

**“AUGMENTED REALITY” IN MARTIAL:
THE USE AND THE ABUSE OF OLFACTORY AND GUSTATORY
SYSTEMS IN MARTIAL’S *EPIGRAMS***

**“REALIDADE AUMENTADA”: USO E ABUSO DE SENSAÇÕES
OLFATIVAS E GUSTATIVAS NOS *EPIGRAMAS* DE MARCIAL**

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Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 16/01/2025

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 29/03/2025

Abstract

This paper examines Martial’s innovative use of the senses of smell and taste in his epigrams, revealing how he transcends the limitations of the written word by inviting readers to interact with his work on a visceral level. By associating specific odors and flavors with social status, morality, and individual character, Martial constructs a sensory map of Roman society. The analysis explores how Martial employs a range of techniques, from the evocation of foul odors to represent immorality and low social status to the satirical use of coprophagy to condemn the excesses of Roman elites. Through these sensory experiences, Martial not only reinforces the moral and social critiques central to his epigrams but also invites readers to inhabit the sensory world of imperial Rome.

Furthermore, the paper investigates how Martial’s use of the senses aligns with his preference for the epigram as a genre rooted in the everyday and the corporeal, challenging the hierarchy of literary and sensory values established by ancient philosophy. Ultimately, Martial’s epigrams demonstrate the power of the olfactory and gustatory senses as vehicles for expression and critique, offering

a unique and insightful window into the social, cultural, and literary dynamics of ancient Rome.

Keywords: Martial, *Epigrams*, sensory system, olfactory system, gustatory system

Resumo

O presente artigo analisa o uso inovador dos sentidos do ofato e do paladar nos *Epigramas* de Marcial, assinalando o modo como o autor consegue superar os limites da escrita, convidando os leitores a interagirem visceralmente com a sua obra. Ao associar determinados odores e sabores a uma dada classe social, a um valor moral ou perfil individual, Marcial constrói um mapa sensorial da sociedade romana.

A nossa análise detém-se sobre o modo como o epigramista se mune de uma série de técnicas, a começar pela evocação dos quatro sentidos, para retratar a imoralidade e as classes sociais mais baixas até ao emprego satírico da coprofagia, com o objetivo de condenar os excessos cometidos pelas elites romanas. Através destas experiências sensoriais, Marcial não só reforça a crítica moral e social nos seus epigramas, como convida os leitores a experienciarem o mundo sensorial do império romano.

Este trabalho investiga ainda de que forma a preferência de Marcial pelo género epigramático, enraizada no quotidiano e na corporeidade, desafia a hierarquia dos valores literários e sensoriais estabelecidos pela filosofia antiga. Por fim, os epigramas de Marcial testemunham o poder expressivo e crítico dos sentidos, oferecendo uma visão privilegiada e única da dinâmica social, cultural e literária da Roma Antiga.

Palavras-chave: Marcial, *Epigramas*, sistema sensorial, sistema olfativo, sistema gustativo

Martial (M. Valerius Martialis), the epigrammatist who flourished during the reign of the Flavian Dynasty, placed the epigram at the bottom of the ranking of literary genres: *quid minus esse potest? Epigrammata fingere coepti*.¹ For Martial, the epigram, firmly anchored in the everyday and empowered by socio-critical zeal, has a moral earnestness lacking in more elevated genres.² The epigram's low generic ranking is confirmed above all by its language, which, in conformity with the principle of stylistic decorum, is every day and colloquial in flavor.³

Nevertheless, this epigram reached its peak of artistic development under Martial. The epigrammatist was known, for example, for using the

¹ 13.94.9 cf. Tac. *Dial.* 10.4.

² Kay 2010: 318.

³ Watson and Watson 2003: 21-26.

literary technique of breaching the fourth wall, by addressing directly to us, the unknown readers (*lector*) of his *Epigrams*. This technique was not an innovation – Ovid had done something similar, about eighty years before Martial, in *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*.⁴ By shattering the fourth wall, Martial created a constant tension between illusory and non-illusory attitudes. By doing so, Martial encouraged us, the readers, towards a specific style of reading his *Epigrams*; the reading had turned into a conversation, in which the reader becomes a listener.

