

So, I ask, off with severity, spare my jests and jollities:
Martial's choice of meter as a primer of humorous affect
in his dactylic, hendecasyllabic and choliambic poetry



Erotic scene of Cupid and Psyche, Villa del Casale in Piazza Armerina.

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Abstract

How does Martial exploit metrical features such as caesura placement, enjambment, foot substitution, and line-final closure to control not just meaning, but *when* and *how* humorous effects occur? Or, more broadly speaking, how does Martial's metrical proficiency yield *affective prosody*? The scope of this study is to understand how the metrical tricks up the poet's sleeve are employed to prime expectation and to subvert it. Three different Latin meters will be discussed, the dactylic hexameter (and conversely elegiac couplet), the hendecasyllable and the choliamb, where particular attention will be given to their respective prosodic and stylistic qualities, before examples of this meter from Martial's corpus will be thoroughly analyzed both rhythmically and metrically. After this analysis, the *synkrisis* of Martial's meters, and how the caesura acts as a rhetorical, or in this case humorous, anchor, will be put up for discussion: the closing preposition being, the caesura may act as a primer of humor, governed by the prosodical idiosyncrasies of specific meters.

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Meter as a stylistic tool*

Is meter merely a formal constraint, of an active medium of expression? In this study, meter is treated not only as a prosodic constraint but as a vital stylistic resource. This view acknowledges that meter is an *active* participant in the meaning-making process of poetry, and not merely a vehicle of the lexicon: lexical content is subordinate to the meter, not vice versa.¹ Lilja 2012 defines rhythm as “a quality created in the perception of a work of art”,² turning the *ethos*, i.e. emotional effect of rhythm in spoken or recited contexts,³ of rhythm into a cognitive-interactive tool that is realized in the dialogue between producer or product and recipient.⁴ A poet's choice of meter can enhance the thematic concerns of a poem, signal generic affiliation, and comment ironically on content. More subtly, the way a line is filled out – the diction, word order, and syntactic structuring – can produce effects ranging from solemnity to playfulness, from pathos to parody and from sorrow to humor. In this sense, a choice for meter may have an emotional effect, i.e. the psychological, rhetorical and emotional impact on the audience, facilitated by a poem's rhythmic and metrical structure.

The question arises how one might research the emotional effect of rhythm and draw sensible conclusions in the case of ancient Greek and Latin, since research on emotions in linguistics is typically based on native-speaker involvement and perception, an impossible research requirement for both languages. Though scholarly attention for emotional dimensions in antique literature has grown,⁵ the role of meter and prosody in shaping affective responses in poetry remains notably underexplored. When one appreciates meter and rhythm as stylistic and inherent to performance, it becomes clear that manipulation of phonological, prosodic, semantic and pragmatical conventions is an essential part of (the performance of) poetry, which in turn could result in emotional effect. As Blankenburg 2021 states: “When referred to as stylistically or rhetorically evidencing or suggesting a specific ethos, ancient Greek meters qualify as a pragmatic marker for the capacity of written texts to express and transfer emotions.”⁶ Dionysius of Halicarnassus already attributes emotive qualities to word-shapes and, more importantly, rhythms, both in metrical and non-metrical text types, claiming such evocative features of prosody may serve rhetorical purposes cf. *De Comp. Verb.* 168. 5-9. To summarize, the deliberate manipulation of linguistic conventions through meter and rhythm may prime affective responses.

How do an ancient poem's meter and rhythm cause affect, and how does a poem's performance lead to an emotional effect? A crucial observation: testimonia from antiquity tell

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¹ Frog 2022, 116-7.

² Lilja 2012, 291.

³ Blankenburg 2021, 193. For the term *ethos*, 201-3.

⁴ Ibid. 206.

⁵ Recent examples include O' Rourke 2025 and Baumann 2025, both in Cairns 2025 – one of several recent edited volumes on emotion in antiquity curated by Cairns.

⁶ Blankenburg 2021, 197.

virtually nothing about the (role of prosody in the) performance of poetry – they don't tell anything about musical accompaniment, 'tempo' and perceptible differences between rhythms.⁷ It speaks to the imagination, however, that it was standard for a poem to be read or performed *aloud*, whether by the poet, by a trained reciter or actor on a stage, whether in private salons or in public readings, and not for it to only be read in silence. The experience of poetry was then inherently aural and auditory, meaning that meter was not merely a written form but a performative, rhythm that listeners would recognize, anticipate and interpret as a rhythm with prosodic qualities, and not merely as sound. Gurd 2022, in his analysis of the famous 'Egg' poem by Simias, asks the question if auditory performance of this *antithetikon* allows for the audience to imagine that the visual shape of this poem is indeed egg-like,⁸ and whether the *poem's* metrical schema plays a significant role in this imagination.⁹ He states that there is a distinction between the *sound* of a poem and its meter, for a meter is an intellectual object that is highly abstract and, in that sense, different from the auditory realia of sound.¹⁰ Gurd goes on to quote Devine and Stephens from their *The Prosody of Greek Speech*: "The poet and his audience do not assess metricality on the basis of the actual durations they hear in each utterance, for the relatively trivial reason that every utterance, like every snowflake, is unique... The categories of language to which metre is sensitive must clearly be more general and more abstract than the precisely quantified phonetic measurements of nonce utterances, if metre is to be able to function as a system shared by an entire speech community."¹¹ More broadly speaking, sound is not meter, and meter is not (merely) sound – for meter transcends the mere auditorial realm. Meter acts as an intelligible structure of not only the formal qualities of a poem but also its temporal and acoustic delivery, and is key in the oral-performative nature of antique poetry.

This oral-performative dimension has real stylistic consequences. Roman poets composed with the knowledge that their audiences would be listening, attuned to the interplay of metrical expectation and variation. Sudden substitutions, dissonances between natural word stress and metrical ictus, or disruptions through the caesura could be felt viscerally.¹² Martial, for instance, times many of his jokes or reversals to occur at the end of the line, or just after an enjambment, playing off his audience's metric-predictive horizon.¹³ Poets, however, also composed their works with the understanding that they would be performed by readers or reciters who were already familiar with the poem's conclusion and its structural elements, such as meter, thereby enabling them to employ vocal and rhetorical effects in their delivery.

Meter thus becomes an arena in which stylistic choices are negotiated. In the pre-caesura portion of the line, for instance, poets often exploit rhythmical freedom to insert fillers, transitions, and ornamental language. These positions allow for lexical variation and can reflect the idiosyncrasies of individual poetic style. Conversely, the post-caesura segment

⁷ Raven 1965, 20-1.

⁸ Gurd 2022, 114; one must of course appreciate that these observations are made with regard for a *Greek calligram*.

⁹ *Ibid.* 121-35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 134.

¹¹ Devine and Stephens 1994. 45.

¹² Lilja 2012, 274.

¹³ See the analyses of the elegiac couplet, the hendecasyllable and the choliamb in this study.

typically demands greater conformity to metrical norms. This contrast allows poets to balance variation with regularity, to draw attention to particular words or structures. Deviation from this regularity creates tension, i.e. a marked structure. For instance, a sudden shift from a predominantly dactylic rhythm to a spondaic-heavy line can signal gravity or emotional intensity. Similarly, enjambment that overrides a metrical boundary can dramatize a narrative tension or delay resolution. Such effects are possible only because the meter sets up expectations that the poet can fulfill or subvert.

If meter is indeed an active medium of expression, if it is indeed a stylistic mechanism capable of facilitating and producing emotional effect by shaping pacing, emphasis and tonal modulation, and if it is not merely a formal constraint, questions arise how a poet like Martial exploits the rhythmic affordances of his chosen meters to establish a humorous effect. His use of hendecasyllables, elegiac couplets, and choliamb is not incidental, but central to the timing, structure, and delivery of his jokes. So, how does Martial exploit metrical features such as caesura placement, enjambment, foot substitution, and line-final closure to control not just meaning, but *when* and *how* humorous effects occur? Or, more broadly speaking, how does Martial's metrical exploitation yield *affective prosody*?¹⁴

Defining meter beyond measure

Meter in Latin poetry functions as a system of formal constraints governing the arrangement of syllables within a poetic line according to their quantitative value, i.e. the relative length of pronunciation of syllables, scanned as long (–) or short (∪).¹⁵ In Latin, meter is based on the temporal duration of syllables, and poetic rhythm is established by combining these syllables into fixed metrical feet, which are then sequenced into lines with predictable internal structure. A syllable in Latin is considered long either by *nature* if it contains a long vowel or diphthong or by *position* if a short vowel is followed by two or more consonants, or by a 'double' consonant (x, z).¹⁶ *Muta cum liquida* clusters allow for the prepositioned vowel to be interpreted as a long or a short, depending on metrical need.¹⁷ The fundamental building blocks of Latin meter are metrical feet, most commonly:

- Dactyl; one long followed by two shorts (– ∪ ∪);
- Spondee; two longs (– –)
- Trochee; one long followed by one short (– ∪)
- Iamb; one short followed by one long (∪ –)

¹⁴ See the section "On form and function: establishing the research question" of this study.

¹⁵ Raven 1965, 22; in Latin, long syllables are approximately twice as common as shorts, in Greek vice versa.

¹⁶ Ibid. 23-4

¹⁷ Ibid. 25

Lines of Latin verse are constructed by organizing these feet into standardized metrical schemes, such as:¹⁸

- Dactylic hexameter: six feet, usually with dactyls in the first four or five positions and a spondee or trochee in the final foot. In the hexameter (and conversely in the hexametrical line of the elegiac couplet), each trisyllabic dactyl may be replaced by a disyllabic spondee, which however is highly unusual in the final two feet: the fifth foot is typically a trisyllabic dactyl, while the sixth foot is disyllabic. The first syllable of this foot is always a long, the final syllable is either a long or a short,¹⁹ only by convention of occurring at the line-end, not due to intrinsic foot variation. Conversely, the sixth foot may be a spondee or trochee.²⁰ The most important *caesura* in the hexameter occurs in the third foot, and is considered *strong* if it occurs after the long, and *weak* if it occurs after the short;²¹
- Elegiac couplet: a dactylic hexameter followed by a dactylic pentameter,²² where the pentameter is actually two hemistichs of two and a half feet each, scanned as, – ∪ ∪ | – || ∪ ∪ | –. The hemistichs are separated by a strong caesura. In the double hemistich, only the first two dactyls may be substituted by spondees;²³
- Hendecasyllable: a syllabically-defined meter of eleven syllables, typically arranged as, x x | – ∪ ∪ – || ∪ – | ∪ – | x;²⁴
- Choliamb/scazon: a *limping* iambic trimeter, where either the elements of the final foot are switched around, such that a trochee replaces the iamb in the final

¹⁸ More complete and detailed lists of Latin metrical forms and descriptions can be found in e.g. Crusius (1967), Drexler 1967, Halporn 1963, Halporn *et al.* 1994, Boldrini 2004, and Moreno 2018, cf. Forston IV 2011, 92.

¹⁹ West 1982, 287 states that ancient metricians teach that the final syllable in *any* meter is indifferent (ἀδιάφορος). West goes on to quote several testimonia from antiquity to support the consideration that a long in the final position (in lieu of a short) is the rational quantity in many meters, described as ‘*brevis in longo*’ by Maas 1923, 35. West 1982, 288 states that the final position can be *notated* as long in *all* cases, inasmuch as it may always accommodate a long, and if this final position is occupied by a short, its length may be regarded as long, being made up by the pause the verse-end facilitates.

²⁰ Thorsen 2013, 368; see also Moreno 2018, 53-56.

²¹ *Ibid.* 369.

²² For the pentameter, see Moreno 2018, 78.

²³ Thorsen 2013, 368.

²⁴ Martial *invariably* uses a spondee in the first two ancipitia, instead of a trochee or iamb, thereby not adhering to what modern metricians might interpret as Catullan flexibility. Pliny the Elder, in *NH* praef. 1, relates that this substitution struck the contemporary ear as ‘harsh’ (*/duriusculum/*). For differences between Martial’s and Catullus’ hendecasyllables, see Ferguson 1963, 3, and 1970, 173; Martial follows Catullus in typically placing noun and adjective at the initial or terminal position in the line and balancing two related words in these positions. He differs from Catullus in preferring a monosyllable before a monosyllabic ending, though the few examples from the corpus show these are hardly strong or significant words, but rather reduced monosyllables, such as pronouns and parts of verbs */sum/*, */fio/* or */volo/*. Cf. Paukstadt 1876, 29.

foot, or where the last short is realized as a long, disrupting the cadence of the trimeter.²⁵

Other important terms for understanding the rest of the paper include:

- Caesura: a break or pause within a metrical *foot*. It is mostly viewed as a breath pause for the performer, but, as I argue in this study, it may have rhetorical properties;²⁶
- Dieresis: where the end of metrical foot and the end of a word coincide, i.e. a break or pause within a metrical *line*. This dieresis is bucolic if it occurs in the fourth foot;²⁷
- Enjambment: continuation of the utterance over the verse end.²⁸
- Bathos: a rhetorical shift or anti-climax that may stem from a change in semantic register.
- Affect: the involvement of the audience, and the manipulation that defies expectations and the feelings of the poet or performer.

