2

Martial and Tacitus on regime change: transition, survival and the palimpsestic *libellus*

Victoria Rimell, La Sapienza University of Rome

This paper reads Tacitus' *Agricola*, which was apparently completed in 98, alongside the second edition of Martial's tenth book of *Epigrams*, which Martial presents to his readers as an edited version of the first edition to suit the new political and cultural climate after Domitian's assassination and *damnatio memoriae* (the new *libellus* is, like the *Agricola*, thought to have been published in 98). These are – on the surface at least – radically different texts, which have never been read closely in juxtaposition. Yet both works deal in very similar ways with how an author might or should position himself at such a tricky transitional moment, and with how we might think about the past, and about memory, from the new vantage point of the post-Domitianic present. This paper is an experiment in seeing what might emerge – and how we might perceive both authors/texts differently – when we read the *Agricola* and *Ep.*10 in parallel, or even envisage them as interacting.

In particular I consider the role of the geographic imagination (focused on Bilbilis in *Ep.*10, Britain in *Agr.*) in negotiating Rome's relationship with its own past, and analyse the dense dyadic structures of both works, inextricable as they are from the paradoxes of *damnatio memoriae*. The pattern of double perspectives in both works has the effect of destabilizing secure interpretative positions, loading readers with the responsibility of constructing a past that can underpin their chosen future. I read Martial *Ep.*10 in detail, homing in on poems which seem to advertise their (uncertain) belonging to the old or new edition. Among other things I suggest that the verbally signposted thematisation of 'survival' or 'living on' into the Nervan-Trajanic age in both works becomes, for Martial, a means to engage provocatively not just with Tacitus' text but with the life of Agricola himself, who was (or would have been) Martial's contemporary (cf. König on the possibility that Martial also explores the theme of survival via interaction with Frontinus and his *De Aquis*, with which Tacitus' *Agricola* may itself engage; also Mratschek on Pliny's interaction both with some of Martial's *Epigrams* and with a key figure who exists both within and beyond them).

In the final part of the paper I argue that, in contrast to what one influential recent critic has called the 'bamboozling' *Agricola*, Martial's forked meanings put us on the spot, and give an inescapable political colouring to epigrammatic repetition and variation generally. In order to participate in the experience of reading *Ep.*10's jokes and puns, I suggest, we are constantly cornered into making decisions about where each poem belongs in time, into deciphering the book's doubleness. Through *Ep.*10 (second edition), we are pushed to confront head-on the irresolvable paradoxes, and indeed radical potential, of the *Agricola*. These two texts, and two authors, perform a politically edgy and intellectually explosive double-act, firing up silenced, elite readers and writers to engage in debates that will define the final years of the first century in Rome, and posing questions for us in the process about both the nature and power of different kinds of literary interaction.