

## **Romans, the Night and Martial**

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### **Introduction**

Rome and the night, or more colloquially ‘Rome after Dark’, is a research area that has received limited attention. This neglect surprises, as it is a topic that catches the imagination and one that has abundant subject matter. Limited attention, however, also provides opportunity. In short therefore, the primary aim of my project is to analyze representations of the night/darkness and day/light to understand how the concepts are presented in extant literature. As a part of this process we will also gain further insights into several aspects of Roman Society, ranging from identity issues to daily (or nightly) reality. A vast topic, yet it is with this broad aspect that this paper begins. We will discuss some select passages to give insights into Roman social construction of the night and show that the night has different and at times a conflicting imagery, at least in literary texts. This is followed by a more detailed investigation into Martial’s *Epigrams* and his use of the night and darkness. To be clear, the observations that are introduced are preliminary, and while interesting and informative they also raise plenty of questions that undoubtedly need further analysis. No claim is made to having reached final conclusions on all topics, but as will become clear the approach itself opens up a different perspective into Roman society.

### **The Imagery of the Night**

Studies of night in antiquity are few and far between. Most social history books make the odd mention of an occupation or activity that occur at night: so, for example, bakers may begin work in the early morning while others sleep (Martial *Epigrams* 12.57); and teachers disturb with their early classes (Martial *Epigrams* 9.68). Of course, drunks and/or dangers in the night receive some attention, consider the sentiment expressed in select passages of Juvenal (*Satires* 3.232-314). Nevertheless, a comprehensive and all-embracing analysis is lacking, any comments tend to be limited to a specific passage or are very general, selecting specific anecdotes as exceptions that (ultimately) maintain the view that Romans tended to spend the hours

of darkness sleeping. Demonstrative of this view is Balsdon, who in his *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* notes: ‘The Romans in general lived by day and slept by night’. He does go on to comment on the odd exception (bakers, elder Pliny, hard working emperors), but then returns in detail to daily routines.<sup>1</sup> Only a couple of recent studies challenge this norm, (1) a collection of papers gathered under the title *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*, which while interesting does not directly relate to our topic. Then there is (2) James Ker’s article on ‘Nocturnal Writers’. Ker introduces Roman writers who make use of the night to pursue their craft. In developing his discussion Ker makes some far-reaching and interesting comments on Roman social construction of nighttime imagery. His work is directly relevant to our topic and we will make some use of it, at times developing and discussing points he identifies. These works aside, there are not a lot of other studies.<sup>2</sup>

As noted this scarcity surprises. The reality is that in spite of the generalizing modern comments quoted a lot actually occurred at night, far more than can be covered here: anecdotes abound describing bars, inns and baths open into the evening – or later. Workers begin, end or carry on working at various stages of the night – in Petronius’ *Satyrica*, for example, our trio having escaped Trimalchio’s dinner party manage to find their way to their accommodation in the dead of night only to find the door locked and no amount of knocking will raise the inn keeper. The arrival of a courier, however, solves their problem as he simply breaks the door down (*Satyrica* 79). The courier’s appearance is not presented in a way that is unusual or unexpected; to the contrary he is an example of a late night worker. Then there is the fire brigade who broke into Trimalcho’s dinner party, again late at night, in the belief there was a fire (*Satyrica* 78) – more workers (and revelers) out at night.

There are also numerous complaints in a variety of sources against noise, which in itself indicates activity. There are laws that govern day and night time urban

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<sup>1</sup> Balsdon (1969) 18 (for quote) and 19 (for exceptions). Note too Balsdon (1969) 55: ‘Workers and shopkeepers must have fed when their working day ended. After which, with the coming of darkness, most people went to bed’. Balsdon is by no means alone; consider Shelton (1998) 124 and n.9. All references to Martial are to his *Epigrams*.