Meter is a generative template: it prescribes which combinations of long and short syllables are allowable in each position, often with built-in variation (e.g., substitution of a dactyl for a spondee in dactylic hexameter). The constraint system also includes rules of elision,²⁹ caesurae, bridge rules (prohibitions on word division on specific metrical positions), and principles of *ictus* (the metrical beat).³⁰ Importantly, Latin meter is not divorced from natural linguistic stress, though it operates independently.³¹ Poets often exploit or counterpose natural word accent and metrical ictus for stylistic effect, using their interplay to create tension or emphasis.³² Similarly, metrical choices influence and are influenced by syntactic phrasing: line-endings, caesurae, and enjambments are manipulated for rhetorical emphasis and comedic or dramatic timing.³³

²⁵ In Martial's time, 'resolved elements', i.e. two shorts rather than one long, occur (but not in the final foot), and the anapest (∪ ∪ –) is permitted at the start of the line. Such as in //dederas, Apici, bis trecenties ventri// (Mart. 3.22.1-2), scanned as, ∪ ∪ – ∪ – || – – ∪ – | ∪ – – – , cf. Raven 1965, 62. Even with these resolved feet, the maximum amount of syllables in a choliamb (16) cannot exceed the dactylic hexameter's maximum (17, in the case of holodactylic verses).

²⁶ Antique texts say virtually nothing about the caesura, which insinuates it may not have any noteworthy rhetorical effects. For antique texts on Greek meter, see e.g. Hephaestion's *Ἐγχειρίδιον περὶ μέτρων*, Aristotle's *Περὶ ποιητικῆς*; for the caesura in Greek, see West 1982, 25-6, 36, 40, 83, 91, 94, 153, 158; no Latin texts from the first century BCE to the first century CE that are only concerned with meter have survived, though meter is briefly discussed in Cicero's *Orator*, *Brutus* and *De Oratore*, Horace's *Ars Poetica* and Seneca Maior's *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*; for problems defining the caesura, see Moreno 2018, 702-4.

²⁷ Basset 1905, 111.

²⁸ Brandenburg 2022, 903. Enjambment is a stylistic tool; Edwards 2002, 14 considers enjambment "affective prosody" cf. Blankenborg 2015, 94.

²⁹ For a digression on elision as a marker of style, see Morgan 2010, 328-32.

³⁰ The interrelation of ictus and stress-accent is crucial in determining the rhythm of the verse cf. Naughtin 1952, 152.

³¹ Duffell 2013, 21-2; Ryan 2017, 585.

³² Morgan & Powell 2015. "Metre, Latin." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 6 Jul. 2015

³³ See the analyses of the elegiac couplet, the hendecasyllable and the choliamb in this study.

Thus, meter in Latin poetry is a formalized interaction between semantics, phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics. It functions as a set of abstract, rule-based patterns that structure poetic language, creating rhythm not only as an acoustic phenomenon but as a semantic and rhetorical device. Far from a rigid template, meter is a compositional grammar that allows for expressive deviation and modulation within its bounds, making it integral to the stylistic and interpretive texture of Latin verse.

On function and form: establishing the research question

How does Martial exploit metrical features for *affective prosody*? Since, in this study, meter is considered stylistic, and therefore potentially affective, and Martial's choice of meter is treated precisely as a deliberate choice of the poet, I suppose Martial exploits the idiosyncrasies and qualities of his meters to full effect. It is to be hypothesized that the poem is indeed subordinated to its meter – that is, *how* the poet intended its performance, and when the meter is made aural through performance, it gains a new dimension of emphasis, timing, tempo and other prosodic qualities which can not be fully exploited without this aural performance. Martial, then, uses a meter and the prosodic room it allows, to play with his audience, by highlighting certain metrical positions with languid longs to draw attention to these positions; by propelling the line forward with dactyls, choriambes or other feet which contain both longs and shorts; by introducing strong or weak pauses to emphasize the positions and conversely the lexical items adjacent to these pauses.

To address the coming-about of this *affective prosody* and of humorous effects, this study examines multiple exemplifying poems written by the poet Martial, paying particular attention to their metrical forms. First, I establish Martial's place in the Catullan literary tradition, and look at how Martial's historical context contributes to the content of his epigrammatic poetry. After this, I will look at a selection of poems, which comprise three distinct meters: the dactylic hexameter (more specifically, the elegiac couplet), the hendecasyllable, and the choliamb. Each of these meters will first be analyzed in terms of its prosodic structure and formal characteristics, after which their stylistic and rhetorical functions will be explored through close readings of selected epigrams. By situating these metrical forms within Martial's poetic practice, this study seeks to demonstrate how meter operates not merely as a structural framework but as a dynamic, stylistic instrument used in the generation of comic effect.

Contextualising Martial

<i>Hic est quem legis ille, quem requiris,</i>	Here he is – the one you read, the one you want,
<i>toto notus in orbe Martialis</i>	Martial, known all over the world
<i>argutis epigrammaton libellis:</i>	for his witty booklets of epigrams:
<i>cui, lector studiose, quod dedisti</i>	to him you have given, devoted reader,
<i>viventi decus atque sententi,</i>	such glory, while he lived and felt,
<i>rari post cineres habent poetae.</i>	as comes to few poets after their passing.

(Mart. 1.1) .

/Verona docti syllabas amat vatis/: Martial in the Catullan tradition

Marcus Valerius Martialis (40-104 CE) stands as a pivotal figure in the development of Latin epigrammatic poetry, whose work reflects both continuity with and departure from the legacy of Gaius Valerius Catullus.³⁴ Although separated by more than a century, the two poets share a literary affinity rooted in genre, tone, and stylistic audacity. This relationship, however, is neither linear nor uncritical; rather, Martial's oeuvre represents a sophisticated reimagining of Catullan strategies and techniques in light of the aesthetic and socio-political demands of Imperial Rome.³⁵ Nowhere is this interplay more evident than in Martial's strategic engagement with Catullus' metrical choices, particularly the hendecasyllable and choliamb, which function not only as formal markers but as vehicles of literary identity and political subtext.

Catullus (c. 84–54 BCE) brought the epigram to artistic prominence in the Late Republic by fusing personal intensity with invective, eroticism with wit, and intimacy with broader cultural critique – a crucial point in the Roman adoption and transformation of Hellenistic lyric and epigrammatic tradition.³⁶ His corpus, and in particular poems 69-116, displays a vibrant mix of satirical and erotic motifs, frequently employing biting invective and meticulous attention to metrical form.³⁷ Catullus was instrumental in popularizing the hendecasyllable and the choliamb, both of which allowed for a unique blend of colloquial energy, rhythmic variation, and expressive nuance. The hendecasyllable, in particular, emerges as Catullus' most frequently employed meter in his shorter poems, where it serves both erotic lyricism, e.g. Cat. 5, and satirical vitriol, e.g. Cat. 39. Its metrical agility mirrors Catullus' tonal versatility. Equally notable is Catullus' use of the choliamb. This metrical deviation from the standard iambic trimeter embodies moral and aesthetic transgression in poetic form. Catullus often uses it to mock pretentious poets or hypocrites, with the uneven

³⁴ For Catullus' influence on Martial, see Newman 1990, Swann 1994, Swann 1998, 48-58, Fitzgerald 2007, 167-86.

³⁵ Saller 1983, 246.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hutchinson 1993, 5–8.

cadence reflecting the deformity or corruption of his targets (cf. Cat. 8, 22, 23).³⁸ The very act of metrical subversion in Catullus parallels his broader subversion of Roman social and literary norms, particularly in the politics of invective, identity, and erotic speech.

Catullus' poetry targets a range of figures, from political elites to unnamed social climbers, often revealing the tensions within elite Roman masculinity and identity.³⁹ Martial, by contrast, emerges during the Principate, writing under emperors such as Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan (80–104 CE). His *Liber de Spectaculis* and his fourteen books of *Epigrammata* illustrate an epigrammatic tradition transformed by literary evolution and historical contingency. While Martial self-consciously situates himself within a Catullan lineage, he also redefines the function and scope of his epigram for a world now shaped by constraint, autocracy and complex systems of patronage.⁴⁰

One of the most evident continuities lies in the use of obscene language and invective. Like Catullus, Martial embraces *obscenitas*, often deploying graphic language to critique social and moral deviance.⁴¹ Yet the political function of such language diverges significantly. Catullus operates in a world where poetic invective could still masquerade as *libertas*, the right of the freeborn citizen to speak truth to power.⁴² Martial's invective, however, is often cloaked in wit and ambiguity, a necessary adaptation in an age of imperial surveillance and censorship.⁴³ His blending of personal expression with public commentary can be seen as an evolution of Catullus' style, adapted to the broader and more complex context of the Roman Empire.⁴⁴ Martial's engagement with Catullus is also evident in metrical and structural form. While Catullus wrote epigrams among other genres, Martial specialized in them, elevating the genre to a primary literary form. His frequent use of the elegiac couplet – a hallmark of Catullus and the Neoterics – signals a conscious aesthetic alignment. However, Martial's brevity, often honed to razor-sharp irony within just two lines, reflects a refinement of epigrammatic concision.

Thematically, both poets address *amicitia*, sexuality, betrayal, and literary rivalry. Yet Martial's thematic vision is more deeply inflected by the realities of Flavian Rome.⁴⁵ His works frequently engage in poetic gift exchange, a formalized literary economy shaped by patronage networks.⁴⁶ This system forces Martial to walk a thin line: deploying satire to criticize social pretensions, while never offending those who controlled his livelihood. His targets are often stock characters, they are anonymous or generalized, ensuring plausible deniability – which allows him to exercise critique more freely in an age where emperors were potential readers, patrons and adversaries.⁴⁷ Moreover, Martial broadens the social

³⁸ Saller 1983, 253.

³⁹ Goold 1983, xvi-xxiii.

⁴⁰ Fitzgerald 2000, 102–6.

⁴¹ Richlin 1992, 53–74.

⁴² Edwards 1997, 74.

⁴³ Saller 1983, 250–7.

⁴⁴ Rimell 2009, 50.

⁴⁵ Roman 2001, 114–6; White 1978, 84.

⁴⁶ White 1978, 87; cf. Garthwaite 2004, 412.

⁴⁷ Saller 1983, 246.

canvas of the epigram. While Catullus focused on elite circles, Martial's poetry depicts a more diverse urban population: tradesmen, freedmen, prostitutes, paupers, and petty criminals populate his verses.⁴⁸ This democratization of subject matter reveals Martial's responsiveness to the complexity of imperial society and enhances his poetic relevance.

Martial invokes Catullus directly, acknowledging his influence while asserting his own artistic independence. In 1.61, he names Catullus among the poetic greats but implies that his own work has expanded the possibilities of the genre. In 2.71. 2-3, he even states there is much of Catullus, be it in content, genre, stylism, etc., in his poetry: *//si quando ex nostris disticha pauca lego, //protinus aut Marsi recitas aut scripta Catulli//*, "if I ever read some of the elegiacs from my work, you immediately recite either Marsus' or Catullus' works!" But Martial also alludes to Catullan poetry by parodying him, e.g. in 1.77.⁴⁹ Another famous example is Martial's 1.18, containing the murder of an anthropomorphized wine, a mirror image of Catullus 27.⁵⁰ The intertextual strategy of echoing, modifying, and sometimes challenging Catullus, positions Martial as both heir to and innovating emulator of the Catullan conventions.

Limping along with Catullus: Martial's metrical mischief

Martial's primary metrical vehicle is the elegiac couplet, which he transforms into an instrument of concentrated wit and irony. This choice marks a divergence from Catullus' hendecasyllabic focus,⁵¹ yet the hendecasyllable still makes occasional and strategic appearances in Martial's work – especially in prefaces, dedicatory poems, and poems that require a marked shift in tone or genre.⁵² For example, 1.1, composed in hendecasyllables, establishes a tone of urbane modesty, marking the poem's introductory function and invoking a lineage that includes Catullus. By using this form sparingly, Martial enhances its metapoetic resonance: the hendecasyllable becomes a formal gesture of deference to Catullan lyricism, reserved for moments that highlight literary inheritance and stylistic polish.

Moreover, although Martial rarely employs the choliamb in his poetry, he is clearly aware of its function. In several poems, particularly where invective is sharpened, he reproduces the tonal effects of the choliambic meter through lexical or syntactic disruption within the pentameter of the elegiac couplet. This allows him to evoke the critical edge of Catullus' choliamb without overtly adopting a form that would risk drawing imperial censure in a less tolerant literary climate. Pliny the Younger relates that he feared he would be exiled or executed during Domitian's reign of terror.⁵³ Martial, who wrote in the same literary landscape, employs self-censorship by using stock characters and curbing his satire:

⁴⁸ Von Albrecht, 1997. 945–951.

⁴⁹ Watson 2000, 285-298.

