

A Case for the Epigram: Ben Jonson's "Inviting a Friend to Supper"

MEREDITH GOULDING

The epigram does not readily come to mind when one thinks of major work in the English poetic tradition, and the fact that Jonson's justly famous "Inviting a Friend to Supper" occurs in a collection entitled *Epigrams* is rarely accorded much attention. Even distinguished editors of Jonson dismiss as a "quite unmanageable wilderness of verse kinds"¹ the volume that the poet himself referred to as "the ripest of my studies, my *Epigrams*". Not that popular notions, either now or in the seventeenth century, of what the term might mean offer much assistance. "Inviting a Friend to Supper" is hardly illuminated by the OED definition of epigram (2. a short poem ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought); nor has it much in common with the work of Jonson's contemporaries, from whose fashionable epigrams Jonson took care to distinguish his own:

To thee my way in epigrams seems new,
When both it is the old way and the true.
Thou sayst that cannot be: for thou hast seen
Davies and Weever, and the best have been,
And mine come nothing like. I hope so.²

If lines like these, in conjunction with a current narrow definition, present the difficulty of reaching common ground with Jonson on the epigram, they also indicate the importance of facing that difficulty. Their terse, clear insistence on Jonson's interest in the genre as he believed it should be interpreted, may serve as a reminder of what ought hardly be doubted: the poems chosen to head the 1616 Folio—before, it will be remembered, the plays as well as other poems—were named advisedly.

What then, was "the old way and the true" in epigrams? Jonson, like the contemporaries he dismisses, owed a debt to Martial. He was able nonetheless to chart a course through what had generally proved a Scylla and Charybdis with the Latin text. On the one hand "merry Martial" invited imitation, and men like

- 1 C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (eds.), *Ben Jonson*, Volume II (second corrected edition), Oxford 1954, p. 341.
- 2 Epigram 18 in Ian Donaldson (ed.), *Ben Jonson: Poems*, London 1975. This text is used throughout.

Davies turned out collections of short satirical, often licentious quips. On the other hand, the Martial of verses which “doe muche availe”—after the “filthy and fulsom phrases” were weeded out—could offer “profite and great delectation” to “modest mynded” readers of, say, Kendall’s *Flowers of Epigrammes*.³ Jonson’s more generous understanding of the Roman poet allowed him to avoid such excesses—equally unfair to the original model—and the fact that he, also, drew on Martial’s work, though very much more intelligently, is well established. But to set the limits of “the old way” there, with Martial, is to discount the largest body of epigrammatic verse, a collection to which Jonson as one of the foremost Greek scholars of his day certainly had access. That collection is *The Greek Anthology*, and its diversity of amatory, dedicatory, declamatory, convivial, sepulchral, and satiric epigrams (to list a few of the types) indicated the range of which the genre was, and in Jonson’s hand again would be, capable. With the majority of the poems from the Greek authors being epigrams—those Greeks, who, Jonson believed, had held poetry “in prime estimation” and “transmitted [it] to the Latines”, before it was received by the English⁴—the genre offers problems of unexpected complexity rather than of narrowness. But in this broader context Jonson’s one hundred and thirty-three poems ushered together in *Epigrams* can be seen as offering not a confusing wilderness of different verse kinds, but the surprising variety of their nominated genre.

For there are certain characteristics common to the poems in *Epigrams*, including “Inviting a Friend to Supper” which is apparently the least epigrammatic of them, and these characteristics give unity to the collection and also set the works in it apart from other forms of poetry. Briefly they are, first, an unusual insistence upon polish and professionalism in artistry, and second, the open demonstration of a balance skilfully achieved between public, conventional themes and private conviction or experience. The attention of the reader is particularly invited to both these qualities so that interest in the epigram focuses on the quality of poise achieved in a structure that holds in equilibrium art’s two “directions”: the truth of the fable, to use Jonson’s terms, and the

- 3 Timothe Kendall, *Flowers of Epigrammes* (1577), Facsimile of The Spenser Society Publications, No. 15 (1874), New York 1967, p. 19.
- 4 *Discoveries*, in C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (eds.), *Ben Jonson*, Vol. VIII (second corrected edition), Oxford 1954, l. 2382. Subsequent references are to this text.

matters of fact or feeling which supply that truth's substance. The art of the epigrammatist is the even juxtaposition of abstraction and quotidian detail—a concept most readily observed, perhaps, in the sepulchral epigram, where the fact of one man's death is quite as important as the observations, whatever they may be, about Death more generally. So epigrams demonstrate in action, as it were, the very mechanics of poetry in making a focus of attention, at the surface of the poem, the process which is submerged to a greater or lesser degree in other genres.

The origin of Greek epigrams as anonymous inscriptions on tombstones, sign-posts, and the like, designed to catch by their brief, memorable artistry the thoughts of random passers-by, explains the unusual emphasis on expertness as well as the public quality in the poetry, as it does of course the relative brevity. But it is to the curious fact of a metre shared with elegy, the genre of private reflection, that we must look for the other quality in epigram: that strain of personal experience or understanding tempering the austerity of brief, public poems. The genre brought into sharp focus Jonson's theoretical principle (expressed throughout *Discoveries*) that the poet's major achievement was tempering his own awareness to wisdom in the school of men, at the same time as infusing "somewhat, out of all, peculiar to himself" (l. 2407) into work addressed to the good of all ages. This kind of poetry must have offered especially interesting challenges to the man who was at once the professional servant of mistress Poesy (l. 622–32) and "rare Ben Jonson".