<sup>2</sup> Ker (2004) 209-242. There is a reasonable amount of material available on dreams, but these tend to have an abstract association to the night and darkness. To be fair, there is a recognition by some that more may have been occurring at night than is normally accepted, worthy of mention is Beard (2008) 78-80. But, again, the scarcity of such studies surprises.

traffic<sup>3</sup>, while court cases determine acceptable noise and activities.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Suetonius informs us that Augustus preferred to travel at night (*Augustus* 53.2); while Horace's trip down the Appian Way gives us another perspective on travel and the night.<sup>5</sup> We have accounts of battles that were fought at night or into the night (e.g. Actium, where according to Suetonius Octavian fought to a late hour of the evening: *Augustus* 16), and there are explanations as to how the cover of night was used to try and gain a military advantage.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned above anecdotes abound, but we need to focus on literary imagery and societal perception, or perhaps more accurately the societal construction of the night. As indicated, we will then show how Martial used the night to reinforce his themes and to provoke. The arguments are not all abstract and literary, there is a cross over to reality here as well that reoccurs and that we will make some comment on. After all Martial's social commentary was not produced in a vacuum, and societal norms and parameters need to be identified in order to provide context. Our author, in this case Martial, through his writing actually creates a 'mental space' that he shares with his audience, the allusions within this 'space' are in turn recognized through shared cultural inputs. The connection to reality, therefore, is implicit and necessary, albeit difficult to reconstruct due to our separation from early Imperial Roman society.<sup>7</sup>

To be more specific, day and night, light and darkness are common enough polarities. Each can invoke particular associations and add a vivid imagery to a description of events. So a simple dichotomy in language can represent opposites in reality, or at least perceived reality, in turn uniting literary imagery and social construction. A relationship that is complex. Nevertheless, James Ker has begun the process of analyzing Roman society's construction of the night discussing, among

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<sup>3</sup> On Traffic regulation see the *Tabula Heracleensis* otherwise known as the *Lex Julia Municipalis* [CIL I<sup>2</sup> 593], Section II.56-61 restricts traffic movement to after the tenth hour of the day and into the night: see Crawford (1996) 372ff.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Beard (2008) 78; FIRA iii 185 (p. 582ff).

<sup>5</sup> Horace *Satires* 1.5 – note the use of a boat that was meant to carry the party by night, and descriptions of Inns where the party stayed at night.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Alexander's crossing of the Hydaspes, before dawn, landing uncontested before noticed by Porus' scouts: Arrian 5.12.3-4; Curtius 8.14.23-4; Plutarch *Alexander* 60.3-4. Note too the advice given to Alexander before Guagamela, Arrian 3.10.

<sup>7</sup> This is not meant to imply that Martial presents us with a direct window into the reality of urban Rome, but it does provide us with insights, albeit in a complex way. See comments and references in Roman (2010) 88-117. I must also acknowledge Dr. Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides who drew my attention to how my arguments could correspond to those related to performativity of the night in Roman literature, and introduced the phrase 'mental space' as a way to encapsulate my arguments.

other things, Quintilian's recommendation to use the night in order to write: 'And so one should burn the midnight oil and let the silence of the night and a closed room and a single lamp especially hold one's eyes, as it were, free from swerving'.<sup>8</sup>

Now, the imagery that is built up here is striking, but consider what is being praised. Night incorporates the best features or conditions that facilitate writing: solitude, silence and the lack of distraction for the mind. To be fair, for Quintilian, time is but a part of the equation. Location, for example, also has a role to play, but it is the imagery of the night, Ker argues, that helps to present a deliberate picture based on societal understanding and expectations (of the night); that is based on social constructs. Ker goes on to note that 'the significance of Quintilian's nocturnal scene can be most clearly defined ... [against]... the set of nocturnal activities in which he is emphatically not engaging. In the moralizing tradition of Roman literature ... there was a strong tendency to see a person's use of time as an indicator of his or her moral and social identity.'<sup>9</sup>

If we accept Ker's analysis this suggests that, at its most simplistic level, it is possible to add a moralistic tone or a judgment to people's actions or to certain activities by attributing them to certain times. Anecdotes support this interpretation. Tacitus, for example, when describing some of the degenerate ways embraced by some nobles under Nero, outlines a social understanding of the difference between day and night – or light and dark: 'Night too was given up to infamy, so that virtue had not a moment left to her, but all the vilest of that promiscuous throng dared to do in the darkness anything they had lusted for in the day.'<sup>10</sup>

In this construction darkness and night are perceived as a time of secrecy where social norms can be perverted. Individuals use the cover of darkness to do what they might desire by day, but do not dare to do. In the context of Tacitus' passage the cloak of darkness provides the opportunity for all sorts of excesses, of which drinking and fornication are to the fore. Time and action, therefore, inform a person's social identity. At the extreme we even hear of those who invert the duties of the day and the night, not waking until night has begun to fall (*Seneca Epistulae* 122). These individuals abandon their public duties to the freedom and luxuries of the night, and

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<sup>8</sup> Quintilian 10.3.26: *ideoque lucubranti silentium noctis et clausum cubiculum et lumen unum velut rectos maxime teneat*. Trans Murgja in Ker (2004) 214.