⁵⁰ Rimell 2009, 34.

⁵¹ Of the recognized epigrams of Martial, 1235 are elegiac distichs (79 percent) cf. Sullivan 1991, 227n22.

⁵² Watson 2006, 294.

⁵³ Strunk 2013, 95-9.

Hunc servare modum nostri novere libelli, To keep this limit, I've adapted my booklets,
parcere personis, dicere de vitiis. to spare persons, but to speak of vices.

(Mart. 10.33)

The shift from Republican freedom of speech to imperial decorum necessitates this formal adaptation. Conversely, the limp of the choliamb becomes a rhythmic allusion rather than a full-bodied poetic mode.⁵⁴

Catullus' meters served functions beyond aesthetics: they encoded social identity, political dissent, and poetic autonomy. Martial, acutely aware of these associations, modulates them to fit the expectations of imperial patronage, even as he maintains a sardonic, at times subversive, poetic voice. His metrical discipline – the ability to compress satire, praise, complaint, and philosophical reflection into a single couplet – speaks to a new kind of formal economy, one that builds upon but ultimately transforms the Catullan model.

Martial's Dactylic Hexameters and Elegiac Couplets

<p>«<i>Hexametris epigramma facis</i> », <i>scio dicere Tuccam.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Tucca, solet fieri, denique, Tucca, licet.</i></p> <p>«<i>Sed tamen hoc longum est</i> », <i>solet hoc quoque, Tucca, licetque.</i>⁵³</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>si breviora probas, disticha sola legas.</i></p> <p><i>conveniat nobis ut fas epigrammata longa</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>sit transire tibi, scribere, Tucca, mihi.</i></p>	<p>‘You make hexametrical epigrams’, I know Tucca says.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Tucca, that is <i>normal</i>, Tucca, that is allowed.</p> <p>‘But this one is <i>so long</i>.’ That is also normal, Tucca, and allowed.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">If you want shorter ones, read only my couplets.</p> <p>Let's make a deal: you may skip the long epigrams,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">and I, Tucca, may write them.</p>
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(Mart. 6.65)

⁵⁴ On the invective of the choliamb, and Martial's use of the choliamb, see the section “Choliambics prosodic features” of this study.

Dactylic hexameter's prosodic features

The dactyl, and more specifically the dactylic hexameter, was a benchmark, the meter wherewith all other meters identified themselves.⁵⁶ Aristotle defined the dactylic hexameter as the most stately and most dignified of the meters (στασιμώτατον καὶ ὀγκωδέστατον τῶν μέτρων),⁵⁷ and Horace states that the meter *par excellence* for describing heroic, i.e. epic, feats, was the Homeric verse.⁵⁸ Though the dactyl is deceptively straightforward in form, it possesses significant rhythmic and expressive potential. It features most prominently in the dactylic hexameter, the meter of Homer, Virgil, and Lucretius. The dactylic foot, often described as “falling” in rhythm due to its metrical cadence, imparts a forward-moving, expansive quality to verse, a feature that has led some scholars to associate it with grandeur, motion, and continuity.⁵⁹ Though, as Morgan 2010 contends, the dactylic hexameter also lends itself perfectly to, what she calls, the satirical suspicion of artifice.⁶⁰

One of the most striking prosodic features of the dactyl is its inherent *rhythmic drive*. Where the iamb or trochee have a *binary* form, which creates a sense of metrical alternation, the *ternary* configuration of the dactyl allows for greater flexibility and extension. This structural feature has prompted Knapp 1923 to assert that possibilities for variation within the dactylic hexameter are effectively ‘infinite’.⁶¹ However, such a statement requires considerable nuance. While the dactylic hexameter indeed may offer a substantial scope for variation in what O’Neill 1940 calls the *inner metric* – which comprises caesuras and diaereses –, there exists an oppressive constraint in the so-called *outer metric* – the permissible distribution of dactyls and spondees.⁶² The first four feet of the hexameter indeed allow for sixteen potential variations (in non-spondaic verses),⁶³ yet the fifth and sixth feet are functionally fixed. That is, the fifth foot is almost invariably a dactyl, while the sixth is a spondee or trochee, with deviation from this standard closing cadence (– ∪ ∪ | – x) being both rare and marked. It is true, however, that the dactylic hexameter, by virtue of its capacity to accommodate a greater number of syllables per line, allows for a broader range of prosodic and syntactic variation than meters with more rigid syllabic constraints, such as the iambic trimeter and choliamb, which typically has twelve syllables per line,⁶⁴ or the Latin hendecasyllable, which is metrically restricted to eleven syllables per line. The resulting rhythmic dynamism, the *rhythmic drive* of the hexameter, constitutes one of its most powerful expressive tools, enabling poets to sustain narrative momentum, generate tonal contrast, and

⁵⁵ On this matter, see also Mart. 2.77.7: //non sunt longa quibus nihil est quod demere possis//. Cf. Sullivan 1991, 63.

⁵⁶ Morgan 2010, 284

⁵⁷ Arist. *Poet.* 1459b34-5.

⁵⁸ Hor. *AP* 73-4.

⁵⁹ West 1982, 7-11; Allen 1973, 54.

⁶⁰ Cf. Morgan 2010, 310-26.

⁶¹ Knapp 1923, 75.

⁶² For definitions of “inner metric” and “outer metric,” see O’Neill 1940, 336n3; cf. Getty 1963.

⁶³ Knapp 1923, 75.

⁶⁴ To a maximum of seventeen with ‘resolved elements’, see note 6.

exploit the interplay between form and meaning with remarkable versatility. As West 1982 notes, “a line composed entirely of dactyls rushes onward, unimpeded by the pauses or balancing effects found in other meters”.⁶⁵ This property made the dactylic hexameter ideal for epic poetry, which demands both narrative momentum and metrical grandeur. The meter’s relative resistance to syntactic closure mid-line ensures that thought and rhythm can flow continuously from one verse to the next.⁶⁶

A key site of prosodic manipulation is the caesura. Martial typically follows the forms established by Ovid, and avoids experimentation with the caesura, unlike his contemporaries.⁶⁷ The use of caesura in the dactylic hexameter contributes both to its musicality and its dramatic pacing, allowing poets to balance expansion with tension. The positioning of caesurae may mirror shifts in tone or narrative perspective, providing a form of “internal punctuation” that structures the verse.

The capacity for variation is a fundamental feature of the dactylic rhythm. While the metrical scheme of the hexameter allows for substitution of a spondee in place of a dactyl in the first four feet, such substitutions significantly alter the poem’s tempo and tone. This metrical choice is rarely arbitrary. For example, Virgil’s use of successive spondees (a technique sometimes termed “spondaic weighting”) frequently correlates with moments of narrative gravity or tension, such as in his famous depiction of Aeneas carrying Anchises: *//et sublātō montem genitōre petīvit//* (Virg. *Aen.* 2.804). Here, the ponderousness of the spondaic substitutions enacts the physical and emotional burden borne by the hero.⁶⁸ In Martial, hexameters typically end in one of the two dominant forms, either with a disyllabic or trisyllabic word, preceded by a disyllable, trisyllable or quadrisyllable.⁶⁹ On occasion, he ends the verse with a strong polysyllabic name or adjective, eliminating word division. Such words are generally preceded by a dactylic fourth foot, as are his double spondaic endings, which hardly ever occur.⁷⁰

Such metrical plasticity also extends to the use of elision (and enjambment), which in dactylic poetry serves as a vital tool of rhythmic and syntactic control. It can smoothen transitions between words, but in dactylic verse it also introduces metrical compression that counteracts the line’s natural expansiveness.⁷¹ Hexameter poets may use elision in rapid narrative sequences to create a sense of breathless urgency. Famous examples of this phenomenon include Catullus’ outburst *//quam modo qui m(e) un(um) atqu(e) unic(um) amic(um) habuit//* in Cat. 73.6, Statius’ *Silv.* 4.2.18 *//tect(um) august(um) ingens, non cent(um) insigne columnis//*,⁷² and Virgil’s *Aen.* 3.658 *//monstr(um) horrend(um) inform(e),*

⁶⁵ West 1982, 85.

⁶⁶ Devine & Stephens 1994, 283-4.

⁶⁷ Sullivan 1991, 228.

⁶⁸ Quinn 1968, 119; Wilkinson 1963, 185.

⁶⁹ Sullivan 1991, 228.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Morgan 2010, 329-332.

⁷² This of course serves as a response to Virg. *Aen.* 7.170: *//tect(um) august(um) ingens, centum insigne columnis//*.

ingens//.⁷³ By contrast, strategic avoidance of elision can draw attention to particular lexical items, such that they become more rhetorically eminent.

Despite its association with epic, the dactyl also finds meaningful deployment in shorter, more compressed genres such as didactic verse (e.g., Lucretius' *DRN*) and epigrammatic hexameters, where it often functions ironically. In these contexts, the dactylic rhythm can be used either to parody epic tropes or to juxtapose elevated form with mundane content. In Martial's hexameters, for example, the grandeur of the meter may contrast with the triviality or vulgarity of the content, producing a tension that is both humorous and critical.

The Elegiac Couplet: unsettling conventions

Elegiac couplet is the meter *par excellence* of the epigram, so consistently employed that it may be considered either a formal convention of the genre or its normative expression.⁷⁴ It is differentiated from the iambics by a greater elevation of form, guaranteed above all by the hexameter's association with the epic.⁷⁵ While alternative meters such as the hendecasyllable and the choliamb remained in circulation, particularly within satirical and invective subgenres, it was the elegiac couplet that ultimately prevailed, due in part to its formal versatility and adaptability across a wide range of thematic domains.⁷⁶ Moreover, the couplet's bipartite structure enabled not only concise expression but also sustained poetic development: the notion that an epigram typically consists of at least five lines underscores the form's capacity for thematic extension.⁷⁷

The hexameter's asymmetrical structure, which allows for a range of dactylic and spondaic substitutions in the first four feet, encourages both variation and a sense of expansion. The hexameter's rhythm is well-suited to narrative momentum. However, the subsequent pentameter introduces a pronounced formal contrast. Rather than extending the narrative rhythm, it interrupts it. Composed not of five metrical feet in the strict sense, the pentameter consists of two metrically responsive hemistichs, each containing two and a half feet, divided by a fixed central caesura. This bipartite element within the pentameter destabilizes the expectation of continuity established by the preceding line. Only one of the three dactylic "openings" in the couplet achieves metrical and syntactic closure; the pentameter's hemistichs, by contrast, resist finality. The result is a metrical resolution that feels incomplete, abrupt, and tonally unsettled.⁷⁸

⁷³ The account of Polyphemus in Virgil's *Aeneid* is analyzed by Soubiran 1966, 636-7, in the chapter 'Valeur expressive de l'élision', 613-45.

⁷⁴ Watson 2006, 285n1. Hexameter, and conversely elegiac couplet, is used in around 75% percent of the poems in his books 1-12, and it is the usual meter in 13-14 and *De Spectaculis*.

⁷⁵ Fantuzzi & Hunter 2005, 34.

⁷⁶ Sullivan 1991, 79.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Thorsen 2013, 369.

Such asymmetry, far from being a flaw, is intrinsic to the poetic economy of the elegiac couplet. The interplay between the metrically expansive hexameter and the compressed, dual-hemistich pentameter enacts a kind of formal dialectic in which the epic and the anti-epic confront one another within a single unit of verse. The traditional association of hexameter with heroic or elevated subject matter and of pentameter with humility or affective introspection lends semantic weight to this structural opposition. Elegiac poets often exploited this tension through generic subversion: epic themes might be rendered in the diminished scale of the pentameter, while the emotional intensity typical of elegy might be inflated by hexametrical elevation. The phenomenon known as *versus echoici*, ‘echoing lines’, in which the pentameter rhythmically or semantically comments on, undercuts, or revises the preceding hexameter, further highlights the subversive force of the second line. In such cases, the pentameter asserts dominance over the hexameter, structurally and thematically destabilizing any expectation of heroic finality.⁷⁹

The hexameter permits considerable metrical variation through the substitution of spondees for dactyls, particularly in the first four feet, allowing poets to modulate the rhythm for dramatic or descriptive effect.⁸⁰ Conversely, the pentameter exhibits stricter metrical constraints, with a fixed pattern. Each hemistich comprises two dactyls followed by a long, restricting the metrical flexibility and emphasizing rhythmic regularity. From a prosodic standpoint, the contrast in metrical flexibility between the two lines reinforces this dynamic. The hexameter permits considerable variety through spondaic substitution, allowing poets to manipulate tempo and tone for expressive effect. The pentameter, by contrast, is metrically more rigid: the second hemistich is always holodactylic, limiting rhythmic innovation while ensuring a predictable cadence. This regularity contributes to the sense of symmetry within the pentameter, but also restricts its capacity for expansion, its formal constraint being part of what makes it so effective at undercutting the amplitude of the preceding line.