In this paper I would like to expose another literary device used by Martial, in which he conveyed his messages to the audience, which can be seen as a form of ‘Augmented Reality’: by appealing to the senses of the reader, particularly the senses of smell and taste, Martial changes the whole reading experience; the emotions of the reader intensify since the sensory experience is a universally human one. Martial succeeds in conveying a clear message that every reader can identify with, through familiar smells and tastes. The messages can be either social criticism, social commentary, mockery and humor. And thus, the reading experience becomes a sensual experience, involving the olfactory and the gustatory systems.

In ancient philosophy, the senses of smell and taste were ranked lower in the hierarchy of the senses than the senses of sight and hearing (with touch coming in at halfway place).⁵ By elevating the operations of the mind over those of the body, the Western philosophical tradition has largely confirmed these ancient prejudices.⁶ Two millennia before modern studies on the senses of smell and taste and their relations to the part of the brain responsible to memory and emotion, Martial is an excellent example of author from antiquity who used the senses of smell and taste as agents of expression, emotion, exclusion and differentiation.

Martial and the Sense of Smell

Martial applied great sophistication to distinguishing between bad smells and good smells.⁷ Thais and Bassa, regular butts of jokes in Martial’s *Epigrams*, are defined by their foul-smelling body. On one hand, Thais’

⁴ Ov. *Tr.* 4.10.132 (candide lector), 3.1.2 (lector amice), 3.1.19 (dicite, lectores); *Pont.* 3.4.43 (Quo magis, o lector, debes ignoscere) et passim.

⁵ On ancient philosophical approaches to taste see Rudolph 2018: chapter 2.

⁶ Gowers 2018: 90.

⁷ Bradley 2015: 6.

foul-smelling body is attributed to her profession – prostitute, and on the other hand Bassa's stench is one of her physical traits, something inherent.

*Tam male Thais olet, quam non fullonis avari
Testa vetus, media sed modo fracta via,
Non ab amore recens hircus, non ora leonis,
Non detracta cani transtiberina cutis,
Pullus abortivo nec cum putrescit in ovo,
Amphora corrupto nec vitiata garo.
Virus ut hoc alio fallax permutet odore,
Deposita quotiens balnea veste petit,
Psilothro viret aut acida latet oblita creta
Aut tegitur pingui terque quaterque faba.
Cum bene se tutam per fraudes mille putavit,
Omnia cum fecit, Thaida Thais olet.^{8*9}*

Here Martial uses a range of foul smells that would be familiar to the inhabitants of early imperial Rome. The epigrammatist tries to evoke the polluted figure of Thais and her profession.¹⁰ Although Thais tries to conceal her body odor with cosmetic recipes, it remains a potent telltale sign of her social status, and Martial equips his readers with a rich repertoire of olfactory associations with which to describe such a figure.¹¹

Bassa's foul-smelling body is treated by Martial in two different literary ways: one – direct and straightforward – as in Epigram 4.87: *pedere Bassa solet* (Bassa has the habit of farting), and the second – the use of *cumulatio*, the buildup of foul odors which evokes Bassa's indescribable stench, as in Epigram 4.4. This array of images, haphazard as it may seem, shows a certain organization based on the association of ideas around the verb *redolere*.¹² Unlike the verb *fetere* which means “to have an ill smell, to stink”, which Martial uses exclusively to describe a person who reeks of wine,¹³ the connotation of

^{8*} All English translations are by Bailey 1993.

⁹ Mart. 6.93.

¹⁰ On Thais as a fellatrix (a prostitute who performs oral sex) see Mart. 4.12, 4.50, 4.84; Hofmann 1956-1957: 433.

¹¹ Bradley 2015: 6.

¹² Moreno Soldevila 2006: 114.

¹³ Mart. 1.28: *Hesterno fetere mero qui credit Acerram*; 5.4: *Fetere multo Myrtale solet vino*.

redolere is mostly positive.¹⁴ It is mainly used, however, for intense, pungent smells, not necessarily pleasant.¹⁵ Martial’s employment of *redolere* in his foul odors catalogue provokes the reader and his expectations as the epigram progress to its conclusion. The catalogue of foul odors accumulates as follows: reeking waters, a paradigm of pestilence, veteran soldier’s worn-out boot, a double-dyed purple fleece and bad breath. The catalogue is rounded off by further animal stench: the fox and the viper, a likely misogynist touch involving the prostitute’s (*Leda*)¹⁶ and the protagonist’s name (*Bassa*).

