Martial is a poet who makes us want to believe him. His critics focus heavily on his ‘mendicant facade’ and his role as a social commentator, critic and realist. Martial, like his fellow satirist and near contemporary Juvenal, is regarded as a valuable source of information about the Flavian Rome of the late first-century CE and, even more fascinating, a reliable source, this despite the fact that Martial wrote in an avowedly satirical vein that aimed at giving an epigrammatic point to his material. Social historians are particularly fascinated by what Martial has to say about the system of relationships based on patronage that so infused Roman society and culture and functioned as one of the major social mechanisms for the production of power in both republican and imperial Rome. There is no single subject that receives more attention in Martial’s epigrams than the troubled relations between amici (‘friends’) or patrons and their clients.

In Martial’s poetry, the number of patrons is staggering, the complaints about the system frequent and strident, and the references to
money bald and breathtaking. Martial has an almost obsessive interest in money—both in the abstract and the concrete—and in gifts (money and goods), the dole and loans. His poems are crowded with words for giving, asking, buying, selling and owning. Quite unlike his Augustan counterparts, who take pains to downplay interest in financial remuneration and stress the importance of poetry over any payment for it (cf., e.g., Prop. 1.6; 3.9), Martial seems almost to flaunt his need for money and to press the point in embarrassingly obvious ways. This has given rise to many condemnations of Martial for being shrill, servile, undignified, bullying and mendicant.

It seems to me that the way we read and interpret Martial’s treatment of ‘reality’ will colour our analysis of the poet’s self-presentation as a mendicant, his portrayal of the institution of patronage—largely through his own experiences—and the effect of these obsessions on his poetry. I would like, therefore, to ask the following questions: (1) What does it mean to say that Martial writes ‘realistic’ poetry? (2) What can we understand about Martial, his age and contemporaries, and about Martial’s treatment of patronage from his self-presentation as a ‘mendicant’ who has an avowed and blatant interest in money? (3) How can an understanding of these issues illuminate the workings of patronage in Flavian/imperial Rome? I shall focus in at

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6 See Hardie (1983) 70; Saller (1983) 255 (‘Martial’s undignified requests’); Sullivan (1991) 121–3. Over the centuries, some writers (particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but also closer to Martial’s time) have sympathised with Martial’s obsession with the financial aspect of being a writer, while others have condemned him roundly. For examples of the former, see Sen. Ben. 7.23.3 (Cum dicimus bene faciam repeti non oportere, non ex toto repetitionem tollimus; saepe enim opus est malis exactore, etiam bonis admonitio, nunc non poscat nec in ius vocet, ‘When I say that one shouldn’t seek a benefit in return, I am not completely disallowing this possibility; often delinquent people need to be dunned and even good people need a nudge.... Sometimes we need to give someone a nudge but one that is delivered tastefully and not as a demand or a legal order’) and Samuel Johnson, Vanity of Human Wishes 159–60 (‘There mark what ills the scholar’s life assail/toil, envy, want, the patron and the jail’ [see McAdam (1964) 99]) and ‘no man but a blockhead ever wrote for money’ [Hill and Powell (1934) 19]. In the first quote, Johnson replaced Juvenal’s ‘garret’ with the word ‘patron’ to annoy Lord Chesterfield. For the latter, see Lord Macauley’s famous assessment of Martial’s servile flattery and indecency (‘I wish he were less nauseous... his indecency, his servility and his mendicancy disgust me’ [see Trevelyan (1878) 458 for this letter] and Byron’s lines in Don Juan 1.43 (‘And then what proper person could be partial/To all those nauseous epigrams of Martial?’ [Steffan, Steffan and Pratt (1982) 56]).