Syntactically, the distinction between the two lines is equally marked.⁸¹ The dactylic hexameter often permits self-contained units of meaning, even while allowing for enjambment. In contrast, the elegiac couplet may thrive on syntactic continuation across line breaks, as in Catullus, who carries a thought beyond the end of the verse – much like in stichic verse – and lets it come to an end early in the following line. In this way, the emphasis is on the word or words that are delivered in the following verse. Secondly, he interlaces the pentameter with the following hexameter by having a colon run through both. This technique is intended to make it possible to express longer units of meaning in the distich.⁸² The frequent use of enjambment between hexameter and pentameter lines in elegiac poetry prevents closure at the end of the hexameter, thereby reinforcing the destabilizing effect of the second line.

The bipartite structure of the elegiac couplet establishes a formal rhythm that inherently conditions audience expectations. Unlike other meters that may end on a note of

⁷⁹ Ibid. 375.

⁸⁰ See the previous section.

⁸¹ I would like to thank R.J.J. Blankenburg for this notion.

⁸² Brandenburg 2022, 916-7.

closure or ambiguity, the elegiac couplet's structural predictability primes the listener or reader to anticipate a follow-up, e.g. one with an ironic or humorous turn. This is especially significant in epigrammatic poetry, where the hexameter often lays the thematic groundwork only to be undercut or subverted by the pentameter. The audience, attuned to this form, learns to expect that the "punchline" or twist may reside not in the initial statement but in its resolution. As such, the pentameter becomes a site of humorous culmination, where expectation meets inversion or exaggeration. This expectation is not merely functional but becomes part of the joke itself: the delay and structural inevitability enhance the comic timing. Poets like Martial frequently exploit this mechanic, using the hexameter to evoke a tone of seriousness or grandeur before deflating it in the pentameter with vulgarity, irony, or *bathos*. Thus, the fixed sequence of the elegiac couplet enables a metrical framework for controlled comedic surprise.

Haughty hexameters and perturbing pentameters: how Martial exploits the Elegiac

In the following chapter, I present a selection of examples from Martial's corpus to demonstrate how the poet systematically exploits the formal conventions of elegiac verse for comedic effect. Particular attention will be given to Martial's prosodic strategies, including the deployment of pauses within and between verses to draw emphasis to specific lexical items;⁸³ the calculated alternation of long and short syllables to lend weight to metrically significant positions, especially verse-initial and verse-final placements,⁸⁴ as well as those adjacent to caesural or syntactic breaks; and the insertion of fillers, e.g. vocative names, which not only serve rhythmic and metrical needs but also contribute to the epigram's overall structural coherence.⁸⁵

The analysis begins with selected poems from *Epigrams* Book 2, representing Martial's earlier output, before turning to examples from later books to trace the consistency or evolution of these techniques across his oeuvre. Given the constraints of this study, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive analysis of Martial's entire elegiac corpus, also because not all of his elegiacs are strictly humorous. The poems discussed here have been chosen selectively, not only for their personal interest to me,⁸⁶ but also for their exemplarity. That is, the observations and interpretative framework developed in this chapter are intended to be broadly applicable to Martial's entire corpus of humorous elegiacs.

⁸³ It speaks to the imagination that the word directly before and after a verse-end, or more broadly speaking, words directly juxtaposed with a strong pause, are emphasized cf. Strangert 2003, 2477.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ See note 91.

⁸⁶ I have a predilection for satiric content, which is most prominent in Books 1-3 cf. Williams 2005, 31.

*Cum sint crura tibi similent quae cornua lunae,
in rhytio poteris, Phoebae, lavare pedes.*

Since your legs look like the crescent moon,
in a drinking horn you should, Phoebus,
wash your feet.

(Mart. 2.35)

Scansion: // -- | - u u | - u u | -- | - u u | -- // - u u | - u u | - || - u u | - u u | - //

The rhythmic drive of this hexameter,⁸⁷ facilitated by the alternation of spondees and dactyls, and the elevated imagery (legs likened to the crescent moon⁸⁸) evoke epic grandeur. The hexameter, through the invective comparison of the legs and the crescent moon, paints a humorous picture, which however is incomplete owing to the hexameter being an adverbial clause introduced by */cum/*. The haughty language of the hexameter stands in stark contrast with that of the pentameter, whose medial caesura after */poteras/* creates a moment of suspense. The verb's placement at the hemistich's end primes the hearer to anticipate an action, but the syntax deliberately withholds it. This pause generates comedic tension: the listener expects a joke, but does not yet know if this will consist of a continuation of epic grandeur or bathos in accordance with the diminutive, obscure */in rhytio/*.⁸⁹ The latter occurs in the form of */lavare pedes/*. The ludicrous image of washing feet in a tiny cup collapses the poem's elevated tone. The elevated nature of the hexametrical line of the elegiac is undercut in the double hemistich, which comments ironically on the content of the hexameter. The rhetorical force of the joke hinges on the suspenseful gap between */poteras/* and its complement, with the caesura in the second line functioning as a hinge between grandeur and ridicule.

Quid mihi reddat ager quaeris, Line, Nomentanus?

hoc mihi reddit ager: te, Line, non video.

What my land at Nomentanum yields, you ask,
Linus.

My land yields this: that I, Linus, can't
see you.

(Mart. 2.38)

Scansion: // - u u | - u u | - || - | - u u | -- | -- //⁹⁰ - u u | - u u | - || - u u | - u u | - //

⁸⁷ Laurens 1989, 293-4 notes monotony is avoided by the syntactical subordination of the first line, here by means of the spondaic */cum sint/*.

⁸⁸ There appears to be some contrast between Apollo's divine beauty and the physical imperfection of Phoebus cf. Williams 2005, 133, which also states there is an interplay between *lunae* and *Phoebus*, since Phoebus is an epithet of Apollo, who was associated with the sun.

⁸⁹ *CGL* 3.324.52 states a */rhytium/* is a silver drinking vessel. The word is nowhere else attested in Greek or Latin text. One may infer the shape of this drinking vessel from this poem.

⁹⁰ Spondaic verses, i.e. hexametrical verses which have a spondaic fifth foot rather than a dactylus, are quite rare in Martial: only 15 out of his 3038 hexameters are spondaic, 12 of those ending in proper names. An equally rare phenomenon is that it is a single word that comprises the final two spondees. It is somewhat rare in Catullus, where this phenomenon occurs in 3.12 percent of hexameters, but it is hardly found after Catullus cf. Marina Sáez 1998, 138-9, 158-62; cf. Williams 2005, 117.

This poem has a question-answer structure, where the stately formulated question of the hexameter is undercut in the pentameter.⁹¹ The hexameter consists of an entire sentence, while the pentameter is divided into two independent sentences, a rare phenomenon in the monodistichs in Martial's corpus.⁹² It is a common device to repeat a name in the vocative in both the hexameter and the pentameter to give a sense of unity to the epigram.⁹³ The strong caesura after *ager* performs a dual function. Prosodically, it inserts a sharp pause in an otherwise unbroken dactylic flow, thereby creating a moment of suspension. Rhetorically, this pause invites the hearer to anticipate a serious or practical response only to be subverted in the following line. In the pentameter, the first hemistich mimics the rhythm of the first line but halts abruptly at the midpoint. The second hemistich introduces the punchline, which is primed by the pause facilitated by the caesura after */ager/*, creating a sharp medial pause. Its trisyllabic beginning */te, Line/* slightly disrupts the regular cadence, drawing attention by fronting the object. The final dactyl resolves the suspense with metrical finality. Martial thus uses dactylic fluency, medial suspension, and hemistich symmetry to orchestrate comic timing purely through meter.

Zoile, quid solium subluto podice perdis? Zoilus, why ruin your bath by washing your anus?
spurcius ut fiat, Zoile, merge caput. To make it dirtier, Zoilus, stick your head in.

(Mart. 2.42)

Scansion: // - ∪ ∪ | - ∪ ∪ | - || - | - - | - ∪ ∪ | - - // - ∪ ∪ | - ∪ ∪ | - || - ∪ ∪ | - ∪ ∪ | - //

The alternation of dactyls and spondees creates a pronounced rhythmic acceleration which builds towards the line's end. This rhythmic propulsion is undercut metrically by the prosodic weight of */subluto/*: the spondee in the third foot decelerates the line to draw attention to the gross implication of */subluto perdice/*.⁹⁴ The final spondee */perdis/* also decelerates the line and arrests the momentum precisely where semantic resolution is expected. Postponement of the act itself, which could only be obscene, creates comic suspense, effectively "pausing" the joke within the line's prosodic flow. In the first hemistich, the prominent */spurcius/*⁹⁵ primes the hearer to expect an empathic resolution. Martial creates tension by placing the disyllabic, semantically light verb */fiat/* in a metrically prominent position. The caesura falls after this */fiat/*, marking the exact midpoint of the pentameter and enforcing a syntactic and rhythmic

⁹¹ On the vivid effect of the question-answer format in this poem, cf. Laurens 1989, 292-3.

⁹² Cf. Williams 2005, 142.

⁹³ Laurens 1989, 269-70 cf. Galan Vioque 64

⁹⁴ It is inferable from Mart. 2.16 and 2.19 that Zoilus is a filthy person. Williams 155 states it is clear Zoilus' mouth is filthier even than his anus, which is inferable from Mart. 2.10 on Postumus' unwanted kisses. He thus suggests Zoilus has befouled his mouth, much like Postumus, with sexual practices. Obermayer 1998, 220 suggests that Martial insinuates Zoilus' */podex/* has played some role in these sexual endeavors.

⁹⁵ Williams 2005, 156 suggests */spurcius/* hints at oral sexual practices, but unconvincingly with only one example from the Latin corpus, namely Lucil. 398, */sporcus ore/*. For */sporcus/* as an insult in general, see Opelt 1965, 156-7.

rupture; a prosodic expectation of completion is denied, since the joke’s climax */merge caput*⁹⁶ is deferred until the second hemistich.

Hostem cum fugeret, se Fannius ipse peremit.

As he fled his enemy, Fannius killed himself

hic, rogo, non furor est, ne moriari mori?

Isn’t this, I ask, crazy, to die to *not* die?

(Mart. 2.80)

Scansion: // – – | – ∪ ∪ | – || – | – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ // – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – || – ∪ ∪ | – ∪ ∪ | – //

This poem displays the bipartite structure of the elegiac: the hexameter poses an “objective” narrative situation, while the pentameter undercuts this objectivity with a “subjective” comment by Martial. The distinction is further highlighted by the use of a past-tense in the hexameter, and a present-tense in the pentameter.⁹⁷ Both lines are separated into two syntactic unites at the principal caesura.⁹⁸ Since the hexameter starts with an adverbial clause, the main verb and agent are omitted until after the caesura, which creates rhetorical suspense. The reflexive */se/* is positioned directly after the caesura, which isolates it syntactically and metrically, drawing attention to the reflexivity of Fannius’⁹⁹ act. The placement of the verb in the final position of the line, withholds the final narrative action *just* long enough to prime the audience for a resolution, which, by means of the aforementioned */se/*, knows he did something, and that he did it *to himself*. Prosodically, the first half of the hexameter runs more slowly, since it contains two spondaic feet. The caesura is positioned in the spondaic third foot, whose elongated pronunciation puts extra emphasis on the metrical pause.

The first hemistich concludes with the semantically light */est/*, halting the midline thought. The placement of */est/* mirrors the effect of */fiat/* in the previous poem: a semantically light verb is positioned directly before the caesura, essentially priming the joke by halting the verse both prosodically and semantically, and deferring the joke until the second hemistich. This enforced pause after */est/* isolates the clause, making it sound rhetorically complete. Yet the second hemistich */ne moriari mori/* reopens the logic of the line with a compulsory holodactylic sequence, creating a sense of mechanical progression that mirrors the tautology of the content.

⁹⁶ Williams 2005, 156 suggests */caput/* is used in conjunction with sexual practices. This makes his argument for the sexual connotation of */spurcius/* even more unconvincing, since in the only example he gives of this connotation, */spurcius/* is used with */ore/*, not */caput/*. In *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* by Adams 1982, */caput/* is used only *once* in conjunction with verbs meaning “join” (e.g. */iungo/* and derivatives). The word itself does not seem to have any direct sexual connotation. Though it may be inferred from the context presented in this particular poem and, by a stretch from Williams who links this poem to Mart. 2.10 that Zoilus has *sexual* diseases, it is more likely Martial simply intended to insult Zoilus’ filthy appearance rather than his sexual endeavors.

⁹⁷ Williams 2005, 248.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ For a digression on the unclear identity of Fannius, see Williams 2005, 248-9.