<sup>9</sup> Ker (2004) 216.

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus *Annals* 14.20: *Noctis quoque dedecori adiectas, ne quod tempus pudori relinquatur, sed coetu promisco, quod perditissimus quisque per diem concupiverit, per tenebras audeat* (trans Church and Bodribb).

in doing so represent all of what traditional Roman values are not.<sup>11</sup> This reinforces a link between time and identity and introduces a link between time and the other, where inversions also construct a perceived social identity.<sup>12</sup> These connections can take many forms; at its most obvious the night was used to cloak public and cultural norms. It was a time of secrecy, darkness provided a cover or a screen that challenged and/or transformed normal social activities, providing inversions and different perspectives. Consider Claudius, who received his virile gown at midnight without the usual ceremony (Suetonius *Claudius* 2). Night is used to cloak the ceremony and the participants, transforming the event and its reception. Here the use of the night must also have added to a wider social perception of Claudius' condition.

Night too can also be understood as a time of extremes, a time for degenerate luxurious activity, a time of secrecy and it is also a time of danger. Juvenal makes that clear (see for example *Satires* 3.268, 278, 302) as do the laws of the land. Consider how a thief, stealing during the day, could only be killed if he carried a weapon, however if he is caught at night no such restriction existed: the thief could be killed on the spot.<sup>13</sup> The underlying point, again, is that time changes perception and as a consequence reality (as any thief apprehended at night would attest, if given the chance!).

We can of course also make the case that some of these perceived negative associations to the night or indeed activities undertaken at night are a part of Roman culture, and while they might violate some ideological construct each is an expected norm. In the extant literature drinking and sex would dominate this sort of discourse, and moreover examples abound. Juvenal comes to mind (again), we have also made reference to Tacitus (above) and we will see that these *topoi* appear in Martial on a regular basis. Excess and luxury, therefore, are accepted and expected constructs of the night, a part of how Romans present and understand their society.

Certainly such a discussion is very abstract. Moreover, we are a long way from Quintilian's description of a writer utilizing the night to produce his craft, although some of the features of the night that enable the negative constructions we have discussed are the very reasons why this time is beneficial for a writer: the dislocation from daily expectations, distractions and norms; not to mention the silence

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<sup>11</sup> Note also Ker (2004) 220.

<sup>12</sup> There is much recent anthropological research that examines time and the other. A good place to start is the work of Johannes Fabian and his book *Time and the Other*.

<sup>13</sup> See Twelve Tables 8.3; *Digest* 9.2.4.1, 47.2.55(54).2; Ker (2004) 219.

all immediately spring to mind. Here the night mirrors the forest where Pliny goes hunting, returning with three boars and full notebooks.<sup>14</sup> Attributes of a space and time are utilized for specific purposes. What this shows is that imagery and reality can and do operate on several complex levels. Even accepting a basic understanding or representation of nighttime events there are complexities and distortions. Some activities can be enhanced by the simple fact that they challenge, perhaps overcome or invert negative associations (such as Quintilian's writer). As a result very different images and use of the night appear, each representing a mode of behavior that can advance or undermine societal norms.