The foul odor Tyrian-dyed purple is a common theme in Martial’s *Epigrams*. Martial refers to the smelly purple with adjectives derived from the verb *olere*, which during the classical period of Latin literature referred to both ‘Sweet-smelling, fragrant, odoriferous’ and ‘Stinking, foul, rank’.¹⁷ In 9.62, Martial uses his satirical sense of smell to describe in irony how a woman tries to conceal her foul body odor by using the smelly purple:

*Tinctis murice vestibus quod omni
Et nocte utitur et die Philaenis,
Non est ambitiosa nec superba:
Delectatur odore, non colore.*¹⁸

Not all smells in Martial’s *Epigrams* are bad. In 11.8 Martial compares his slave-boy’s morning kisses to a rich array of scents which hold a position of prestige in the ancient sensorium:

*Lassa quod hesterni spirant opobalsama dracti,
Ultima quod curvo quae cadit aura croco;
Poma quod hiberna maturescentia capsae,
Arbore quod verna luxuriosus ager;
De Palatinis dominae quod Serica prelis,
Sucina virginea quod regelata manu;
Amphora quod nigri, sed longe, fracta Falerni,
Quod qui Sicani detinet hortus apes;
Quod Cosmi redolent alabastra focique deorum,*

¹⁴ Mart. 3.65.4, 11.8.9, 14.59.2; Verg. *G.* 4.169, *A.* 1.436; Stat. *Silv.* 2.1.46; Serv. *A.* 1.436.

¹⁵ Mart. 13.18: Fila Tarentini graviter redolentia porri/ edisti quotiens, oscula clusa dato.

¹⁶ On Leda as a nickname of a prostitute, see Mart. 3.82.3, 11.61.4.

¹⁷ Mart. 1.49.32 olidae vestes murice; 2.16.3 Sidone tinctus olenti.

¹⁸ Mart. 9.62.

*Quod modo divitibus lapsa corona comis:
Singula quid dicam? non sunt satis; omnia misce:
Hoc fragrant pueri basia mane mei.*¹⁹

Like Thais (6.93), the slave-boy is figuratively described by scents and fragrances; These two descriptions rest on the basics of the sense of smell alone, whereas no physical description is given. With great sophistication, Martial succeeds in evoking in the reader the feelings attributed to those smells, which are at the ends of the spectrum of smells; Martial expects his readers to be familiar with the smells and odors listed on his ‘catalogue’ of scents in *Epigrams* 6.93 and 11.8 and turn these basic gut instincts – disgust and lust – into complex and diverse metaphorical associations.²⁰

The attempts to cover foul body odors up are a recurring motif in Martial’s *Epigrams*. These bad smells are connected to immoral habits, as a canny author as Martial can point out, and in particular – consumption of wine by women, which was associated with adultery. In 2 BCE, Emperor Augustus exiled his daughter Julia from Rome on the grounds of her adulterous behavior. One of the noted prohibitions placed by Augustus upon Julia was the denial of wine.²¹ Myrtale (5.4) and Fescina (1.87) use laurel leaves and pastilles, respectively, to conceal their smell of wine. The body’s odor bore witness to the irresponsible and improper control of the orifices, both what went in them and what came out of them, and this idea of the permeability of boundaries governs notions of the foul body, as outlined by Mary Douglas and extended in Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the ‘grotesque body’.²² Here, the promiscuous women could be identified by the telltale whiff of their bodies.

In 2.12 Postumus attempts to cover up his bad breath with myrrh. Martial sees through the trick and delivers a damning and characteristically paradoxical *sententia* to the effect that one who always smells of perfume must be trying to cover something up:

¹⁹ Mart. 11.8 cf. 3.65 with different types of scents and fragrances to describe his lover’s fragrant kisses (*basia fragrant*).

²⁰ Bradley 2015: 7.

²¹ Suet. *Aug.* 65.3. Recent studies on the origins of the prohibitions of wine by Roman women show that the archaic wine taboo had more to do with the nature of wine than with the nature of women: Komar 2021: 239-254.

²² Douglas 2003: xxxvii–xxxviii; Bakhtin 1968: 26–27, cited in Bradley 2015: 136.