The first hexameter starts with */languēbam/*, consisting of three longs – which makes the beginning of the line weighed down and lethargic, only fitting for a speaker claiming illness. This effect is compounded in */sed tu/*, consisting of two longs. The rare opening sequence of two successive spondees not only slows the line but physically enacts, through rhythm, the speaker's claimed infirmity. The medial caesura after */tu/* defers syntactic closure, and draws attention to the fact that another, directly addressed person who will prove to be Symmachus,¹⁰³ has done *something*, thus priming this act. After this languid opening, the pace of the line quickens. Structurally, the line is split by a strong dieresis between */ad me/* and */venisti/*, a tactical pause that sets up a measured pace. The strategic caesura after */centum/* again delays syntactic closure – an effect also caused by the insertion of the name */Symmache/*.¹⁰⁴ The verse-final */discipulis/* lands with extra force after a build-up with many long syllables and the pauses after */centum/* and */Symmache/*, which influence the pacing of the line. The metrical weight of the hexameter does not merely enact illness by being languidly paced, but it amplifies the ridiculousness of the situation: the grand rhythm clashes with the mundane, crowded, and altogether inconvenient reality of Symmachus bringing a hyperbolic, somewhat humorous amount of students.

The second hexameter starts with a spondee, but progresses smoothly with four dactyls in rapid succession, a metrical evenness that contrasts with the spondaic heaviness of the first hexameter and the first hemistich in the pentameter line. The caesura after */manus/* functions syntactically by separating the subject, one hundred anonymous hands, from its apposition */Aquilone gelatae/*, a poetically elevated phrase. The line proceeds smoothly until its chilling close, where the cause of discomfort is finally named. The enjambment from the previous line heightens this delay, such that the coldness is not revealed until the line-end, echoing the structure of the poem itself, where illness arrives only at the end. The adjective */gelatae/*, placed in final position, acts as a rhetorical sting, creating suspense due to its semantic weight, and its heavy syllables offer a rhythmic deceleration after the rapid succession of dactyls. The line proceeds smoothly until its chilling close, where the cause of discomfort is finally named.

By suspending the final element */nunc habeo/* to the second hemistich, Martial delays the resolution of the poem. Crucially, a caesura occurs after */febrem/*, priming this resolution. After */Symmache/*, a pause occurs, metrically isolating */nunc habeo/*. The second hemistich is as short as allowed, creating a sense of abruptness and finality. The rhythmic and syntactic minimalism of these last three words, each a single syllable, produce an effect of clipped, almost breathless conclusion. This brevity, when contrasted with the heavy spondaic opening of the first line, emphasizes the rhetorical shift from lethargy to ironic complaint.

¹⁰³ Doctors usually have Greek names cf. Howell 1995, 85. The verb */tetigere/*, an epic perfect form of */tangere/*, conveys a clinical and impersonal kind of contact, i.e. a medical procedure. Jokes concerning doctors often center on leaving patients worse off (usually dead) than before their visit cf. *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Martial's Hendecasyllables

<i>Udenis pedibusque syllabisque</i>	For my syllables with eleven feet,
<i>et multo sale nec tamen protervo</i>	for my abundant, though not rude humor,
<i>notus gentibus ille Martialis</i>	I am known in all the nations, I, Martial,
<i>et notus populis – quid invidetis? –</i>	and known to all the people – jealous, are you? –
<i>non sum Andraemone notior caballo.</i>	yet I am not better known than the race-horse Andraemon.

(Mart. 10.9)

Hendecasyllable's prosodic features

Martial's adoption of the hendecasyllabic meter is a striking poetic choice, one that departs from the traditional hexameter-driven landscape that dominated Latin poetry in the first century CE. During this period, the (post-Catullan) hendecasyllable had the status of anti-dactylic form *par excellence*, a status that was exploited by Martial and Statius.¹⁰⁵

Hendecasyllables, originally Greek, underwent a transformation in Latin, where they became a vehicle of epigrammatic wit and brevity, especially in the hands of Martial. The majority of Martial's hendecasyllabic epigrams display one or more of the characteristics associated with the meter, namely wit, informality, and speed, and may be found in contexts of invective, lighthearted ridicule and complaint.¹⁰⁶

A few major prosodic features differentiate Martial's hendecasyllables from his dactylic verse – particularly dactylic hexameter. Firstly, Martial's hendecasyllable is more conversational than the dactyl, which tends to preserve the elevated, weighty cadence associated with dactylic verse.¹⁰⁷ The hendecasyllable is characterized by a greater regularity of accentuation, creating a predictable rhythm, whereas dactylic verse involves more variable stress patterns, as this meter by nature is governed by patterns of long and short syllables. The hendecasyllable thus accommodates the natural word-stress of Latin more easily than the dactylic meters, which often require artificial elongations or contractions of syllables to preserve quantitative rhythm. This is owed in part to the fact the hendecasyllable is a *syllabic* meter, while e.g. the dactyl is not. Secondly, unlike the dactylic hexameter, which relies heavily on a strong mid-line caesura to organize its rhythm, the hendecasyllable permits more fluid verse-end enjambment. Thirdly, in hendecasyllable, Martial often places caesurae after

¹⁰⁵ Morgan 2004, 18; the rise of syllabic poetry, owed in part to the role of ictus and its interaction with stress-accent in syllabic poetry, reflects that Latin poetry may need to be appreciated as colometric rather than metric.

¹⁰⁶ Watson 2006, 293; 295.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

the fifth or sixth syllable,¹⁰⁸ reinforcing a conversational tone rather than the stately divisions characteristic of the dactyl. This might have to do with the *quality* of the syllable *before* this caesura:¹⁰⁹ in the Latin hexameter, the penthemimeral caesura occurs after an insolvable long syllable, which inevitably clashes with the ictus, something which does *not* happen in the hendecasyllable.

Martial's hendecasyllables present a rhythm that is simultaneously stable and swift.¹¹⁰ Their rhythm derives from the metrical ictus that falls on syllables 1,3,6,8 and 10, foregrounding the penultimate stress of Latin words.¹¹¹ Their speed and predictability make them ideal for short, punchy statements. This regular rhythm, however, also creates opportunities for strategic disruption, namely the insertion of unexpected syntactic breaks, enjambment, or metrical incongruities.¹¹² When carefully deployed, these can enhance humorous affect by undermining reader expectations, which allows Martial to exploit both the natural expectations of the hendecasyllable and its capacity for delayed resolution to manipulate comic timing.

Noteworthy is the lack of elision in Martial's hendecasyllables: the majority of his poems are free from instances of elision.¹¹³ Elision is a means to artificially play with pace and weight, i.e. change the way the poem is articulated. This is virtually redundant in the case of syllabic meters, which are focused on syllable count rather than syllable length, i.e. the pace and weight of each syllable within the metrical foot on which quantitative meters are based. The lack of elision in hendecasyllable reflects its less elevated and more direct nature compared to dactylic verse, where elision *does* more frequently occur. Martial's hendecasyllable tends to preserve clear word boundaries, contributing to the sharp, epigrammatic quality of his poetry.

Rhythm and rhetoric: Martial's hendecasyllable in practice

Martial's hendecasyllables are typically longer than two lines.¹¹⁴ Since I presented almost exclusively monodistichs in the analysis of the elegiac, it seems only just to cover several short hendecasyllables to support my claims – namely: the hendecasyllable is more conversational compared to the dactyl and elegiac due to the interaction between ictus and accent; the hendecasyllable is based on regularity in its syllable count rather than length,

¹⁰⁸ Morgan 2018, 138.

¹⁰⁹ I, again, would like to thank R.J.J. Blankenborg for this notion.

¹¹⁰ Morgan 2010, 60.

¹¹¹ Duffel 2013, 24.

¹¹² Raven 1965, 139-40.

¹¹³ Garrod 1906, 90; Watson 2006, 293.

¹¹⁴ Williams 2005, 66. The epigram naturally falls into two halves, the first explaining the situation, the second providing subjective commentary, a structure familiarized in the analysis of the elegiac.

which facilitates strategic disruption; verse-end enjambment is accommodated more easily in the hendecasyllable. I will, however, analyze several longer hendecasyllables, to better represent Martial's usual hendecasyllable. This in part has to do with the use of vocative names as a recurring element in his shorter poems, the use of which I have thoroughly analyzed for the elegiac. Since vocative names play a less vital role in longer hendecasyllables, I ought to showcase these longer hendecasyllables to accurately represent Martial's hendecasyllabic corpus. The selection process is identical to that of the elegiac poems.¹¹⁵

Et iudex petit et petit patronus.

And the judge asks for money, and the patron asks for it!

Solvas censeo, Sexte, creditori.

You should pay back, I think, Sextus, your creditor.

(Mart. 2.13)

The first line opens with the spondaic¹¹⁶ */Et iudex/*, a weighty beginning that mimics the seriousness or repetition of formal, legal procedures. This slow opening foot contrasts with the following choriamb */(Iud)ex petit et/*, whose short syllables¹¹⁷ quicken the tempo, mirroring the repeated, even aggressive, action of */petit/*. The repetition of */petit/* is rhythmically reinforced since both instances of this verb are scanned identically (long-short). The recurrence of */petit/* across two feet is not only syntactically insistent but rhythmically emphatic, a hammering repetition that Martial enforces through meter as much as through diction. The final cretic */patronus/* closes the line with a clean, symmetrical cadence. It offers prosodic balance after the central acceleration by the choriamb */(Iud)ex petit et/*. There occurs only a minor penthemimeral caesura; the lack of a strong caesura produces a continuous forward movement. A noteworthy aspect of this line is its assonance of vowels “e” and “i”, open, unstressed vowels which propel the line forward. The final two vowels, “o” and “u”, round the line acoustically, complementing the deceleration in the last two feet.

The second line, of course, also opens with a spondee, which is again followed by dactyl. The metrical pattern spondee-dactyl in the verse-initial positions, provides lightening after the initial heavy spondaic foot, and juxtaposes firmness and fluidity. A pause occurs after */censeo/*, subtly dividing the line rhythmically and creating a semantic and rhythmic pivot Martial can exploit for rhetorical punch.¹¹⁸ */Sexte/* is rhythmically abrupt. Positioned mid-line, it receives prosodic emphasis via placement and disyllabic compactness. The iambic shape adds sharpness, especially as a vocative, and its rhythm breaks the fluidity of */censeo/*, generating a small jolt that functions as a primer and as an anchor for the humorous twist. The line ends with the critic in */creditori/*. Martial manipulates the weight and velocity of each foot, starting heavy, quickening in the middle, and landing with poised cretics in */patronus/*

¹¹⁵ See chapter “Haughty hexameters and perturbing pentameters: how Martial exploits the elegiac”.

¹¹⁶ Per usual in Martial, see note 10.

¹¹⁷ Of course */(Iud)ex/* is long here.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Williams 2005, 66.

and */creditori/*. He balances metrical variation with the underlying consistency of the hendecasyllabic line to craft a prosody that is energetic, compressed, and rhythmically sharp.

Quod nulli calicem tuum propinas By not passing your cup to *anyone*,
humane facis, Horme, non superbe. you act *humanely*, Hormus, not arrogantly.

(Mart. 2.15)

This epigram is simply structured, consisting of a single sentence which falls into two parts, an adverbial clause introduced by */Quod/* comprising the entire first line, and the main clause, itself divided into two parts by the vocative */Horme/*.¹¹⁹ The first line begins with */Quod nulli/*, forming a spondaic first foot. This, together with the long in */nulli/*, slows the onset of the line and brings metrical gravity to the opening. The trisyllabic shape of */calicem/* and its vowel alternation make it ideal prosodically, bringing metrical elasticity and a sense of lightness after the heaviness of the spondee. */[T]uum propinas/* contains a pair of clean trochees, allowing for regular rhythm in the second half of the line. However, */tuum/* has potential for phonetic ambiguity in vowel length depending on performance (though here clearly long-short). The double trochaic structure serves to stabilize the line's latter portion, which is ultimately achieved by the critic, a prosodically satisfying cadence that enables the line's closure. In this line, no strong pause occurs in the hepthemimeral position, promoting the fluidity and pacing of the line in its medial section.

The second line, again, starts heavily with a spondee followed by a long in */humane/*. The choriamb in */facis, Horme/* relieves the tension of the languid, long opening, and drives the line forward. Importantly, this structure is a prosodic pivot, straddling the metrical center and introducing the only pauses in the line, marked syntactically by a vocative. This mid-line vocative */Horme/* splits the line into two halves, and the rhetorical break mimics a metrical caesura and functions as a prosodic hinge, redirecting the rhythm. The final two feet */(Hor)me, non superbe/*, a trochee and a cretic, are metrically empathic. The contrast of the iambic stress on */non/* and the rise-fall-rise structure of the cretic produces a rhythmic counterpoint that marks the end of the line, and here, the end of the poem. The final foot's rhythm thus allows Martial to land the line with full metrical resonance.

¹¹⁹ Williams 2005, 76. On the */quod-sed-non/* structure, see Schiedslag 1977, 65-68 cf. Williams 2005, 59; Hormus' action appears arrogant but is actually considerate in view of bad oral hygiene, owing perhaps to sexual endeavors. Williams 2005, 76 states that, though the specific cause of Hormus' supposed bad oral hygiene is not stated in the poem, the experienced hearer and reader of Martial's or more broadly speaking Roman invective is familiar with the trope of supposing oral sexual practices as the joke. Martial considers passive homosexuality disreputable in a mature citizen cf. Sullivan 1979, 294; n10, which names certain poems in which this passive homosexuality occurs. Examples from Martial's corpus are many, among which the Postumus poems, and 12.91, in which Magulla refuses to drink out of the same cup as her husband, but she shares a bed and a male prostitute with him.

