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Martial IV.29 by Martial

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George Held
Martial, IV.29

Marcus Valerius Martialis
IV.29

The number of my little books
works against them, dear Pudens,
and their frequent publication
bores and sates their readers.

What's rare delights: thus the first apples
are most prized, thus winter roses
fetch prime prices, thus arrogance
recommends a despoiler,

and a door always open won't retain
a young stud. So Persius in just one book
outranks all of slight Marsus' *Amazoniad*.
So whichever of my books you reread,

suppose it the only one: thus
will it be worth even more to you.

Commentary

When it came to justifying the value of his “little books” of epigrams, Martial (40–104 CE) was his own best apologist, and many of his poems concern the poet’s avidity for recognition and fame. After all, he wrote in competition with such accomplished poets as Juvenal, Ovid, and Martial’s fellow Spaniards Seneca, Lucan, and Quintilian. Moreover, Catullus, who lived in the previous century, still held sway, so Martial became an ardent salesman of his own wares: “Buy these” (I.2).

In IV.29 Martial speaks in defensive mode, explaining that his “little books” suffer from their proliferation: too much of a good thing breeds indifference. It is “what’s rare” that gains attention, so Martial offers a series of examples of prized rarity, including the first apples of the season and winter roses. The poet ties these examples together through the repetition of *sic*, creating parallel structure and underscoring his series of items. Both parallelism and the series frequently aid Martial in his poetry, for he revels in making lists of examples and in filling out categories.

The clause in Martial line 6, about the young man, proves interesting, for he might find the open door inviting either to enter or to leave through. The young “stud,” as I call him, might allude to the motif of *paraclausithyron*, in which a young lover (*exclusus amator*) laments being locked outside his mistress’ door. But Martial, ever contrary, chooses to leave the door open to suggest that once inside, the lover, granted easy access, won’t easily be held inside by his mistress’ charms.

At the end of IV.29 Martial comes back to his main point, a defense of his own books against a predecessor of the previous century, Marsus, a lightweight whose epic was, Martial argues, eclipsed by their fellow satirist Persius (34–62), who died before completing his own book. Martial then concludes by telling Pudens (“Bashful One”), who was last mentioned in line 1 (line 2 of the translation), that whenever he rereads one of Martial’s books, he should regard it as one of a kind: “thus / will it be worth even more to you.” This notion, that his then four books are as one, complements Martial’s theme that what’s rare, a single volume, is valued most.

Rather than use Martial's block-form, I divide the poem into four stanzas, three quatrains and a concluding couplet, resulting in a pseudo sonnet: it has the fourteen lines of a sonnet and looks like some English sonnets, but has no rhyme scheme or standard line-length. Like Martial, I do use internal rhyme, as the repetition of the **uh** sound in line 10 shows: "a **young stud**. So Persius in **just** one book." As in many English sonnets, the final couplet both ends the poem and cinches the argument.

Source text:

Martial. *Epigrams*, vol. 1. Edited and translated by D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge, 1993, p. 300.