

CARPE, CARPE DIEM: A NOTE ON MARTIAL 4.54.10

In epigram 4.54 Martial addresses Collinus¹, a winner in the *Agon Capitolinus*², and advises him to make the most of life:

O cui Tarpeias licuit contingere quercus
 et meritas prima cingere fronde comas,
 si sapis, utaris totis, Colline, diebus
 extremumque tibi semper adesse putes.
 Lanificas nulli tres exorare puellas
 contigit: observant quem statuere diem.
 divitior Crispo, Thrasea constantior ipso
 lautior et nitido sis Meliore licet:
 nil adicit penso Lachesis fusosque sororum
 explicat et semper de tribus una *secar*³.

He is fortunate enough to have been awarded the oak garland⁴, the coveted prize in the *Agon Capitolinus*, but fame and glory do not grant eternity: he should live as if every single day were the very last, because no one, regardless of their riches and merits, has ever changed the course of destiny. Martial makes use of a long-

¹ On this character, see *Prosopographia Imperii Romani saec. I II III* (Berlin-Leipzig 1933) C 1258.

² Domitian established the *Agon Capitolinus* to commemorate the restoration of the temple of Iuppiter Optimus Maximus in AD 86: Suet. *Dom.* 4.8: *Instituit et quinquennale certamen Capitolino Iovi Triplex, musicum equestre gymnium, et aliquanto plurimum quam nunc est coronatorum*. On these games, see M. L. Caldelli, *L'Agon Capitolinus. Storia e protagonisti dall'istituzione Domiziana al IV secolo*, Roma 1993.

³ I follow D. R. Shackleton Bailey's Teubner edition: *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammata*, Stuttgart 1990.

⁴ Cf. Mart. 4.1.6; 9.3.8; 9.23.5; Stat. *silv.* 5.3.231; Iuv. 6.387

established mythical picture: the Parcae's inexorable spinning and breaking of the thread of life⁵. As the text stands, the poet rounds off his invitation to enjoy life by reminding his addressee of the unavoidability and abruptness of death⁶. *Secat*, however, is not present in the manuscript tradition⁷. The most widespread reading is *negat*, the *lectio* of the third family⁸, followed by the *neget* of the second family, which is clearly incorrect⁹. Manuscript *F*¹⁰ contains *necat*, which might bear witness to a previous *secat*. Friedländer, Heraeus, Lindsay and Schneidewin (1842) preferred *negat*, whereas Schneidewin (1853), Gilbert, Duff, Izaak, Ker, and Shackleton Bailey wrote *secat*, following Heinsius and Scriverius¹¹.

⁵ This traditional image, which goes back to Homer (Hom. *Il.* 20.128; 24.209), is a recurrent element in Greek and Latin epitaphs (see R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*, Urbana 1962, 159–61).

⁶ On the *carpe diem* motif in Martial's epigrams, see M. Bonvicini "L'epigrama latino: Marziale", in U. Mattioli (ed.), *Senectus. La vecchiaia nel mondo antico*, II, Roma-Bologna 1995, 124–6, and in Latin poetry, see V. Cristóbal, "El tópico del *carpe diem* en las letras latinas", in *Actas del IX Encuentro sobre aspectos didácticos en las Enseñanzas Medias*, Zaragoza 1994, 225–68.

⁷ Not even in manuscript *P*, *Vaticanus*, *Palatinus lat.* 1696, despite Friedländer's assertion in his *apparatus criticus* (1842), followed by Gilbert. Heraeus rightly writes (*etiam P*); see also W. M. Lindsay, "A Supplement to the *Apparatus Criticus* of Martial (II)", *CR* 15, 1901, 45.

⁸ For a succinct and accurate introduction to the manuscript tradition of Martial's epigrams, see M. D. Reeve, "Martial", in L. D. Reynolds (ed.), *Text and Transmission. A Survey of the Classics*, Oxford 1990², 239–44.