Another view of these differing social constructions of the night is evident in the Lucretia story. It is a good, if not the best, example of different night imagery encapsulated in a single story in the extant literature. To be specific, two different images of the night are portrayed through the activities in two households. Livy informs us that the princes arrive in Rome at dusk and find their wives, as Livy describes it: 'with a group of young friends at a dinner-party, in the greatest luxury'. The riders continue on and discover Lucretia very differently employed, Livy again takes up the story: '...it was already late at night, but there, in the hall of her house, surrounded by her busy maid-servants, she [Lucretia] was still hard at work by lamplight upon her spinning.'<sup>15</sup>

The contrast could not be clearer. Luxury and drinking are contrasted with work ethic, honor and familial responsibility. The night can be a time of excess or an extension of the day. For Ker these two incompatible modes of nocturnal activity are symbolic, dramatizing 'the fundamental conflict between two models of the household and two models of the state'.<sup>16</sup> We can add more, each 'activity' symbolizes the complexity of studying identity and societal norms. For want of a better expression, Romans undertake both sorts of nocturnal activities, so both are a part of Roman society. At the same time (at least on an ideological level) negative actions at night are 'other', contrary to societal norms and constructs (in this case) of the ideal Roman society. In the Lucretia narrative this is further emphasized by the violation that occurs at night, when the house was quiet and all were asleep (Livy 1.58). The 'mental space' is one of order, Lucretia is safe from the dangers of the

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<sup>14</sup> Pliny *Letters* 1.6, I owe this reference and association to Dr Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides.

<sup>15</sup> Livy 1.57: *sed nocte sera deditam lanae inter lucubrantes ancillas in medio aedium sedentem*. (trans. De Sélincourt).

<sup>16</sup> Ker (2004) 224.

night in her home. Yet that other understanding of the night, a cultural link to danger in turn destroys this imagery. The mental space distorts demonstrating how nocturnal excess can lead to depravity and the breakdown of social order, perhaps even society. The overriding observation, the particulars of the story aside, is the complexity inherent in the nighttime imagery. In other words, Livy creates a mental space and then transforms it using different allusions to the night. In this Livy is not unique, as will be shown Martial's use of the night is also complex and is constructed to present deliberate imagery.

### **Martial**

It should not surprise that night and darkness are used extensively in Martial, *nox* for example appears 43 times and while *tenebrae* is used only 7 times there are numerous allusions to lamps, lanterns, dawn, stars, shadows and the like.<sup>17</sup> The purpose is to play on powerful imagery to enhance his epigrams and the themes that he develops. This though is just the beginning. A detailed study of Martial's use of *nox* (night) provides further insight. Night is associated with the passage of time, so for example in *Epigram 2.5* the stated desire is to be with Decianus 'day and night'. This is a phrase that seems to be used as a descriptive (even poetic) and emphatic way of measuring time. It is not, however, a phrase peculiar to Martial, appearing in other literature of this era. Pliny for example also describes the passage of time in this way (*Pliny Letters 2.3*). We should also note that it is not just 'days and nights' that refer to time, but other terminology is also utilized. In *Epigrams 4.7* we learn of a 'long night', while elsewhere *nox* can mark a point in time, describing events 'last night' (see *Epigrams 1.27*) or even one's 'last night on earth' (*Epigrams 1.80*). Of course time itself is not the issue (or the only issue) that Martial emphasizes, rather select terminology is chosen for literary echoes and social/cultural constructs. For example, Martial uses the expression 'long night' (*nox longa*) to play on the social connection between night and sex (something we will discuss in more detail shortly), and to utilize a convention in erotic poetry that can refer to lonely nights as long.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> As demonstrative note that *somnus* ('sleep') appears in the *Epigrams* 20 times; *luna* ('moon') 7 times; *umbra* ('darkness' – caused by shade) 30 times; *lucerna* ('lamp') 19 times.

<sup>18</sup> Martial *Epigrams 7.4*. Note usage in Ovid *Amores 1.2.3*; and see Soldevila (2006) 136.

Moreover, a ‘long night’ can describe death, at *Epigrams* 4.7 it perhaps also marks an ending; while in *Epigrams* 10.71 the connection with death, one long sleep, is more explicit.

