

## Translating a poem from Latin

### Epigram Number 68, from Book 9 of *Epigrammata* by Martial (c AD 40–c AD 104)

**Marcus Valerius Martialis**, the poet known as Martial, was born in north-east Spain – part of the Roman Empire then – in about AD 40 on the first of March (hence the *Martialis*). He went to Rome in his early twenties, and stayed there; Rome is the setting of his amusing poems and often their subject too.

He called his short poems *Epigrammata*, giving us a word we still use in English – *epigram*: a short, usually amusing poem. His first book of epigrams was published in AD 85. He says of himself that he was 'known the world over for his neat and witty epigrams'. And no doubt he was.

#### 1

The first step for students translating this poem is for them to hear it read aloud. Latin teachers will perform the poem with conviction, but Martial is a poet who should appeal strongly to other language teachers, as well as to teachers of English; and they may be less familiar with how Latin is rendered aloud. The impressive podcast performance of Latin verse detailed at the foot of these notes will in that event prove invaluable.

Teachers of students encountering Latin for the first time will need to remind them that Latin isn't any longer a spoken language, so it isn't easy to be sure how poems sounded. Evidently the rhythms of a line of Latin verse depend on some vowel-sounds being 'long' or drawn out, and others being short. Modern readers (for example, in the podcasts referred to) lengthen some vowel sounds rather as in Italian.

## Martial: Epigrammata, Book 9, Number 68

*Quid tibi nobiscum est, ludi scelerate magister,  
invisum pueris virginibusque caput?  
nondum cristati rupere silentia galli:  
murmure iam saevo verberibusque tonas.  
tam grave percussis incudibus aera resultant,      5  
causidicum medio cum faber aptat equo:  
mitior in magno clamor furit amphitheatro,  
vincenti parmae cum sua turba favet.  
vicini somnum – non tota nocte – rogamus:  
nam vigilare leve est, pervigilare grave est.      10  
discipulos dimitte tuos. Vis, garrule, quantum  
accipis ut clames, accipere ut taceas?*

Once the students have heard the poem read in Latin, they should read it aloud themselves in their groups (in chorus) or in pairs or individually – perhaps all three. The tone of the poem, some sense even of the meaning of fragments, will emerge from such reading.

It will be worth reminding students who are not studying Latin that translators are often in the same position as they are, not knowing the language they translate from. But like all such translators, they can connect the look and sound of words in Latin with words in English, and in this context, hearing words like *clamor*, *percussis* and *garrule*, they will begin to sense what might be going on.

## 2

The next step is to provide students with a rough, literal translation of the poem. As I point out in the Students' Notes, this is often called a 'trot'. It will of course be largely without the rhythm, shape or literary persuasiveness of the original, but the 'trot' is the basis of much fine translation on the part of writers who somehow 'see through' the plain literal version to the poem beneath.

Even provided with a literal translation, students may still want to look up some Latin words. They should check English-sounding Latin words such as – here – *murmure* and *resultant*.

**Martial: Epigrammata, Book 9, Number 68** – a rough prose translation:

*What for you is (your problem with us), you accursed play/nursery school master,  
a thing/leader/head disliked equally by boys and girls?  
The crested cocks haven't yet broken the silence,  
now you're thundering out with savage roaring and banging,  
as noisily as the bronzes ring out clattered with hammers  
as the craftsman fits the lawyer on the middle of his horse;  
no less of a clamour rages in the large amphitheatre,  
when the mob favours/applauds the conquering small-shield (gladiator).  
We, your neighbours, do not request that you permit us to sleep for the whole night –  
it is a small thing to be occasionally wakened – but to be kept awake all night is a serious affair.  
Would you like, noisy man, to accept as much for staying silent as you earn for making a noise?*

### 3

The next step is to attempt some lines of translation. I focus in the Students' Notes on the anger of the speaker – as in *Scelerate magister* – and how it sounds. It will itself be a small challenge to find a just-right word for *scelerate*, as it will be to decide how serious the speaker's anger is, and whether the fun of the poem comes from real fury or something else.

To settle on what tone to adopt, it may be useful to try translating – as I've suggested – the key last two lines. Is what is suggested a serious or joke proposition? The Students' Notes offer variant ways of conveying the speaker's tone. I experimented with these two crucial lines, and came up with:

*Send away/ Dismiss your class. Would you like, Mr Mouth, to get the same as you earn for your racket for keeping quiet instead?*

And:

*I suggest you dispose of your young charges, and decide to take your wages not for making a racket but for shutting up.*

And I made the kind of comments on my experiments that were intended to act as spurs to further experiment.

#### 4

Translating the last two lines should help students decide on the tone of their own Martial schoolmaster poem. One more example could be offered: when the speaker says this teacher makes as much din as the workers in bronze hammering away on the equestrian statues they make for lawyers, is this absolutely serious or slightly tongue-in-cheek, exaggerated for effect?

There remain other basic matters: form, syllable-count, line-length. Even-numbered lines are twelve syllables long, the odd lines longer. Is that feature imitable or transferable? Would rhyme help, or would it get in the way? The poem's twelve lines might nicely fit the sonnet shape – and there are 'sonnets' in English of twelve lines. Not all of them rhyme, either.

Stress that there is no 'right' way to translate the poem, that each translation is the translator's – or the translators' – own poem and that decisions about whether it will be a sonnet, blank- or free-verse, or a poem in rhyming couplets, are up to each individual or group.

#### **Robert Hull, 2015**

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On these websites you will find information about Martial and translations of many of his Epigrams:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martial>

[http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial\\_epigrams\\_book09.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book09.htm)

<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Martial.htm>

You'll find some brilliant podcasts, with readings in Latin, and commentaries on various Latin poems, at:

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/latin-poetry-podcast/>

<http://www.readinglatinpoetry.com/podcast/?author=53647944e4b0a8d04d93b2ba>