⁹ As Shackleton Bailey explicitly states in his *apparatus criticus* (*M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammata*, 134): "et in errore manifesto pervicaces edd. praeter Duff and Izaak".

¹⁰ *Florentinus Mediceus XXXV 38*: according to Citroni (*cf. M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton Liber Primus. Introduzione, testo, apparato critico e commento*, Firenze 1975, lvi–lvii), it belongs to the third family, with a strong contamination from the second one. Its text is very sound and does not present many humanistic interpolations.

¹¹ *Cf.* D. F. G. Schneidewin, *M. Val. Martialis Epigrammaton Libri*, Græmae 1842; D. F. G. Schneidewin, *M. Val. Martialis Epigrammaton Libri*, Leipzig 1853; L. Friedländer, *M. Val. Martialis Epigrammaton Libri, mit erklärende Anmerkungen*, Leipzig 1886 (= Amsterdam 1967); W. Gilbert,

Friedländer adduced a passage from Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* (4.1) as an argument for the validity of *negat*, an explanation which Valmaggi¹² refuted by pointing out that there is a difference in tone between both passages and by giving a convincing explanation of *secat* in this context: 'Come infatti potrebbe modificarsi a beneficio della vita di una persona il corso immutabile dell'azione delle Parche? Evidentemente in uno di questi tre modi soltanto: o aggiungendo qualche po' de lana al *pensum* che corrisponde alla vita di ciascun uomo, o arrestando lo svolgersi del fuso che fila la lana del *pensum*, o trattenendo la mano della Parca che inesorabilmente taglia il filo quando il *pensum* è esaurito. Ora Marziale intende dire appunto che nessuno di questi tre modi è possibile'. In any case, *negat* would involve an implicit debate between the protagonist and the Parcae, a commonplace in poetry. Actually, Martial's phrasing would then recall *Epic. Drusi* 243 (*de tribus una mihi... inquit*) and Prop. 2.13.44. The idea that the Fates deny life is also present in [Tib.] 3.3.35: *aut si Fata negant reditum tristesque sorores / stamina quae ducunt quaeque futura neunt*. In another passage by Martial, Vestinus, on his death bed, asks them for a postponement (*oravit*), which they grant (4.73.3) out of pity for his unselfish prayer. In 4.54.10, *negat* could be the answer to *exorare* (line 5)¹³; yet, as the poet has already stated that no

M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton Libri, Leipzig 1886; W. M. Lindsay, *M. Val. Martialis Epigrammata. Recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit W. M. L.*, Oxford 1903 (editio altera 1929); J. D. Duff, *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammata. Corpus poetarum Latinorum a J. P. Postgate aliisque editum*, London 1905, II, 431-531; W. Heraeus, *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton Libri. Recognovit W. H.*, Leipzig 1925 (ed. correctiorem curavit I. Borovskij, 1976); H. J. Izaac, *Martial, Epigrammes*, Paris 1930-1933; W. C. A. Ker, *Martial, Epigrams*, I. Cambridge (Mass.) - London 1968 (revised edition); D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *M. Valerii Martialis, Epigrammata*, Stuttgart 1990.

¹² L. Valmaggi, "Varia", *Rivista di Filologia* 29, 1901, 252-3.

¹³ See, for instance, the traditional explanation given by V. Collesso, *Val. Martialis Epigrammatum Libros XV interpretationis et notis illustravit V. C. ad usum Serenissimum Delphini*, London-Amsterdam 1701: 'etiamsi duae exorari possint, tertia tamen inexorabilis permaneret'.

one has ever convinced the Fates, the final *negat* would be weak and anticlimactic. Moreover, *nihil adicit penso* and *explicat fusos* refer to their characteristic spinning; *negat* is, therefore, utterly unsuitable; *secat*, the cutting of the thread of life, would be preferable here.