Martial, therefore, deliberately chooses terminology to convey the themes and ideas he wants to emphasize. Often, even when *nox* is used to measure time, other (expected) *topoi* and social connections to the term are also explicitly described. So there are multiple meanings or layers to the use of the night. To be more specific, consider the *topoi* that we find Martial making reference to, there is (1) Drinking all night (e.g. *Epigrams* 12.12) or drinking heavily during the night (e.g. *Epigrams* 11.104), or drinking until sunrise (*Epigrams* 1.28). This can get extended so we also have, for example, drinking to forget (one’s troubles) (*Epigrams* 1.106.5); and the use of associated Greek proverbs, when out drinking at night a dinner invitation was extended that was expected to be forgotten (one does not ‘remember’ things said and done in the course of an evening’s drinking!).<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the particulars the association between night and drinking is apparent and played on here by Martial. Furthermore, and (2), night is also the accepted or appropriate time for sex (e.g. *Epigrams* 10.38; 11.97, 11.104; 12.65). Tacitus too makes this explicit in his account of Nero’s wedding to Pythagoras, consider how he finishes his description of the scene with the scathing judgment: ‘... everything in a word was plainly visible, which, even when a woman weds darkness hides’.<sup>20</sup>

As we would expect there are also associated themes or extensions to this basic construct. For example at *Epigrams* 11.4 we have claims of sexual prowess with intercourse occurring numerous times in the course of a night. So as with drinking, the social norm is manipulated, with night and darkness used in order to emphasise the themes under development. He purposefully plays on the social connotations embedded in the terminology he selects to enhance his imagery and in doing so blurs literary *topoi* with, if not reality, then at least the accepted social construct of the

<sup>19</sup> See Martial *Epigrams* 1.27 and see Plutarch *Moralia* 612d.

<sup>20</sup> Tacitus *Annals* 15.37: ‘Nero who polluted himself by every lawful or lawless indulgence, had not omitted a single abomination which could heighten his depravity, till a few days afterwards he stooped to marry himself to one of that filthy herd, by name Pythagoras, with all the forms of regular wedlock. The bridal veil was put over the emperor; people saw the witnesses of the ceremony, the wedding dower, the couch and the nuptial torches; everything in a word was plainly visible, which, even when a woman weds darkness hides’. *Ipsae per licita atque illicita foedatus nihil flagitii reliquerat, quo corruptior ageret, nisi paucos post dies uni ex illo contaminatorum grege (nomen Pythagorae fuit) in modum solemnium coniugiorum denupsisset. Inditum imperatori flammeum, missi auspices, dos et genialis torus et faces nuptiales, cuncta denique spectate, quae etiam in femina nox operit.* (trans. Church and Bodribb).



night. To use the terminology of our earlier discussion, Martial is using the night to create a mental space to advance his imagery.

Let us now consider *Epigrams* 11.104, where Martial plays on a contrast between day and night / light and darkness (and associated *topoi*) in order to help present some powerful imagery: '[...] I get pleasure from nights drawn out in joyful drinking: you glumly hurry to get up when you've drunk water. You like the darkness [*tenebrae*]: I like to have fun with the lamp as witness and to bust my guts with the light let in [...].' So in this theme the epigram goes on extorting his ways and desires resulting in the climatic last couple of lines: '[...] If puritanism delights you, you can be a Lucretia through the whole day if you like, but I want Lais at night'.<sup>21</sup> Kay in his commentary notes the extensive allusions in many of Martial's word choices in this passage: the wife drinking water at a symposium symbolizes her puritanical outlook, his enjoyment of the symposium denotes enjoyment of wine and the well accepted association to sex and/or love.<sup>22</sup> Of more relevant interest to us, of course, are the references to night, darkness and the lamp.

In this *Epigram* (11.104), as is evident even from the few lines cited, the imagery is deliberate and powerful, the literary *topoi* help reinforce Martial's themes, and the cultural expectations and norms underlie the terminology used. The mental space being developed is deliberate; the imagery is to the night as a time of decadence, to be understood in the context of our earlier discussion. So at its most obvious night is the time for the symposium and its use is expected, if nothing other than to enhance the *topoi* of drinking and sex, and so luxury and decadence. However, there is another subtle association here that perhaps again demonstrates the complex imagery of the night in the mind of the Romans. Tacitus showed us that night and its inherent darkness is the appropriate time for intercourse. In this epigram, this association is maintained (his wife 'likes the darkness'), but then the social norm is inverted as the lamp casts aside the darkness and bears witness to the nocturnal activity. This contrast between sex in the dark or by the light of the lamp on one level hints at adventurous activities and exhibitionism, topics discussed by others

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<sup>21</sup> Martial *Epigrams* 11.104: *me iucunda iuvant tractae per pocula noctes: tu properas pota surgere tristis aqua. Tu tenebris gaudes: me ludere teste lucerne et iuvat admissa rumpere luce latus ... sit e delectate gravitas, Lucretia toto sis licet usque die, Laida nocte volo.* (trans N.M. Kay). Lais is, of course, an infamous courtesan; cf. Athen. 13.587d.