<i>Sotae filia clinici, Labulla,</i>	Daughter of doctor Sotas, Labulla,
<i>deserto sequeris Clytum marito</i>	you abandoned your husband and persue Clytus
<i>et donas et amas: ἔχεις ἀσώτως.</i>	you give presents and love him: you are a sot.

(Mart. 4.9)

The poem starts spondaic, a heavy, lethargic opening which adds rhythmic gravity and formality to the situation. The choriambic, and the following trochees with their alternation of long-short quicken the line. A syntactically marked pause occurs after */clinici/*, dissecting the line to make */Labulla/* a prominent rhythmic close, after which an end-line enjambment occurs. In the second line, the same metric structure occurs, with a minor mid-line caesura after */sequeris/*. The metric delay of */Clytum/* and */marito/* until after this caesura adds tension and comic surprise. The third line is particularly punchy due to the paratactic repetition of */et ... et/*.¹²⁰ The strong pause after */amas/* makes the bathos to a Greek register more crude, facilitating comic disruption. The two vital terms for the joke¹²¹ are placed in the initial and final positions of the poem, which are both metrically prominent, and the terms */clinici/* and */Clytum/* both occur juxtaposed to a pause.¹²²

<i>Addixti, Labiene, tres agellos:</i>	You've sold, Labienus, three fields:
<i>emisti, Labiene, tres cinaedos:</i>	you've bought, Labienus, three concubines:
<i>pedicas, Labiene, tres agellos.</i>	you plant your seed, Labienus, in three fields.

(Mart. 12.16)

This epigram is patterned in threes: three lines, three vocatives (of the same name) positioned directly after the verb and before the object, and three instances of the number three. Each line starts with a molossus-shaped verb, followed by the vocative */Labiene/*, a construction which makes the opening of the line deliberately weighty and sets up anaphoric and sonic parallelism. The caesura after */Labiene/* primes the audience for a joke that is constituted by the object of the verb. The crude bathos from a register of trade¹²³ to one of sexual endeavor, gives a new semantic dimension to */agellos/*, a word that has already appeared rather unobtrusively in the first line.¹²⁴ The rhythmic stability across all three lines reinforces the

¹²⁰ See also note 123.

¹²¹ The joke, namely the interplay between the Greek name Sotas and the Greek verb ἀσώτew cf. Moreno Soldevila 2006, 149; 151.

¹²² The bathos to Greek is primed semantically by the terms */clinici/* cf. κλινικός, and the Greek name */Clytum/* cf. Moreno Soldevila 2006, 150-151.

¹²³ */[E]mere/* supplies the logical opposite of */addicere/*, priming the audience to expect some conventional exchange for the */agelli/*, where this is undermined by the introduction of */cinaedos/* in the second line cf. Bowie 1988, 94.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

poem's tightly controlled formalism. In this poem, the joke is facilitated partly by its structure of "A has sold B; A has bought C; ∴ B = C", which obviously is intentionally fallacious.¹²⁵ The metric structure underscores this syntactical structure by making the line more lethargic in the verse-initial positions, where Martial places the joke's operative term, in this case the bathic verb */pedicas/*, in a position of rhythmic prominence. Verse-final positions are highlighted by means of lethargic longs, to put focus on the object of the verb, crucially on */agellos/* in line three.¹²⁶

<i>Tinctis murice vestibus quod omni</i>	Though clothes a-changed by the conch, each
<i>et nocte utitur et die Philaenis,</i>	night she wears, and each day, Philaenis,
<i>non est ambitiosa nec superba:</i>	she isn't ambitious or highhearted:
<i>delectatur odore, non colore.</i>	She <i>loves</i> the stench, not the blench.

(Mart. 9.62)

The same rhythmic pattern is observed as in the previous poems: a spondee followed by a choriamb, whose lightness subverts the slow and weighty start to provide metrical elasticity to the central part of the line. Each line ends with a cretic to give rhythmic closure. The phrase */quod omni/* is semantically incomplete, creating tension and conversely rhythmic propulsion for the audience that expects and desires a resolution which Martial withholds until the second line. The */et ... et/-*structure¹²⁷ creates a prosodic framing device and balances the rhythm symmetrically. The evenness of the rhythm of the second line mimics the continuous action of use both day and night, paralleling the habitual repetition in content, which might be relevant to the joke.¹²⁸ In the third line, */non est/* is abrupt and spondaic, drawing strong emphasis to the line's denial. */[A]mbitiosa/* is metrically elastic since it is a trisyllable, and it helps anchor the central metrical rhythm with */nec superba/* repeating the length pattern and stress of the earlier phrase. The strong spondaic opening of */delectatur/* draws attention to the word, appropriate for the joke. A syntactically marked pause occurs after */odore/*, drawing attention

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ For sexual euphemisms to do with agriculture in which */ager/*, */agellos/* etc. are used for */cunnus/* and */culus/*, see Adams 1982, 24; 84; 113; Buchheit 1960, 223f.

¹²⁷ In the elegiac, one might expect */nocte dieque/* cf. Hendriksén 1998 Vol. 2, 63.

¹²⁸ The joke in this poem is very layered. What seems clear, is */murex/* had an olfactory connotation, which was probably familiar to the Roman audience cf. López-Cañete Quiles 2019, 82. The smell refers to the smell of urine, a substance used to purple-die robes. The use of */murice/* perhaps primes the joke semantically, since the audience knows of the associated smell. The reason why Philaenis loves this smell on her person is reason for debate: it may be to hide personal aura cf. Lilja 1972, 135; López-Cañete Quiles 2019, 74. – a view that becomes problematic owing to */et nocte et die/*; or she wears the stench as a form of sexual depravity owing to her being a */cunnilingus/* cf. López-Cañete Quiles 2019, 70-72, a view that is extended to her being a lesbian cf. Butrica 2005, 267. This view attaches a special connection to the purple of */murice/* and */cunnum lingere/* in the Greek verb φοινκίζειν cf. López-Cañete Quiles 2019, 83; n60, and suggests a hint of */cunnilingere/* and sexual depravity: the ablatives in the fourth line both end in */ore/*, the ablative of */os/* cf. ibid. These conjunctions occur right before a pause, emphasizing them.

to the term, and perhaps, specifically to the conjunction of the ablative.¹²⁹ This pause shifts the rhythm to initiate a closing contrast. A similar effect is achieved by the prosodically distinct assonance in */odore, non colore/*. The cretic is heavily stressed here, to carry the weight of the moral punchline.

<i>Tantum dat tibi Roma basiorum</i>	So many kisses gave Rome to you
<i>post annos modo quindecim reverso</i>	now you've returned after fifteen years
<i>quantum Lesbia non dedit Catullo.</i> ¹³⁰	as Lesbia never gave Catullus.
<i>Te vicinia tota, te pilosus</i>	The entire neighborhood, the farmer who kisses
<i>hircoso premit osculo colonus;</i>	with lips of a buck presses upon you;
<i>hinc instat tibi textor, inde fullo,</i>	here comes the weaver, there the fuller.
<i>hinc sutor modo pelle basiata,</i>	here the cobbler who's just kissed his leather
<i>hinc menti dominus periculosi,</i> ¹³¹	here the owner of a dangerous chin,
<i>(†hinc† dexiocholus, inde lippus)</i> ¹³²	(here the cripple, there the teary-eyed)
<i>fellatorque recensque cunnilingus.</i>	and the sucker and he who just licked a cunt.
<i>iam tanti tibi non fuit redire.</i>	So it wasn't worthwhile to come back.

(Mart. 12.59)

The same verse-initial structure of spondee-choriamb occurs in the entire poem, a regularity which allows Martial his room for exploitation. The poem contains noteworthy assonance (*/tantum dat ... Roma basiorum/*, */post annos modo ... reverso/*, */hircoso ... osculo colonus/*), facilitating a light pacing which is subverted by denser consonant clusters, phonetically burdensome terms (e.g. */pilosus/*, */basiata/*, */dexiocholus/*, */cunnilingus/*) that slow the rhythm. These words feel metrically labored, undercutting the amorous setting rhythmically. The repetition of the verse-initial spondaic rhythm is underscored by the use of the term */hinc/* in three (or four, depending on the reading of *†hinc† dexiocholus, inde lippus/*). This drives the forward motion of the line while an accumulation effect occurs. The assonance again occurs in the final line. The jokey term */redire/* falls perfectly into a cretic that contrasts with the build-up. The placement of */non fuit/* directly before the joke breaks the rising tension and produces a metrical flattening. There occur hardly any strong pauses in the verse, only before */inde/*, to emphasize a contrast with the verse-initial */hinc/*; this deliberate suppression of pauses adds to the cumulative tension produced by lines 4-9. The penthemimeral caesura after */tibi/*

¹²⁹ See note 122.

¹³⁰ Catullus is echoed by, of course, the names Catullus and Lesbia, but also by the phrase */da basia/*, which Catullus introduced in his 5.7 cf. Kurmally 1971, 54; for the unexpected positive connotation of these kisses, 56-7.

¹³¹ A reference to the skin disease *mentagra* cf. Bowie 1988, 285.

¹³² There is debate about the appropriate reading of this line cf. Diggle and Goodyear 1972, 993; Bowie 1988, 285-7, who talks about the possible insertion of a vocative (*/Rex/*) for metrical need and the reading of */dexiocholus/*.

in the final line creates a rhythmic deceleration and break, which anchors the punchline, also by deflation of the cumulating effect. This deflating effect might be enforced by the reintroduction of assonance (*/iam tanti tibi ... fuit redire/*) which occurred *before* the cumulating lines 6-10.

Martial's Choliamb

*Proinde aut rumpe iam moras aut cave ne
eosdem istos libellos, quos tibi hendecasyllabi
blanditiis elicere non possunt, convicio scizontes
extorqueant.*

(Plin. *Ep.* 5.10.2)

So bestir yourself, or else beware!
Those booklets, yes, *those*, which my
hendecasyllables, with their flattering words
were not able to elicit from you, my
choliambics will aggressively *torture* out of
you!

Choliamb prosodic features

The choliambic meter, also known as scazon or *versus hipponacteus*, is a variant of the iambic trimeter in which the final iamb is replaced with either a spondee or a trochee. This facilitates a *limping* effect that subverts rhythmical expectations. It has been suggested by Demetrius, that the sixth-century BCE poet Hipponax, the supposed inventor of this metrical form, “because he wanted to insult the people he hated, made the meter lame, he made it *limp* instead of making it walk straight, he made it arhythmic, and thus suited for harshness and abuse (δεινότητι πρέπον καὶ λοιδορία)”.¹³³ This inherent aggressive character is inseparable from its speed.¹³⁴ The metrical distortion in the final metron was accordingly regarded by the Greeks as “a deformed or mutilated version of the standard iambic line.”¹³⁵ It has consequently been suggested that the choliamb “seems to have been devised by Hipponax to suggest by his halting lines the distorted subjects with which they dealt – the vices and perversions of humanity”;¹³⁶ that is, the form itself was conceived in mimetic alignment with its content, designed specifically for contexts of abuse and ridicule.¹³⁷

Following Hipponax, both Greek and Roman poets adopted the choliamb for a range of literary purposes, though its association with invective and polemic remained a defining feature. The Roman poet Catullus, for instance, hardly ever employed the choliamb, but when he did, it was almost exclusively within contexts of verbal attack – the principal exception

¹³³ Cf. Demetrius, *Eloc.* 301, 2.

¹³⁴ Cf. Morgan 2010, 149.

¹³⁵ Morgan 2000, 101-2; Quinn 1970, xxxiii; West 1982, 41; Watson 2006, 286n9.

¹³⁶ Quinn 1970, xxxiii.

¹³⁷ West 1987, 30.

being his *Carmen 31* on Sirmio, which adopts a more tranquil and lyrical tone.¹³⁸ In a similar vein, Martial demonstrates a measured but deliberate use of the choliambic meter. Although he composes relatively few choliambic epigrams, but 75 in his total corpus,¹³⁹ those he does write tend to preserve the genre's traditional associations with abuse or bitter complaint.¹⁴⁰ Martial's choliambics often target specific individuals or types, deploying the meter's jarring rhythm to underscore his sharp satire and moral scrutiny. One might reasonably expect, given the obscene and aggressive subject matter of Hipponax' poetry, that later practitioners of choliambic meter, such as Martial and Catullus would likewise employ the choliamb in sexually explicit or generally obscene contexts. However, this is far from the case. Despite their general openness to obscenity in other meters, both poets hardly use the choliamb to such ends.¹⁴¹ The meter thus retains its historical connection to vituperative, but not necessarily to obscene speech.