*Esse quid hoc dicam, quod olent tua basia murram
Quodque tibi est numquam non alienus odor?
Hoc mihi suspectum est, quod oles bene, Postume, semper:
Postume, non bene olet qui bene semper olet.*²³

The ending *sententia*, in literary criticism, came to connote a brief saying embodying a striking thought.²⁴ Walter proposes that there is a pun in *bene olere*, but the equivalence ‘smell good’, that is – have a good reputation – seems to be characteristic only of German (*in gutem Geruch stehen*) and not of Latin.²⁵ This phrase reappears in 6.55.5: “malo quam bene olere nil olere”. It seems, as Williams points out, that Martial was influenced by proverbial sayings, as appear in Plautus and Cicero.²⁶ If, as the passages from Plautus and Cicero suggest, the phrase was particularly connected with women, then we have a sophisticated insult based entirely on the connotations of masculinity and femininity: a man should not be smelling of perfumes.

Several unguents and perfumes are mentioned in Martial’s *Epigrams* with connotations of masculinity and femininity. Nard was a fragrance for men (2.59.3, 3.65.8) and it is usually alluded to in relation with the symposium.²⁷ Whereas nard was a typically masculine fragrance, it seems that cinnamon was favored by women (3.55, 2.10) or effeminate men (3.63, 6.55). Petronius uses cinnamon as a metaphor for a woman.²⁸ We therefore learn that Martial’s attitude towards perfumes used both by women and men was entirely negative.²⁹

As with Thais whose foul body odor is associated with her profession and social status, Martial uses unpleasant smells to describe the lower social classes and the poor people in Rome. The city of Rome incorporated several activities and businesses that could be extremely odorous: laundries, tanneries, slaughterhouses, meat and fish markets.³⁰ This certainly creates the impression that some areas would have been more odorous than others

²³ Mart. 2.12.

²⁴ Watt and Winterbottom 2016: 1349-1350 v. *sententia* in OCD 3rd.

²⁵ Walter 1998: 208; contra Williams 2004: 64.

²⁶ Plaut. *Most.* 273: mulier recte olet, ubi nihil olet; Cic. *Att.* 2.1.1: ut mulieres ideo bene olere, quia nihil olebant, videbantur. Williams 2004: 65.

²⁷ Moreno Soldevila 2006: 170 with references to ancient authors.

²⁸ Petr. 93.2.8-9.

²⁹ López-Cañete 2019: 78, n. 38.

³⁰ Bradley 2015: 113-114, n. 16.

– the outskirts of Rome had the stench of these industrial businesses. In 12.59 Martial makes a vivid and olfactory comparison between Rome and the country. A country man returns to Rome after a long absence, and the whole neighborhood (*vicinia tota*), which is represented by the foul-odor professionals, comes to greet and kiss him:

*Tantum dat tibi Roma basiorum
Post annos modo quindecim reverso,
Quantum Lesbia non dedit Catullo.
Te vicinia tota, te pilosus
Hircoso premit osculo colonus;
Hinc instat tibi textor, inde fullo,
Hinc sutor modo pelle basiata,
Hinc menti dominus periculosi,
Hinc et dexiocholus, inde lippus,
Fellatorque recensque cunnilingus.
Iam tanti tibi non fuit redire.³¹*

The different classes of residential districts in Rome were marked as well by their smells, as well as their inhabitants. In 12.32 Martial mockingly depicts the eviction of Vacerra and his family from their lodging for not paying their rent, by listing the smells association with their low status: broken chamber-pot, and obscenely stinking jug contained salt pickerel or worthless sprats, a smell such as the reek of a marine fishpond break winds. Martial humiliates Vacerra, who is so poor, that his poverty-stench will stick to him wherever he goes.³²

So far, we have seen how Martial uses odors to mock, condemn and reproach his butts of his *epigrams*. The city of Rome, its districts and its inhabitants are described by the sense of smell, sometimes the smell serves as a metaphor. By using the extreme smells on the olfactory spectrum, Martial's *epigrams* evoke the reader's feelings and emotions.

Martial and the Sense of Taste

In addition to the sense of smell, the sense of taste is used by Martial in his *epigrams* to describe people and places in a humorous and sarcastic

³¹ Mart. 12.59.

