The basic facts about Martial’s use of metre are well known. As was traditional in both Greek and Roman epigram, the elegiac couplet predominates, but the poet also makes frequent use of the Phalaecian hendecasyllable and the scazon or choliambic. In twelve epigrams he experiments with other metres.

While much has been written on the technical aspects of Martial’s metrical usage, less attention has been devoted to the factors determining the poet’s choice of metre in any given poem, and it is on this aspect which the following discussion will focus. Since the elegiac couplet, as the metre par excellence of the genre, is employed in epigrams covering the widest possible range of subject matter, style and tone, the most profitable line of enquiry will be to take this metre as the norm, and to explore in detail the poet’s use of other metrical schemes. When Martial intersperses poems in hendecasyllables and scazons among his elegiacs, is this merely for the sake of variety or as

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1. It is the usual metre in Books 13 and 14 and the De spectaculis. On average, it is used in around 75% of the poems in Books 1–12, though the figure is lower for Book 12 (see next n.).
2. It appears in 228 epigrams in Books 1–12 (just under 20%). There is considerable variation, ranging from approx. 10% in Books 3 and 9 to an exceptional 38 poems (39%) in 12. The average for Books 1–11 is 17.7%.
3. Cf. below n. 12.
4. Hexameters (1.53, 2.73, 6.64, 7.98); iambic trimeters (6.12, 11.77); iambic trimeter + dimer, as in Hor. Epod. 1–10 (1.49, 3.14, 9.77, 11.59); choliambus + dimer (1.61); sotadics (3.29). For Martial’s metres, see further Birt in Friedländer 1886, I.26–50; Giarratano 1908; Marina Sáez 1998. I have not seen Luque Moreno 1987.
6. Morgan 2000, 119–20 makes a start in this direction in his discussion of Mart. 11.5. On this question, the commentators have for the most part focused on the unusual metres (e.g. Citroni 1975, 177 on 1.53; Henriksén 1999, 99 on 9.77). Otherwise there have been only passing remarks e.g. Citroni 1975, 12 suggests that hendecasyllables were chosen for 1.1 so that Martial could use his cognomen, which would not fit into elegiacs; Kay 1985 on 11.61 and Grewing 1997 on 6.26 both mention the association of the scazon with invective.
7. The discussion will be confined to Martial’s two main alternative metres, the hendecasyllable and the scazon.
an act of homage to his epigrammatic predecessor Catullus, or are these metres also associated by him with certain types of theme or tone, such as invective, wit or obscenity? Groups of epigrams on a similar theme but employing more than one metre are also of special interest: does a change from elegiac couplets to hendecasyllables, for instance, mark a change of mood?

1. The choliambic metre

Let us begin with the scazon, since the rationale for its use is in general clear-cut. The metre consists of an iambic trimeter in which the final short syllable is replaced with a long, effecting a “limping close that calls a sneering halt to the line” (Cunningham 1971, 12). It was associated particularly with the sixth-century poet Hipponax of Ephesus, to whose invective verse the metre was specially suited. Later the scazon was employed by Greek and Latin poets for a wider variety of subject matter, though it retained its association with invective and satire. Catullus, for instance, uses the metre eight times, mostly in contexts of invective, the notable exception being the Sirmio poem (31). Like Catullus, Martial employs the scazon judiciously. It appears in only 74 epigrams in Books 1–12, i.e. just over 6% of the total.

8 It is unclear whether Martial’s use of metres is derived directly from Catullus or whether he is following a Latin epigrammatic tradition. (The meagre fragments of predecessors such as Marsus and Pedo are, however, all in elegiacs.) The Priapea use the hendecasyllable, the elegiac couplet and the scazon, in that order of frequency (cf. Parker 1988, 45–7), but whether they antedate Martial is uncertain (Parker 1988, 36–7). Metrical variety is a Roman phenomenon: the Hellenistic epigrams occasionally employ hendecasyllables and scazons, but the satiric epigrammatists Lucillian and Nicharchus confine themselves to the elegiac couplet, with the sole exception of Lucillius, AP 11.176, in iambic trimeters.

9 Demetrios, Eloc. 301, cited by Morgan 2000, 101–2, says Hipponax made the metre lame and thus suitable for “harshness and abuse” (δεινότης καὶ λοιδορία). Cf. Knox 1922, xxviii: “it has a growling and grimacing effect, with an accompaniment of irony, well suited to sardonic humour”; West 1982, 41.


11 On Catullus’ use of the scazon in 31, see Morgan 2000, esp. 100–7.

12 This figure excludes the epigram in the preface to Book 1. For a list, see Raven 1965, 181, who erroneously includes the hendecasyllabic 3.35. The percentage of choliambic lines in the corpus is somewhat higher than 6%, since poems in the metre tend to be long: the 74 epigrams contain 778 lines, i.e. an average of more than ten lines each. (Similarly in the Priapea the eight poems in scazons have an average...