However, it could be objected that *secare* is never used in this context, in which the verb *rumpere* and its compounds seem to be idiomatic: *Eleg. Maec. 76: te propter dura stamina rupta manu*; *Mart. 7.96.6: ruperunt tetricae cum male pensa deae*; *11.36.3-4: rupta / sororum fila*; *Lucan. 3.19: rumpentis stamina Parcae*; *Sil. 1.281-282: duraeque sorores / tertia bis rupto torquerent stamina filo*; [*Sen.*] *Oct. 14-15: utinam ante manu grandaeva sua / mea rupisset stamina Clotho*; *Stat. Theb. 8.13: augure tunc demum rumpebant stamina Parcae*. The collocation is particularly frequent as a funerary formula, intimately related with the *topos* of *mors inmatura*¹⁴: *CLE 221.6; 501.6: ne Lachesis breuia rupisset stamina*; *1206.2: bis septena mea ruperunt stamina*; *1549.17: stamina ruperunt subito*; *443.5-6: rupisse suas quoque fila sorores / luctifica properante manu*; *494.2: ruperunt fila sorores*; *1114.4; 1523.4; 1549.5*. Statius also deploys *scindere* and its derivative *abscindere*: *Stat. Theb. 5.274-5: absciderunt tristes crudelia Parcae / stamina (cf. silv. 3.3.127)*. Martial would have slightly altered the formula by using *secat*, most likely with a view to adding a further pathetic note to this invitation to life.

As usual, the closest parallel is provided by Martial himself:

9.76.3-8

creverat hic vultus bis denis fortior annis,
gaudebatque suas pingere barba genas,
et libata semel summos modo purpura cultros
sparserat. invidit de tribus una soror

¹⁴ About this motif, see J. Esteve Forriol, *Die Trauer- und Trostgedichte in der römischen Literatur. Untersucht nach ihrer Topik und ihrem Motivschatz*, München 1962, 138-40.

et festinatis incidit stamina pensis
absentemque patri rettulit urna rogam¹⁵.

Like *secare*, the verb *incidere* is not usually used with threads or the like, but it can apply to parts of the body, especially the skin (*OLD s. v. 1b*). By using *incidit*, Martial links the act of shaving with the ‘severing’ of the protagonist’s life. In the light of this epigram, it is most probable that the poet employed the verb *secare*, an analogous variation—subtle, albeit significant—, in order to create an intended effect.

Romance verbs derived from *secare*, e. g. Spanish ‘segar’ (‘to reap’), might make the modern reader think of an agricultural image, which would be reinforced by the fact that the personification of Death as the Grim Reaper, though essentially Medieval, is traceable to Classical Antiquity: Horace uses reaping (*metere*) as a metaphor for the levelling force of death (*Epist. 2.2.178-9: si metit Orcus grandia cum paruis?*). The same verb is used by Statius, in a passage quite similar to Martial’s: *Stat. Theb. 1.633-4: Mors fila sororum / ense metit*. In funerary poems and inscriptions, life is subtly represented as a flower severed by death, a Virgilian image¹⁶: *Stat. silv. 3.3.127: florentesque manu scidit Atropos annos; cf. CLE 1523.3-4: ipso mihi flore iuuentae / ruperunt fila sorores; 1549.15-18: quam bene*

¹⁵ Camonius Rufus, the protagonist of this poem, died young in Cappadocia. Martial probably sent this epigram to his father, who kept a portrait of Camonius as a child. The lines quoted stress his young age at the moment of his death. On this epigram, see C. Henriksen, *Martial, Book IX: A Commentary*, II, Uppsala 1999, 96-8.

