

MISZELLEN

MARTIAL, EPIGRAMS 6,40

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*femina praeferrī potuit tibi nulla, Lycori:
praeferrī Glycerae femina nulla potest.
haec erit hoc quod tu: tu non potes esse quod haec est.
tempora quid faciunt! hanc volo, te volui.*

Hardly a deep or moving piece of work: at first sight it looks like a crude variation on the commonplace *tempora mutantur* theme, applied to passing amorous fancies. But is it so simple? Poets seldom address old flames, fictitious or otherwise; and capable though Martial was of triviality, malice or spite, he was nothing if not clever. Much of his œuvre reveals thinly disguised literary sophistication.

There are clear signs in these lines. We meet a triple reversal of the conventional: first, instead of a Catullan lament or diatribe about a mistress' inconstancy, here it is the authorial persona who is fickle; it is, secondly, the male rather than the female partner who is unfaithful; and instead of self-pity or anger or moral compunction attending this behaviour, he revels in it.

The ladies' names, next, are well embedded in literary convention, with telling nuances. 'Lycoris' is an *inamorata* of Cornelius Gallus already,¹ appearing also in Virgil (Ecl. 10.2); and the name crops up elsewhere in Martial too, in contexts usually derogatory (e. g. 1.72.6, with Howell's Commentary ad loc. for further references). 'Glycera' may be, like 'Lycoris', a *betaira* (Athen. 13.595d, 605d, cf. 586b–c), but she too has her literary pedigree: both appear together in a poem (Hor. Od. 1.33) addressed to Tibullus no less, urging him not to fret (nor write boring elegies) about 'Glycera's' failure to respond to his advances. For (to paraphrase) thus it ever is in matters of the heart: a Lycoris pines for a Cyrus, while he in turn loves Pholoe, who would as lief have him for a lover as a she-goat would a wolf. That is Venus' 'treacherous smile' (cf. Hor. Od. 3.27), her practical joke at the expense of the human race. Allusions like these, and perhaps others lost to us, will not have eluded Martial's audience. So as well as confirming that the persons and the mise-en-scène of the implied narrative are but literary figments, and giving an original variation on a well-worn topos, Martial flatters his listeners' literary fancies.

1) L&S s.v.: "a celebrated courtesan of the time of Cicero, Antony, and Gallus ... originally the freedwoman and mistress of Volumnius Eutrapelus ... connected in the same capacity with Antony ... Gallus mentioned her in his poems under the name of Lycoris, by which name she is spoken of also by the Scholiast Cruquius on Horace (Sat. 1.2.55, 10.77; comp. Serv. ad Virg. Eclog. 10.1; Cic. Phil. 2.24; ad Att. 10.10, 16, ad Fam. 9.26; Plut. Ant. 9; Plin. H. N. 8.16)."

There is more. The poem's compact sense is achieved by cunning juxtapositions, repetition and variation. Thus line 2 differs from line 1 only in the girls' names, the word-order, and the contrasting tenses of *potuit ... potest*. The word-order and the tenses deserve special attention. It is not only metri gratia that the word-order is changed: at the end of line 2, the syntactical close, and the implicit intake of breath in recitation² which momentarily separates it from what follows, lend *potest* special weight. This in turn renders *potuit* more important than at first it seemed. And on these two words alone rests the burden of lines 1–2 together: 'I (once) loved you, but it is her I love (now)'. It is impossible to reproduce this in English without additional particles and temporal adverbs, but in Martial's Latin, *potuit ... potest* is enough.

Likewise in line 3, *haec erit hoc quod tu*, which should mean 'she will become what you [now are]' – that is, an 'ex'. Though the difference in tense is only implicit, ellipse of forms of *esse* is easy. And here it serves its own particular purpose. In recitation a Latin ear, attuned by the first two lines to anticipate a contrast between present and perfect verb-forms, will be unsure whether to understand 'fuisti', or 'es', from *erit* and the string of *pot-es, esse* and *est* that follows. So as in music a diminished seventh chord facilitates modulation between different keys, the ellipse provides a slickly ambiguous transition from the present / perfect contrasts of lines 1–2 to the wholly present-tense frame of the second penthemimeris of line 3. But it remains the contrast of grammatical tense (*erit ... [fuisti]* or *eris ... [es]*) that carries the main point. And although *tu non potes esse quod haec est* is wholly in the present tense, it yields another adversative contrast: 'you cannot be (now) what she (now) is' – namely 'my current favourite' – with the (now congruent) tenses bearing the emphatic weight. Finally, with the clausula in line 4, *hanc volo, te volui* – 'I desire her [now, although] I desired you [before]': as in lines 1–2 and the first part of line 3, the contrasting tenses carry, as no modern rendering can without adverbial clutter, the burden of the sense.

We come back, finally, to the 'moral' of the poem, in the first half of line 4, *tempora quid faciunt*: 'what a difference time makes [to us all]'. Hardly profound – though in the light of the poetic allusions noted above it might prima facie be taken to imply 'look how different my verse is to that of my predecessors'. But in the key word *tempora* there lies a more ingenious and pointed double entendre: *tempus* meant not only 'time' in the primary sense, but also, in the technical language of scientific grammar that had been developed in Latin by Varro, Remmius Palaemon and others already for decades, 'tense' (Varr. LL 9.32, 9.95 f.; Quint. 1.5.47, 9.1.11 &c.). 'What a difference the tenses make' – the point rammed firmly home by the conclusion, *hanc volo, te volui*. Rather, then, than vaunting his various, if fictitious, sex-life, the poet here parades his very real dexterity in exploiting the resources of the Latin verb to extract a maximum of sense from a compressed minimum of words, a witty conclusion reached *παρὰ προσδοκίαν* after leading his audience, however briefly, on a literary wild goose chase.

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2) It can never be too strongly emphasised that Latin verse, and Martial's particularly, was composed for recitation, and that we must therefore try to understand its impact as if we were listening, rather than merely as readers. I shall mount this hobby-horse again elsewhere.