³² More on the derogatory tone of Martial in 12.32 see Watson 2004: 311-324.

tone. Martial makes unique use of descriptions of the sense of taste in relation to what is edible and what is not, between food and non-food. One common theme in Martial’s *epigrams* is the aligning of eating with sexual intercourse.³³

*Nec mullus nec te delectat, Baetice, turdus,
Nec lepus est umquam nec tibi gratus aper,
Nec te liba iuvant nec sectae quadra placentae,
Nec Libye mittit nec tibi Phasis aves:
Capparin et putri cepas hallece natantis
Et pulpam dubio de petasone voras,
Teque iuvant gerres et pelle melandrya cana,
Resinata bibis vina, Falerna fugis.
Nescio quod stomachi vitium secretius esse
Suspikor: ut quid enim, Baetice, σαπροφαγεῖς?*³⁴

This epigram is complemented by 3.81, in which Baeticus is explicitly identified as a eunuch, whose passion is for cunnilingus (*quid cum femineo tibi, Baetice galle, barathro*). Martial lists in 3.77 food items Baeticus the *cunnilinctor* does not eat, all emphasized by *nec* in first position: mullet, thrush, hare, boar, cookies, cakes, Guinea fowl and pheasants. Mulletts were highly prized – Seneca mentions a mullet of four and a half pounds that costs 5000 sesterces.³⁵ The thrush and the ability to distinguish between the flavors of male and female was associated with sophistication.³⁶ Martial considers thrush a prime delicacy (*mattea prima*).³⁷ Hares as well would form part of a lavish banquet.³⁸ Cakes were rich delicacies of flour, oil, honey, and sometimes cheese – suitable for sacrifice and birthdays.³⁹

Martial continues and lists what Baeticus does indulge in: slices of tuna and putrid fish sauce. *Allec* was the sediment from the bottom of the barrels used in the production of *garum*, and had a bad reputation.⁴⁰ *Pulpam dubio de petasone* is an innuendo: in Greek comedy piglets and pork were

³³ Rudolph 2018: 16 n. 94.

³⁴ Mart. 3.77.

³⁵ Sen. *Ep.* 95.42.

³⁶ Pers. 6.24.

³⁷ Mart. 13.92.

³⁸ Juv. 5.114-145.

³⁹ Ser. *A.* 7.109, Mart. 6.75.1.

⁴⁰ Dale 2017: 223.

sometimes used as euphemism for female genitals, and Varro tells us that *porcus* was used as a nursery word for *pudenda*.⁴¹ *Melandrya*, the cheap tuna cuts preserved in salt, stands here as food at the opposite end of the gastronomic spectrum from mullet.⁴² The Falerian wine was highly regarded in Ancient Rome, whereas the resinated wine was considered inferior. This is a reference to Baeticus' poor judgement in his actions.

Baeticus' poor judgement is the conclusion of 3.77, when Martial asks *quid enim, Baetice, saprophageis?* Baeticus is a eunuch, therefore he cannot perform penetrative intercourses, only oral sex; but all the references to food and tastes in this epigram suggest that Baeticus is senseless and lack of good judgement since he performs oral sex in old and unhealthy recipients. Thus, through sophisticated built-up of good and bad tastes, Martial lays the groundwork for what is made explicit in the very last word of 3.77: *saprophageis*. Baeticus eats the putrid *cunnius*.

For Martial, the sense of taste is therefore more subjective than objective – its connotation has to do more with personal preferences than necessary needs. In 13.76 Martial mocks the wasteful gluttons who value any food only because of its price – a common motif in Roman literature:⁴³

*Rustica sim an perdix, quid refert, si sapor idem est?
Carior est perdix. Sic sapit illa magis.*⁴⁴

Martial makes here a stinging criticism of contemporary society; from the eunuch to the rich, who represent the extreme end of Roman society. The sense of taste is one aspect of their social status and of their social relationships.

Thus far we have seen how Martial uses his poetic skills in his observations on foul habits and bad taste. We shall now turn our attention to the way he uses *coprophagy* (consumption of feces) as a literary motif. Martial describes in two epigrams the habits of eating feces (*merda*). In 1.83 Martial compares Manneia's dog that licks her face and lips to a dog eating feces:

*Os et labra tibi lingit, Manneia, catellus:
Non miror, merdas si libet esse cani.*⁴⁵

⁴¹ Varro *Ling.* 2.4.10 with Dale 2017: 223.