¹⁶ Verg. *Aen. 9.435-6 purpureus ueluti cum flos succisus aratro / languescit moriens* (see J. Dingel, *Kommentar zum 9. Buch des Aeneids Vergils*, Heidelberg 1997, 175-7); 11.68-71 *qualem uirgineo demessum pollice florem / seu mollis uiolae seu languentis hyacinthi, / cui neque fulgor adhuc nec dum sua forma recessit, / non iam mater alit tellus uirisque ministrat* (see K. W. Gransden, *Virgil, Aeneid, Book XI*, Cambridge 1991, 75-6); *Sil. 5.412-4 iuuenta / florebat, sed Massylus succiderat ensis / pubescente caput mala*.

bis senos florebas, parue, per annos, / credebantque deis uota placere mea. / stamina ruperunt subito tua candida Parcae / apstuleruntque simul uota precesque meas. Secare, which in some contexts means ‘to mow’ (*OLD s. v. 3b; cf. e. g. Sen. Tro. 76*), could have a parallel in *PLM 75.2: Clotho colum baiulat, Lachesis trahit, Atropos occat*, inasmuch as *occare*, though differing in meaning, is originally an agricultural verb. It is not surprising that life—often symbolized by natural images, such as plants and flowers—, when prematurely ended, should be compared with man’s interference with natural cycles. Martial’s poem 4.54 began indeed with an allusion to an oak garland, the prize for the winner, a discernible symbol of life and transience, and could be said to end with a verb with agricultural reminiscences: Collinus should *carpere diem*, “gather” the flowers of life, before Death, unexpectedly and prematurely, “reaps” them.

This idea of “reaping” is, however, totally incoherent with the image of a garland made of oak twigs, but *secare*, meaning “to sever with a sharp instrument”, is aptly applied to branches and the like: *cf. e. g. Cato Agr. 41.1: cum dolabis aut secabis; Col. R. 5.9.2: ramum secaturus es; Serv. georg. 2.412.2: frondium secandarum. Secat* at the end of the poem would then endow it with a circular structure, subtly linking the pruning of the oak tree with the abruptness of death. In addition, *secare* appears elsewhere in the epigrams, always in highly violent contexts (*cf. Mart. 3.24.5: acuta falce secaret; 3.24.8: resecat cultro colla; 10: ferro... secat*), while death pervades Martial’s book 4¹⁷, sometimes in a gruesome manner, as in poem 4.18, in which a child’s throat is literally—and unexpectedly—pierced by a falling icicle (4.18.8: *Aut ubi mors non est, si iugulatis aquae?*). Bearing these impressions in mind, it is inevitable to recall another use of the verb *secare* (‘to sever the neck’; ‘to decapitate’) and link it with the opening image of Collinus’ head, crowned by the garland. *Secat* would carry so many pertinent and evocative connotations that it should be preferred to *negat* in this poem: Martial is a consummate master of the art of allusion and the

¹⁷ See, for instance, 4.32; 4.59; 4.60; 4.63; 4.73.

choice *secat*, though apparently trivial, could have stirred the reader's imagination as has been explained.

What about the other option *necat*, less favoured by editors? As already stated, this is the reading of manuscript *F*¹⁸, but it is also present in some other humanistic codices and editions, especially the Venetian ones¹⁹. The idea that the Parcae 'kill' could be discarded as absolutely platitudinous; yet, there is a striking parallel in an epitaph, which reinforces its validity: *CLE 422.9-11: Musae mihi dederant puero facundus ut essem. / Inuidit Lachesis, Clothó me saeua necauit, / tertia nec passa est pietate rependere matri*. As in Martial's poem, the Parcae's action takes place in three steps: Lachesis resents the boy's poetical gift, Clotho takes his life, and the third (Atropos) does not commiserate with his mother's grief. In Martial's epigram *necat* would be a stunning pathetic end to this invitation to live. There is no syntactic obstacle: the verb would have an elliptical use here, as in other contexts such as *Ov. trist. 1.2.36* or *Sen. Dial. 1.3.3*, with a general implied object (*cf.* lines 5-6). Besides, although the Parcae are not said to "kill" elsewhere in Latin poetry, they are said to be *nocentes* (*Stat. Theb. 11.189; 11.462; silv. 5.2.84-85*). The only possible objection to *necat* is that the final distich focuses explicitly on the traditional image of the Parcae's spinning²⁰.

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¹⁸ *Cf.* note 10.

¹⁹ See Schneidewin's *apparatus criticus* (1842).

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