<sup>22</sup> Kay (1985) 276-282.

elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> For us Martial is also inverting a social norm through the imagery of the night. This recognition gives, in turn, acknowledgement of Martial's skill. He does not just present tried literary *topoi*, but manipulates them to provide interest, humor and comment. In doing so the line between literary creation and social perception (and so reality?) becomes blurred. The complex social conventions or understanding of the term 'night' is reaffirmed through the various applications and interpretations. In other words, the layers of literary imagery presented reflect complex social conventions.

By now it should be clear that Martial's nights are filled with drinking to excess, debauchery, or simply mark time (albeit usually in the process of either drinking, sex or both!). Yet this is still not the full story. Martial also recognizes the positive social constructs of the night, and not just implicitly as part of an inversion. Sometimes the contrast and the promotion are explicit. In *Epigrams* 2.89, for example, drinking well into the night is highlighted as part of a degenerate, luxurious lifestyle. However, in the following epigram (2.90) the image of a good life is developed in which 'nights with sleep' are praised and sought after. The juxtaposition of the epigrams is undoubtedly deliberate as are the contrasting images of the night. Related are other epigrams that complain about broken sleep; schoolmasters and bakers, for example, disturb sleep in *Epigrams* 12.57. So in his work Martial reflects wider social constructs of the night, both good and bad, and inverts the constructs on occasion with clever literary ploys.

To conclude this discussion on Martial and the night, we must observe that he also brings us full circle to Quintilian's nocturnal writers. In *Epigrams* 8.3 Martial is encouraged to keep writing and not to change his attractive style of poetry. We learn that his style will last forever; other styles are dictated by schoolmasters and hated by the students: 'Let the ultra serious and the ultra severe write such stuff, sad fellows looked upon by the midnight lamp'.<sup>24</sup> In these lines Martial plays on the positive imagery highlighted (albeit at a later date) by Quintilian, so what we have is another clever literary inversion of societal norms. The positive image of men toiling away by candlelight (which is in essence an echo of Lucretia toiling away with her wool,

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<sup>23</sup> Note comments and references in Kay (1985) 278.

<sup>24</sup> Martial *Epigrams* 8.3: *scribant ista graves nimium nimiumque severi, quos media miseris nocte lucerne videt.*

converting day into night to complete important tasks) is made to appear to be a waste of time, no one appreciates their endeavors so what a ridiculous use of the night!

### **Conclusion**

What then do Martial's representations of the night suggest? The one observation that we have made consistent reference to throughout this paper is Martial's use and manipulation of social constructs, by which I mean the images of the night and darkness that we introduced earlier. So, as Sullivan notes, Martial's literary themes embrace social attitudes, which in turn suggest that they reflect reality on some level.<sup>25</sup> In other words, night and darkness and/or day and light are used to reinforce important literary themes. These themes are anchored in Roman society's views, attitudes, and norms, all in relation to the night. We are presented with a mental space where the intended audience will understand the allusions because of the shared cultural input. In this context the views are real, so the literary imagery is giving us an insight into the Roman condition, that is Roman identity, culture and society. We have recognized something of the complexity of how these concepts interact, and how Martial twists and inverts them.

We have also seen enough to demonstrate that night, darkness, day and light are select terms that can operate as a lens (as such) or a way of approaching or assessing a text. In doing so perspective changes. Our attention is not only drawn to select *topoi* and social beliefs, as we have discussed, but also to other aspects of the text that we have mentioned in passing; aspects such as time, identity and even reality in a more direct sense. We have for example noted that bakers, teachers, couriers and writers are nocturnal workers. Examining both what anecdotes present us with and the associated imagery give us insights into Roman society. Moreover, the process itself (our focus on the night) is new and provides its own insights. It raises new questions, questions that we simply have not got the space to address here; they will be dealt with elsewhere.

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<sup>25</sup> Sullivan (1991) 160-161.

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