⁴² Dale 2017: 224, n. 36.

⁴³ Cf. Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.25; Petron. *Sat.* 93; Sen. *Ep.* 122.14; Sen. *Helv.* 10.5.

⁴⁴ Mart. 13.76.

⁴⁵ Mart. 1.83.

This epigram can be seen as a misogynic attack on women, a common theme in Martial’s epigrams.⁴⁶ Martial implies here that Manneia is a *fellatrix* and so her mouth stinks as dung.⁴⁷

In epigram 3.17 Martial rebukes Sabidius, a person he does not like, as proven in 1.32: *Non amo te, Sabidi, nec possum dicere quare/ Hoc tantum possum dicere, non amo te.*⁴⁸

We do not know the reason for this hatred, nor does Martiall; but this hatred becomes a harsh condemnation as described in 3.17:

*Circumlata diu mensis scribilata secundis
Urebat nimio saeva calore manus;
Sed magis ardebat Sabidi gula: protinus ergo
Sufflavit buccis terque quaterque suis.
Illa quidem tepuit digitosque admittere visa est,
Sed nemo potuit tangere: merda fuit.*⁴⁹

In this epigram Martial, probably influenced by Lucilius, uses the comic motif that a bad smell is contagious.⁵⁰ Here the innuendo is about Sabidius the person, his essence. Sabidius is a *merda*; he breathes over a cake and the cake turns into excrement. As pointed out above by Bradley, Sabidius’ “foul mouth” was thought to characterize those who performed oral sex.⁵¹ Here *merda* represents the inedible, as opposed to the edible food.

Serving something inedible where one is supposed to eat is a violation of all social conventions. 3.17 shows us a *convivium* goes wrong, with the depiction of Sabidius⁵² the *gulosus* who turns the cake (edible) into excrement (inedible). One of the main purposes of the mutual meal – *convivium* – if not the most important, is strengthening friendships.⁵³ Epigram 3.17 serves an excellent example of deterritorialization. In critical theory, this is a procedure in which the social relations – the territory – has its current structure or organization altered or destroyed. Sabidius deviates from the

⁴⁶ Bradley 2015: 136. On Martial the misogynic see Evangelou 2022: 353-378.

⁴⁷ Bradley 2015: 136.

⁴⁸ Mart. 1.32.

⁴⁹ Mart. 3.17.

⁵⁰ Cf. with Lucil. 11.240. On Lucilius’ influence on Martial see Burnikel 1980: 33-35.

⁵¹ See n. 46 above.

⁵² On the characteristics of Sabidius in Martial’s epigrams see Moreno Soldevila et al. 2019: 531.

⁵³ Lew 2022: 177-186.

accepted Roman (or any civilized culture as well) norms and etiquette by turning the edible into inedible.

Conclusion

Martial's use of the senses of smell and taste in his epigrams reveals his mastery of a unique literary device that transforms the reading experience into a multisensory, visceral engagement which can be described as 'augmented reality'. By appealing to these often-overlooked senses, Martial transcends the limitations of the written word, inviting readers to interact with his work on an intimate, emotional level. The evocation of smell and taste allows Martial to vividly depict the character, behavior, and social status of his subjects, whether through the foul stench of immorality, the bitter taste of poor judgment, or the pungent odors of Roman urban life.

Through his sophisticated manipulation of sensory imagery, Martial not only reinforces the moral and social critiques central to his epigrams but also invites readers to inhabit the sensory world of imperial Rome. This technique amplifies the poet's humor, sarcasm, and biting commentary, making his epigrams as impactful today as they were in antiquity. Moreover, Martial's employment of these "low" senses aligns with his preference for the epigram as a genre rooted in the everyday and the corporeal, elevating the commonplace while simultaneously challenging the hierarchy of literary and sensory values established by ancient philosophy.

Ultimately, Martial's epigrams demonstrate the power of the olfactory and gustatory senses as vehicles for expression and critique. By associating specific smells and tastes with particular social groups, professions, and moral qualities, Martial constructs a sensory map of Roman society, offering modern readers a window into its cultural, ethical, and social dynamics. His ability to turn even the most visceral human experiences into sharp, incisive poetry solidifies his status as one of the most innovative and enduring voices of the Roman literary tradition.

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