The hallmark of the choliambic meter is its prosodic dissonance. Where iambic meters are generally associated with regularity and conversational cadence, the choliamb subverts this by derailing the rhythm at its conclusion. This creates an effect of deliberate awkwardness, as if the poem trips just as it comes to a close. In practice, as has been suggested, and most noteworthy so by Quinn 1970, this rhythmic lameness mirrors the moral or physical deformity of the poem's target, aligning the form of the verse with its function.¹⁴² This formal feature has profound tonal implications. It imbues the poem with a sense of derision and sarcasm. The abruptness of the final metron often echoes the content's brutality – insults land harder, judgments feel final and irrefutable. The meter's final drag on the last syllables mimics the sneering intonation of a moral denunciation, reinforcing the poet's contempt for his subject.

One of the defining features of Latin verse is its reliance on syllable quantity rather than stress. However, Martial's verse, like that of many post-Augustan poets, often exploits natural word accent for rhetorical effect. In the choliambic meter, this interplay becomes particularly complex. The meter's subversion of the expected iamb at the end not only distorts the quantitative structure but also throws off the alignment between natural word stress and metrical ictus. In practice, this misalignment enhances the choliamb's sense of unease and irregularity. Whereas the hendecasyllabic often sees stress and ictus align in a way that feels rhythmically pleasing and natural, choliambics resist such harmony.¹⁴³ Martial uses this tension to heighten the meter's aggressiveness. Stress clashes with meter at critical junctures, drawing attention to key insults or judgments. In this way, the choliamb's prosody becomes a tool for syntactic emphasis and tonal intensification.

¹³⁸ On which see Morgan 2010, 125-130.

¹³⁹ This includes the epigram in the preface to Book 1. A list of all 76 choliambics can be found in Raven 1965, 181, who has mistakenly included the hendecasyllabic 3.35.

¹⁴⁰ Watson 2006, 288.

¹⁴¹ Only 17 percent of Martial's choliambics contain obscenity, which means only 8.5 percent of his obscene poetry is choliambic cf. Watson 2006, 292n33.

¹⁴² Cf. Quinn 1970, xxxiii.

¹⁴³ Abbott 1994, 131.

Martial strategically places caesurae within choliambic lines to reinforce or subvert expectation. Caesurae regularly¹⁴⁴ occur after the fifth or seventh syllable, the penthemimeral and the hepthemimeral positions respectively, where they can divide the line into two uneven parts. This placement allows for a momentary pause before the final metron, heightening the dramatic impact of the closing *limp*. This pause serves multiple functions. Syntactically, it allows Martial to set up a punchline or key piece of invective in the line's final phrase. Prosodically, caesura helps to foreground the metrical rupture by juxtaposing a moment of stability with the limping close. When used ironically, the caesura may even coincide with a humorous or misleading statement, only to be undercut by the final word or phrase, which is metrically and semantically weighted.

A notable feature of Martial's hendecasyllables is his sparing use of elision.¹⁴⁵ This stands in contrast to the more elision-heavy dactylic hexameter, where such devices often serve to maintain quantitative rhythm or smooth out difficult phrasing. In choliambics, however, elision is somewhat more frequent. The harsher, more aggressive tone of the meter tolerates – and even benefits from – the compression and rapid articulation that elision enables. Martial uses elision in the choliamb to quicken the pace in the line's first two cola, thereby enhancing the sense of acceleration toward the final disruptive foot. The sudden halt of the last metron is thus rendered even more striking by contrast with the preceding fluidity. Furthermore, Martial frequently avoids elision at the line end, preserving the clarity of the final word and maximizing its rhetorical impact. This contributes to the poem's epigrammatic force, allowing the last word to strike with full phonetic and semantic weight.

A comparison with Martial's hendecasyllabic and dactylic hexameter lines further illuminates the unique features of the choliambic meter. The hendecasyllable is used by Martial for wit, levity, and urbane critique. It is metrically smooth, accentually regular, and often enjambed lightly, contributing to its sense of conversational flow. The dactylic hexameter, on the other hand, maintains its epic */gravitas/* even in Martial's hands, lending itself to high-style parody or mock-heroic treatment. In contrast, the choliambic meter is overtly confrontational. Its rhythm impedes the flow rather than facilitating it. It denies the reader the pleasure of smooth closure, substituting instead a jarring limp that demands attention. Where the hendecasyllable sparkles with popularism, and the hexameter resonates with formal grandeur, the choliamb stammers and stutters. Each meter brings a different set of tonal possibilities, and Martial chooses with precision.

Limping Verse, Cutting Wit: Prosodic Strategies in Martial's Choliambics

As previously stated, there are significantly fewer choliambic epigrams (only 76) in Martial's corpus than there are elegiacs and hendecasyllables.¹⁴⁶ This, by extension, means that the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ See page 19.

¹⁴⁶ See Raven 1965, 181; note 137.

range for my selection is equally limited. I have curated a selection of six choliambic poems which are satiric and invective, and which contain noteworthy prosodic and rhythmic exploitation, to demonstrate how Martial uses the idiosyncrasies of the choliamb – namely, its limping close; its impeding rather than facilitating metrical scheme; its use of pauses, most notably in the penthemimeral and heptemimeral caesural positions, to highlight the limping close; its (more frequent) use of elision – to prime the joke with full effect. The selection process is identical to that of the elegiac and the hendecasyllabic poems.

Oculo Philaenis semper altero plorat. From one eye Philaenis always weeps.
quo fiat istud quaeritis¹⁴⁷ modo? lusca est. How can this be, you ask? She has *one eye!*

(Mart. 4.65)

The first five metra follow a consistent iambic rhythm, where ictus and accent align, reinforcing a regular cadence in the line; this rhythm is subverted by the trochaic */plorat/*¹⁴⁸, a dissonant final gesture. The lexical weight of */Philaenis/*¹⁴⁹ and */altero/* falls on naturally long or accented syllables, adding to rhythmic heaviness mid-line. There occurs no strong pause in the first line, only a subtle one after */semper/*; the alternation of the long and the short creates a smooth rhythm, which hurries the line forward.

In the second line, the pause directly after the penultimate */modo/* primes the audience for a resolution by reserving the entire final limp, which is syntactically and prosodically marked by this pause, for the point.¹⁵⁰ The joke is further highlighted by this limping effect, facilitated by the spondaic */lusca est/* – whose metric weight force attention –, and perhaps by the elision that occurs between these words. The assonantal clarity of this line enhances its scornful directness.

Habet Africanus¹⁵¹ miliens,¹⁵² tamen captat. The African has *a hundred million*, yet he wants more!
Fortuna multis dat nimis, satis nulli.¹⁵³ Fortune gives many too much, but enough to none.

¹⁴⁷ For similar questions, see Siedschlag 1977, 19-28, especially 26.

¹⁴⁸ The verb */plorat/* is typically not used in the sense of “weeping” cf. Moreno Soldevila 2006, 451, which undermines the interpretation of Watson 1982, 260 that her bad eye is continuously suppurating.

¹⁴⁹ On the name */Philaenis/* cf. Moreno Soldevila 2006, 450-1, which states that Martial uses this name in satirical contexts.

¹⁵⁰ A similar effect occurs in e.g. 1.10.4 *//quid ergo in illa petitur et placet? tussit.//*, though obviously no elision occurs in */tussit/*, and in 6.26.3, which I will cover on page 35.

¹⁵¹ A respectable cognomen cf. Bowie 1995, 78; its only other use in Martial refers to the Scipiones cf. Mart. 4.4.15.

¹⁵² Bowie 1995, 78 states that there is an ellipsis of */(miliens) centens milia sestertium/* cf. Mart. 1.99.1 */non plenum modo vicies (centena milium sestertium) habebas/*. It is to be understood as an enormous fortune, since the lavish Trimalchio is said to have a fortune of thirty million sestertii cf. Petr. 71.12.

¹⁵³ On (the paradox of) this mock-*sententia* and comparable *sententia* from the Greek and Latin corpora, see Bowie 1995, 78.

(Mart. 12.10)

This poem is neatly divided into two parts: a sentence explaining a the background information to a *sententia* – itself twofold, namely Africanus having a fortune and him still practicing the morally dubious *captatio* – and a paradoxical *sententia*, also twofold: a strong pause splits the final metrical foot from the previous two, parallel to the split in the first line.¹⁵⁴

The first line has a regular, smooth iambic rhythm, save for the final verse-final characteristic limp, which subverts this rhythm. A strong caesura occurs after */miliens/*, syntactically separating the situation and its concession. This allows the concession to fall entirely into the final foot. The line contains short, clipped words */habet/*, */tamen/*, which increase the pace of the rhythm. This ultimately enhances the limping effect of */captat/*.

The second line has the same rhythmic structure as the first. Again, a strong caesura occurs, after */nimis/*, setting up the aphoristic *pointe*: the contrast between too much and not enough. Here, */nulli/* lands with full force owing to its weighty limp. The line contains many nasal consonants and assonance of “a” and “i”, which give balance and haste to the line’s rhythm, which is subverted in the verse-final position.

Facere in Lyciscam, Paule, me iubes versus, To write verses against Lycisca, Paulas, you ask of me,
quibus illa lectis rubeat et sit irata. so that when she reads them, she’ll blush and be *mad!*
*o Paule, malus es: irrumare vis solus.*¹⁵⁵ Paulus, you villain: you want to mouth-fuck her alone!

(Mart. 4.17)

Immediately obvious is the elision in the first line */facere in/*. A misalignment of ictus and accent occurs in */facere in/*, where ictus occurs on the first, accent on the second syllable, and in */Lyciscam/*¹⁵⁶, where the same occurs. The placement of */me iubes/*, partly in the second and partly in the third metron, slows the line, as does the insertion of the vocative */Paule/*¹⁵⁷. The caesura after the vocative delays the resolution, i.e. the object, of */facere/*, as does the insertion of */me iubes/*. The verse-final */versus/* is double-long, thereby deviating from an ordinary iambic trimeter; it ends with a weighty closing cadence. There is no verse-end enjambment, since the first and second line both represent a syntactically and lexically complete entity. In the second line, there again is misalignment of ictus and accent, save for the limping close */irata/*, which highlights the limp. The verbs */rubeat/* and */sit irata/* are both prosodically dense and metrically arranged for emphasis. In the final line, ictus and accent

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ On the debate on the reading of */irrumare vis/*, see Moreno Soldevila 2006, 197-8.

¹⁵⁶ The name suggests the bearer is a prostitute cf. Giegengack 1969, 91, though the name is not exclusive to prostitutes cf. Ferguson 1987, 142. The term */irrumare/* of course infers that we are dealing with a prostitute.

¹⁵⁷ On the name Paulus, see Moreno Soldevila 2006, 197. It seems clear he is a patronus, inferred by */versus facere/* and */iubes/*, a term appropriate for a patron cf. *ibid.*

again misalign. A heavy pause occurs after /*es*/, to split the line into a statement /*malus es*/ and its explanation. A crude bathos to a sexual registers is observed directly after this pause.

*Periclitatur capite*¹⁵⁸ *Sotades*¹⁵⁹ *noster*. He risks his head, our Sotades.
reum putatis esse Sotaden? non est. “He is a criminal”, you think? No, he isn’t.
arrigere desit posse Sotades: lingit. Sotades can’t get it up: he licks.

(Mart. 6.26)

This poem has a similar structure as the hendecasyllabic 12.16:¹⁶⁰ Three times a name occurs in a metrically prominent position, which, according to Schiedschlag has a monotonic and metrically enforcing effect: *Die dreifache Setzung des Namens des Verspotteten an metrisch identischer Position wirkt in ihrer Monotonie besonders eindringlich.*¹⁶¹

In the first line, we observe rhythmic regularity, save for the subverting /*noster*/ in the final metron. The mid-line caesura after /*capite*/ is mild, but it introduces a minor pause which splits the line into two semantic halves, one being the verb and its object, the other being the subject of the verb. The second line poses a rhetorical question and its undercutting question in the verse-final limp. Here, the monosyllabic /*non*/ occupies a stressed position juxtaposed directly to the pause after /*Sotaden*/. The limping ending /*non est*/ slows the line to a halt, a deliberate flat finality which delivers the punch not by force but by negation. It primes the audience for a resolution after the rhetorical question: if Sotades isn’t a criminal, then what *is* he and why is he risking his head? In the third line, the audience is immediately faced with a crude bathos to a sexual lexical register, facilitated by the verb /*arrigere*/. The acceleration in /*arrigere desit posse Sotades*/, caused by the iambic meter, produces a sense of a rushed buildup, which the pause before the limping /*lingit*/ arrests abruptly. This verse-final resolution, as in 4.65, is reserved for the verse-final limp. Thus, the limp is again marked syntactically and prosodically.

¹⁵⁸ These words are both technical legal terms cf. Grewing 1997, 200, but their ambiguity, i.e. their reference to the impotence of Sotades and his being a /*cunnilingus*/, is only conferred in the final line, particularly by the syntactically and prosodically highlighted /*lingit*/.

¹⁵⁹ On the name /*Sotades*/, see Grewing 1997, 200-1.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 200.

¹⁶¹ Siedschlag 1977, 89.

