for which Martial is now famous, I - XII, appeared between 86 and 102.

Though Martial romanticized his eventual return to Bilbilis throughout his body of epigrams, his actual retirement there proved less than satisfactory for Martial. Tired of city life and patronage duties, Martial left Rome and returned to Spain around 98. The provinciality and lack of cosmopolitan crowds seemed to have depressed Martial, and regret over leaving Rome perhaps affected his health and hastened his death," which came some four or five
years thereafter, but no later than 104 A.D. As Bovie suggests, "Martial was better off in Rome than in Bilbilis because in Rome he found the villains and fools his art knew how to mock.

**Martial's Times**

Judging from Martial's works and the works of his contemporaries (Tacitus, Juvenal, Pliny), the literary atmosphere in Martial's Rome did not focus on celebrating Rome's past as Virgil did in the *Aeneid* and as Horace did by adapting Greek metrical and rhetorical strategies for Latin use; rather, Martial and his contemporaries illuminated present, daily life with their art. By the time Martial reached adulthood, empire had replaced the republic, and "the ever-increasing speed of social change rendered compensatory nostalgias and conservatisms sentimental". "Wit, satire, and deft adjustments to realities were required, not imagination and grand poetic designs". "Martial's moral moment is the present, and his moral yardstick the relationship between host and guest. Drama for Martial occurs not in the Forum or on the temple steps, but on the doorsill, at the table, in conversation, in bed". Instead of launching imaginative journeys into epic unreality, Martial hands down verdicts on real life.

**Martial’s Epigrams**

Epigrams take their name from the Greek word meaning “things written on”. As early as the fifth century B.C., the Ancient Greeks inscribed them on graves, monuments, buildings, works of art, and votive offerings to explain or commemorate the person or object they described. The Romans used epigrams to comment on nearly every aspect of life; but whereas Greek epigrams were light and often tender, the Romans began to wield the epigram as an invective tool, satirizing the world and its human inhabitants. It was this satirical quality of the poetry, particularly in Martial, that caused "epigram" in English to mean not only an epigraph or sepulchral inscription, but also a short, witty poem. In form, the epigram was "a relatively short poem which led rapidly to a sharp either poignant or telling, conclusion".

In his surviving 14 books (1561 poems), Martial mastered the epigram and made it his own. In doing so, he solidified the form that literature texts still refer to as epigram. Martial has influenced such great English writers as Spenser, Milton, Swift, Jonson, Byron, and Pope. Under Martial, what had been a light, but often sentimental poetic form, became a satirical tool used for both criticism and entertainment. "The satirical possibilities which this new ingredient facilitated were exploited more than anyone else by Martial, who gave the epigram a shape and flavor which it has had ever since".

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