In book 9 of Martial's *Epigrams*, we encounter the poet admiring a statuette of the *Hercules Epitrapezios* owned by Novius Vindex and wondering who might have created the impressive art object:

Alciden modo Vindicis rogabam
eset cuius opus laborque felix.
risit, nam solet hoc, leuique nutu
‘Graece numquid’ ait ‘poeta nescis?
inscripta est basis indicatque nomen.’
Λυσίππου lego, Phidiae putaui. (Mart. 9.44)

I recently asked the Alcides of Vindex whose work and happy labor he was. He laughed, for that is his way, and with a slight nod, "Poet," he said, "don't you know Greek? The base is inscribed and shows the name." I read Lysippus. I thought it was Phidias.

Martial here self-deprecatingly presents his poetic persona as a beholder of a piece of art who is not able to identify the artist from the character of the statuette. Thus he stands in stark contrast to his friend Novius Vindex, who in a contemporary poem by Statius is praised as an excellent art connoisseur:

mille ibi tunc species aerisque eborisque uetusti
atque locuturas mentito corpore ceras
edidici. quis namque oculis certauerit usquam
Vindicis, artificum ueteres agnoscere ductus
et non inscriptis auctorem reddere signis? (Stat. Silu. 4.6.20–24)

There it was and then that I learned of a thousand shapes of bronze and antique ivory and of false bodies in wax, ready to speak. For who would ever rival Vindex' eyes in recognizing the hands of old masters and restoring its maker to an untitled statue?

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2 On arguments supporting the reading *Alciden ... Vindicis*, transmitted in the β-group cf. Henriksén (2012) 197–199.
By contrast to Martial’s 9.44, Novius Vindex is able to identify an object’s artist without having to read any signature.³ Our epigrammatist, however, needs the Greek inscription,⁴ which the statuette itself points out to him; at the same time it mockingly asks him whether he is able to read Greek at all. This creates a funny effect, given that Martial in the immediately preceding epigram, which also deals with the Hercules Epitrapezios Noui Vindicis, has just demonstrated his close intimacy with Greek literature: after having listed the statuette’s previous owners in 9.43.7–10 as Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Sulla, Martial concludes the poem by comparing Novius Vindex to the mythological character of Molorus: utque fuit quondam placidi conuiua Molorchi, / sic uoluit docti Vindicis esse deus (“... and, as once he was the dinner guest of peaceful Molorus, so now the god has chosen to be lettered Vindex’s,” Mart. 9.43.13–14). In Callimachus’ Aetia, Molorus receives Hercules as a guest in his modest home.⁵ Thus, in 9.43, Martial proves himself a poeta doctus familiar with the Hellenistic tradition of the Hercules-legend,⁶ and in 9.44 the demigod himself mockingly accuses him for not even being able to decipher a simple Greek inscription—this, of course, would be all the more embarrassing for someone who calls himself an epigrammatist.

In the pair of poems just mentioned we can see a typical example of what one could call Martial’s poetics of contradiction,⁷ which is also a prominent feature of the epigrammatist’s negotiation with the Greek tradition of his genre: often something which is either not mentioned at all or even explicitly denied by the poet himself or the poet’s spokesperson (like Hercules in 9.44), will nevertheless indirectly appear in the corpus through an intertextual allusion. Such strategy is also pursued within Martial’s reception of his Greek predecessors in the field of epigram: they are rarely mentioned explicitly (though Martial refers to many other poets in his books),⁸ but the poet

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⁴ Canobbio (2011b) 76–85 convincingly argues for reading Greek Λυσίππου instead of the Latin Lysippum, preferred by Housman (1907) 246–247; Shackleton Bailey (1990) and (1993); and Henriksen (2012) 197–199.

⁵ Callim. Aet. fr. 60c Harder; Apollod. 2.5.1; Serv. ad G. 3.19; [Prob.] ad Virg. G. 3.19; Mart. 4.64.30; Stat. Sil. 3.1.29, 4.6.51; cf. Fabbrini (2005).

⁶ On the reception of Callimachus in Martial’s epigrams and other Flavian poets, see Cowan in this volume, pp. 345–371.
