

Slaves don't appear very much in Martial's poems, except just in passing references to their everyday activities about the house or the streets. (In the same sort of way, a poet nowadays is unlikely to mention cars or stoves or even cats and dogs very much, except casually, in writing about his own or his friends' life). A few of his epigrams, however, are about slaves: his little favourite, Erotion, a six-year old born in his own home, or old Charidemus, who was once his companion (paedagogus) when he was a youngster in school. The unpleasant Publius keeps all too attractive a wine-boy, it seems, and is jealous of Martial's admiration for him. In general, the slaves Martial mentions almost all seem to fall into two categories: the young, decorative, curly-haired capillati, or the rough, broken-down, dirty and lazy slaves whose thievish habits were notorious and who were the objects of scornful distaste to every Roman, many of whom retaliated by treating them brutally.

Martial, Epigrams, Bk. 5, No. 37  
Erotion's death:

A little maid, sweeter-voiced to my ear than fine old swans, softer than a pure-bred lamb, daintier than a mother-of-pearl shell from the Lucrine lake; a child one would choose instead of Red Sea pearls or a freshly polished Indian ivory tusk or the first snowfall or an untouched lily; whose hair was finer than a fleece from the Baetis or the braids of the Rhineland or golden dormouse fur; whose scented breath was like a rose garden in Paestum or the first honey of the year from Attic honeycombs or an amber drop warm from my hand; a girl who made the peacock look inappropriate and the

squirrel unattractive and the phoenix itself commonplace - Erotion! She lies still warm on the pyre just built, for a bitter decree of the wicked fates cut her sixth winter short, my little love, my joy, my toy!

And my old friend Paetus says I should not be sad as he beats his breast and tears at his hair: "Aren't you ashamed to weep at the death of a little home-born slavegirl? I have buried my wife, a woman well-known and proud, rich and of noble birth - and I still live on!" What could there be more strongminded than our Paetus? He has inherited twenty million - and still he lives on!

Book 5, No. 34:

This little maid, my father Fronto and my mother Flaccilla, I commend to your care. She was my sweetheart, my darling. Don't let my tiny Erotion shudder at the dark shadow nor the dreadful jaws of the hound of Hell! She would have survived the frosty weather of only her sixth winter had she lived six days longer. Let her play now between the two of you, her old protectors, and she can chatter about me with her little lisping tongue. Let the tough clods not weigh heavy on her gentle bones. Earth, press as lightly on her as she did on you!

Book 10, No. 61 Erotion's Tombstone:

Here lies at peace Erotion, an over-early shade. Fate committed a crime, and her sixth winter was her last. Whoever you may be, hereafter lord of my small acres, see to it that you pay her tiny ghost its yearly rites. Then may your home live on, your household

be unharmed, and in your fields may the only cause for shedding a single tear be this very tombstone!

Book 10, No. 98 Dinner at Publius' house:

Your manservant looks more gorgeous than Ganymede, the cupbearer of Jove, as he pours my Caecuban wine. Your daughter, your wife, your mother and sister reclining around the table are no better turned out than he is. Do you really expect me to prefer looking at your lamp or your antique citron-wood table with its Indian ivory legs? However, so I may avoid your suspicions when I dine with you, provide me instead with slaves from the crowd down on the farm - the cropheaded, bristly little bumpkin sons of your stinking pigman. This jealousy of yours is a disease, Publius, which will destroy you: you can't have these menservants and morals, both!

Book 11, No. 39: To Charidemus, who's been with him since he was a baby:

You were my official cradle-rocker, Charidemus, my childish protector, my constant companion. Nowadays the barber's towel gets black with the shavings from my beard and my girlfriend complains of being pricked by my lips. But to you, I haven't grown an inch! My steward shrinks from you, my treasurer does too, and the whole house trembles at you. You don't let me have some fun, you won't let me fall in love - you

don't want me to do anything at all, though you're not so strict with yourself! You criticise and spy, find fault, keep sighing, and are nearly angry enough to fetch your canes out again. If I've put on a Tyrian purple gown and scented my hair, you protest "Your father never did such things!" And you count every glass I drink with a frowning face just as though the wine jar came from your own cellar. Stop it! I can't put up with a freedman who's as strict as old Cato. I'm a man now - as my girlfriend will tell you!

Three Epigrams criticizing brutal treatment of slaves:

Ponticus, what's the point of cutting your slave's tongue out before you crucify him? Don't you realise that everyone is talking about what he cannot say?

Rufus, you say your roast of hare is undercooked and call for your whip. You'd rather slice up your cook than your meat, Rufus!

One little curl out of place in the coronet of hair because the hairpin was insecure! Lalage saw the crime in her mirror and took her revenge: Plecusa collapsed, struck down because of that cruel tress. Now stop, Lalage, having your ill-omened hair done. No slavegirl ought to touch your crazy head. Let your hair fall out by magic or some savage razor scrape your scalp! Then your mirror will really do your face justice!