<i>Bis Cotta</i> ¹⁶² <i>soleas perdidisse se questus,</i>	<i>Cotta</i> complained he twice lost his slippers
<i>dum neglegentem ducit ad pedes vernam,</i>	as he brought along a careless attendant,
<i>qui solus inopi praestat et facit turbam,</i>	who alone fulfils his needs and makes up his staff,
<i>excogitavit—homo sagax et astutus—</i>	(so) he thought out – smart and clever man as he is –
<i>ne facere posset tale saepius damnum:</i> ¹⁶³	how such a terrible thing would not ever happen again:
<i>excalceatus</i> ¹⁶⁴ <i>ire coepit ad cenam.</i>	he started to go to dinners <i>barefoot</i> .

(Mart. 12.87)

In this poem, we observe the same iambic rhythmical pattern, with the expected exception of the verse-final disyllable which facilitates the limp. In the first line, */perdidisse/*, a syncopated perfect infinitive formation, is metrically helpful in supplying the iambic rhythm. Words such as */neglegentem/* in line two and */excogitavit/* serve a similar function. After both of these words, a penthemimeral caesura occurs, the second being more pronounced and serving as strong rhetorical and syntactic break, helping isolate the apposition. A mild penthemimeral caesura occurs after */posset/* in line five; a mild hepthemimeral caesura after */praestat/* in line three. In the final line, there is a mild penthemimeral caesura after */excalceatus/*, a word which partly conveys the point, though the joke is incomplete without */cenam/*. Martial strategically delays this word until the verse-final, limp position to draw attention to the term.

¹⁶² On the name */Cotta/*, see Bowie 1988, 377. It's up to the audience to separate Cotta's truth from the real truth, and to infer the real cause of his not having his slippers, namely his poverty: he has but one slave – whom he tries to blame for the forgetting of the slippers –, and at that a */verna/*, the least valuable category of slave cf. *ibid.* 335; 378.

¹⁶³ The phrase */damnum facere/* is ironic, being the technical opposite of */lucrum facere/* cf. *ibid.* 379.

¹⁶⁴ Such a term cf. ἀνυπόδητος was an epithet one might expect to find describing austere philosophers such as Socrates, who did not usually wear shoes, but he did so when attending dinners cf. Symp. 173B/174A, or hard-living Spartans. On this, see Bowie 1988, 380.

<p><i>Hic, qui libellis praegravem gerit laevam,</i> <i>notariorum quem premit chorus levis,</i> <i>qui codicillis hinc et inde prolatis</i> <i>epistulisque commodat gravem voltum</i> <i>similis Catoni Tullioque Brutoque,¹⁶⁵</i> <i>exprimere, Rufe, fidiculae licet cogant,</i> <i>have Latinum, χαῖρε non potest Graecum.¹⁶⁶</i> <i>Si fingere istud me putas, salutemus.¹⁶⁷</i></p>	<p><i>To him, who with booklets has laden his heavy left hand</i> <i>whom a smooth-cheeked chorus of notaries presses,</i> <i>who on notebooks, brought from here and there,</i> <i>and on letters fixes his stern gaze,</i> <i>similar to Cato, and Tullius and Brutus,</i> <i>I want to say, Rufus: even if he was forced under torture,</i> <i>he could not say ‘Hello’ in Latin or ‘Greetings’ in Greek.</i> <i>If you think I’m making this up, let’s go greet him.</i></p>
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(Mart. 5.51)

The first line is laden with long syllables, owing to the longs *by position* in */libellis/* and the double-long in */praegravem/*. The line ends with */laevam/*, a spondee rather than an iamb, i.e. the choliambic substitution in the verse-final position. The second line alternates longs and shorts more frequently, thus being less lethargic than the first. The final word */levis/* is prosodically ironic: it means ‘light’, but it is spondaic; the word */premit/* is equally heavy, facilitating an ironic tension between sound and sense. A light penthemimeral pause follows */codicillis/* in the third line, splitting the metrically symmetrical but rhythmically unsettled */hinc et inde/*. The metrical unity of the line is subverted by the spondaic ending */prolatis/*. An end-line enjambment occurs after this descriptive intermezzo. In the fourth line, a strong pause is enforced after */epistulisque/* in the penthemimeral position. */[G]rave voltum/* is metrically heavy, ending in a spondee. The names in the fifth line create a tricolon with ascending weight. A minor pause occurs after */Catoni/*, creating tension: something will happen, in this case an enumeration. */Brutoque/* closes with a limp. As in the other lines, Martial uses a formal cadence in the first two metrical feet to build an expectation, only to subvert it in the final foot by deviating from the iambic metrical scheme.

The sixth line contains fascinating feats. Firstly, the apostrophic and semantically marked */Rufe/¹⁶⁸* is inserted disruptively mid-line, interrupting the rhythm. Secondly, the hard consonants “c” and “g” give a lurching, percussive effect to this spondaic close. The seventh

¹⁶⁵ These three are chosen primarily for their fame as reputable orators cf. Howell 1995, 136.

¹⁶⁶ There were many Greek-speaking people, among whom Romans, in Rome in Martial’s time, who might use a Greek greeting so as to speak their own language or appear fashionable cf. Howell 1995, 136. The name of the ‘victim’ is, quite unusually so, not stated in this epigram cf. *ibid.* 135, so it is unclear to which of the two categories the notary belongs.

¹⁶⁷ Though he does know the words, he does not say them owing to his surliness cf. Mart. 4.83.3.

¹⁶⁸ On this name, see Howell 1995, 136; cf. Mart. 1.61.9.

line contains a strong, syntactically marked pause after */Latinum/*, in this case to emphasizing the contrast between Latin and Greek. Code-switching occurs in *χαῖρε*, which is metrically jarring since it doesn't conform neatly to the expected Latin rhythm.¹⁶⁹ The verse-final */Graecum/* end heavily in a spondee. In the final line, Martial creates tension by delaying the jokey resolution to the verse-final position, in which the choliambic substitution occurs, locking the insult into place. Noteworthily, accent and ictus misalign in the limping */salutemus/*, adding on to the unsettling limp that defines the choliamb. In this poem, Martial matches prosody to his subject's pretensions: the self-supposed seriousness of the "victim" is echoed by spondaic weight, but undermined by the limping close.

//Ohe, iam satis est, ohe, libelle, iam pervenimus usque ad umbilicos//: a conclusion on Martial's choice of meter to prime humor

In this study, I proposed that Martial's choice of meter is a deliberate, stylistic choice, before situating Martial in the Catullan tradition. With several examples from his corpus, I have demonstrated that Martial uses the same tricks in multiple meter – such as the insertion of names to play with tempo, to use pauses, either mid-line or end-line to highlight certain lexical items. In this demonstration, I have tried to emphasize that each meter has its own idiosyncrasies, carrying distinct expectations of tone, rhythm and genre, which Martial can affirm or subvert for comic effect. It is, then, crucial to recognize that the *choice* for a certain idiosyncratic meter plays a significant role in shaping the comic effect. The hexameter, for instance, evokes the grandeur of epic tradition; deploying it for trivial, obscene, or mundane subject matter produces a dissonance that enhances humor through incongruity. The elegiac couplet, particularly with its bipartite structure and rhythmically curtailed pentameter, naturally facilitates reversal or punchline placement. Its very form encourages the audience to anticipate a rhetorical or affective shift in the second line. The hendecasyllable, often used for light, satirical, or erotic themes, fosters a rhythm of conversational elegance. Its compactness and rhythmic regularity make it ideal for witty or sharply turned observations, often allowing the joke to snap shut in the final beat. Meanwhile, the choliambic meter, intentionally *limping* with its final reversed foot, undermines rhythmic expectations at the close, amplifying tones of mockery, sarcasm, or discomfort. Martial's strategic selection of meter thus not only informs pacing and closure but also frames the type and texture of the humor. The joke lands not in spite of the meter, but through its tonal affordances and structural cues. Meter and its functional elements are thus powerful stylistic and rhetorical instruments that Martial deploys with surgical precision to control pacing, meaning, and most crucially, to prime humor.

¹⁶⁹ The Greek *χαῖρε* scans as long-short, where the choliamb accommodates long-long or short-long in this position. This way, *χαῖρε* can *literally* not be said within this Latin meter without being off-beat.

Cutting to the chase: a proposition

In analyzing Martial's use of meter across dactylic hexameter, elegiac couplet, and choliambic verse, one encounters an intriguing stylistic phenomenon: in virtually every poem, caesurae appear to act not merely as metrical features, but as crucial agents in the timing and structure of the joke. This observation raises a broader question: is it the meter itself or the strategic placement of words *around* the caesura that most effectively primes the audience for humor? The argument may be advanced that the caesura is a dominant prosodic mechanism in preparing the audience for the comic turn. As the paper explores in detail, Martial tends to locate the punchline or semantic twist after a strong caesura or verse-end, thereby making the pause not only a rhythmic break but also a structural and rhetorical signal. It is however clear from e.g. Mart 12.59 that Martial does not *always* use the caesura or strong pauses in juxtaposition with the *pointe*; thus, Martial consciously and deliberately chooses to use the caesura or not.

Morgan 2010 and Watson 2006 observe *synkrisis* in Martial's use of the analyzed meters,¹⁷⁰ and draw attention to how their differing rhythms and formal qualities affect comic delivery. However, despite the differences in metric form, the role of the caesura as a transitional and often priming device for humor appears to be remarkably consistent, as does the possibility to use names in juxtaposition with a pause. This synchronicity prompts further inquiry into whether caesurae operate as part of the meter's identity to serve as comedic anchors. The placement of the joke after the caesura in the majority of the analyzed examples from Martial's corpus may suggest the pre-caesura portion of the line functions as a kind of semantically neutral filler, at least for what humor is concerned. This would be a misrepresentation of reality. We have already observed that the pre-caesura portion is not *just* filler information: examples from the analyzed poems include */spurcius/* in the elegiac Mart. 2.42.2, */pedicas/* in the hendecasyllabic Mart. 12.16.3 and */arrigere/* in the choliambic Mart. 6.26.3, which thus are not semantically neutral – rather, all of these examples crudely shift the poem to a different semantic register, in the final line of the poem where the joke occurs. Mart. 2.38.1 */Nomentanus/* shows filler information may also occur post-caesura. A filler, by nature, is context neutral, metrically variable and interchangeable,¹⁷¹ so a filler can be located in virtually every position of the line, though it seems evident the joke is typically located in a

¹⁷⁰ Morgan 2010, 119; Watson 2006, 287.

¹⁷¹ Bakker 2005, 21.

focus position, and particularly the verse-end, the most important sense-pause.¹⁷² Filler information has the very goal to force the semantically relevant information into metrical boundaries. It governs grammar and serves to bridge the gap to the semantically relevant verse-end.¹⁷³ Indeed, the verse-end (particularly in elegiac couplets) functions as the poem's syntactic and rhetorical focus. In elegy, the end of the pentameter is the final and most decisive sense pause, where the poem's affective resolution is delivered. The awareness that a pentameter must follow a hexameter turns this expectation into a compositional principle. The audience is primed to receive the joke or twist in the pentameter's final phrase, since the joke is always constituted there. Perhaps one may generalize, and state the audience expects the joke to occur after the caesura. In any case, the meter primes the humor, not just as a formal constraint, but through cultural and performative familiarity.

Moreover, this priming effect relies on the performance context. As stated, poems were likely performed aloud, making intonation, pacing, and rhythm essential to how the joke is perceived. The speaker's manipulation of tempo and stress, especially around caesurae, governs the rhetorical and emotional trajectory of the performance. Grammar, in this view, emerges as a product of intonation units,¹⁷⁴ chunks of meaning and rhythm shaped by oral delivery. The caesura thus becomes a performative hinge as much as a metrical device.

While meter provides the general architecture, the caesura offers the dynamic interior design, shaping the listener's expectations, managing tonal progression, and emphasizing semantic rupture. Its capacity to interrupt, to create pause, and to anticipate change renders it ideal for the comedic twist. The metric system allows for substitutions, for dactyls to become spondees or vice versa, modulating the tempo. But the caesura calls for a stop, a rhetorical silence or shift, whose effect is immediate and perceptible.

This small scale comparison of Martial's meters reveals that the caesura very consistently, though not exclusively, marks the hinge of affective transition. Whether in the stately hexameter, the balanced couplet, or the *limping* choliamb, the joke often arises in the wake of this metrical pause. If the chosen meter establishes the expectations, the caesura may detonate the effect. The empirical yet case-based evidence suggests that rather than the meter alone, it is manipulation of a meter and its devices, such as caesural timing, or more broadly speaking pause, especially as experienced in oral performance, that truly generates comic force. However, more extensive research needs to be done on caesura as a rhetorical device, and on the distribution of filler elements in certain metrical positions and their interplay with the placement of semantically and rhetorically important information, before one can draw more definitive conclusions on how humor and meter interact.

¹⁷² West 1982, 36.

¹⁷³ Blankenborg 2015, 201; Moreno 2018, 702.

¹⁷⁴ Edwards 2002, 9-13.

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