A broader understanding, then, of what Jonson meant by the true way of writing epigrams is the key to both the reach and the refinement of the poems in his major collection. If "Inviting a Friend to Supper" has long been an admired work, regardless of its poetic classification, nonetheless the less marked, less known values of the poem are to be discovered in its successful resolution of challenges peculiar to that demanding genre.

To speak of an impression of personal experience motivating the poem perhaps needs little substantiation. Almost certainly a first reading of "Inviting a Friend to Supper" suggests that, whatever else the poet may be doing too, he is inviting a particular person to an actual occasion. Most noticeable are the generally easy movement of the verse, the local references and the direct address to a certain "grave sir".

Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house and I
Do equally desire your company;
Not that we think us worthy such a guest,

But that your worth will dignify our feast
 With those that come; whose grace may make that seem
 Something, which else could hope for no esteem.
 It is the fair acceptance, sir, creates
 The entertainment perfect, not the cates.

But even while enjoying this aspect of the epigram one becomes aware, too, of other pressures in the poem for which a local and literal reading cannot account. It is not just that, as one realizes, Jonson "tracks the snow" of classical authors, even in the apparently personal jests; subtleties of tone indicate that this poem offers as well, and quite equally, elements a good deal more formal than a simple, occasional poem might demand. Read with the care Jonson recommended to those who take his book in hand, "Inviting a Friend to Supper" offers a careful pattern of elements plausible and personal with those fictive and, since they prove to be conventionally so, public. It is more thoroughgoing than a technique of cross-reference either to dignify a particular occasion or to "jar into motion"⁵ a classical imitation. We need to look to the poem's genre, and in that context we find that the details of Jonson's invitation bear out the kind of open balance sought in the epigram between public theme and private experience. In this poem the former is a literary tradition and the values it perpetuates, while the latter is Jonson's commitment to both: morally, artistically, and, the liveliness of the fable would have us believe, actually.

First the food: lines 9–11 promise the guest

Yet shall you have, to rectify your palate,
 An olive, capers, or some better salad
 Ushering the mutton; with a short-legged hen,
 If we can get her, full of eggs, and then
 Lemons, and wine for sauce . . .

Three poems of Martial, it is well known, stand behind Jonson's "Inviting a Friend to Supper", and all three (V.lxxviii, X.xlviii, and XI.lii) make specific mention of appetizers—lettuce, tunny, eggs, and leeks—before the meats which are, respectively sausage, a kid and meatballs, and "fish, mussels, sow's paps, and fat birds of the poultry-yard and marsh".⁶ Jonson follows this pat-

5 The expression (and argument) is William V. Spanos', in "The Real Toad in the Jonsonian Garden: Resonance in the Nondramatic Poetry", *JEGP*, LXVIII (1969), 1–23.

6 The Martial edition used throughout is *Martial* ed. and transl. W. C. A. Ker, 2 Vols., Loeb Classical Library, London and New York, 1919–20.

tern, but at the same time introduces elements appropriate to his own time. Most obviously there is the change in the meat to English mutton, but perhaps the order of the food, too, is designed to strike a balance between Martial's Rome and Jonson's England. There are certain ambiguities, centred on the meaning of two verbs: "usher", a new word at the time, and the Latinate "rectify". The first may mean "to conduct" or "lead" but it can also mean "to attend"; and "rectify" is puzzling because though it almost always has a retrospective sense, the context here strongly suggests a meaning something like "to prepare". The appetizers and salads came first in Rome; what was the order of salads and meats in seventeenth-century England? That proves difficult to establish, but the evidence in the poem seems to suggest Jonson deliberately introducing flexibility here, though at the same time not departing too far from the Martial poems. Something similar happens when we come to the "short-legged hen . . . full of eggs". The mention of eggs presented in this manner is odd, but it is worth noting that all three of the Martial poems make a point of promising eggs—sliced eggs hiding tunny in V.lxxviii, eggs garnishing lizard fish in X.xlviii and garnishing tunny in XI.liii, as well as, in the last, eggs "roasted in embers of moderate heat". One wonders whether Jonson played with all these notions of hiding, garnishing, and roasting to offer the one curious, telescoped reference to a hen full of eggs. A hen was no doubt a more substantial supper dish to an Englishman than eggs alone, in the absence of tunny and lizard fish. There may be a simpler explanation that is missed today, but the dish serves as a deft reminder of the three Martialian meals at the same time as offering a local variation of them.

Clearly, then, the menu Jonson offers to his guest has a public dimension, though it sounds convincingly like the product of Jonson's own hospitality. The kind of wit operating in this section invites us to note both the literary antecedents of the meal and their ambiguous, urbane modification to a meal plausible enough in seventeenth-century London.

Now if the three poems of Martial were the only antecedents for "Inviting a Friend to Supper" one might, despite these subtle time-warps, suspect the importance of the literary tradition in the poem to be overstated (though that three separate poems are used suggests something more than a simple level of imitation). But the invitation poem was in fact a category of the Hellenistic epigram imitated, in turn, not only by Martial among the Latin poets

but also by Catullus and Horace. One of the prototypes of the Greek form survives in a poem by Philodemus,⁷ a poet described as “the most important Epicurean of the Ciceronian age, the author of some admirable epigrams preserved in the Greek Anthology”.⁸ Comparing the major poems (and there are no doubt others, less well known) makes interesting reading. Most obviously, a difference can be noted between the poems of the epigrammatists, on the one hand, and those of Horace and Catullus⁹ on the other. The latter seem concerned to stress the *carpe diem* aspects of an enjoyable dinner. Catullus’ charming piece, playful and lyrical, speaks of filling out the conversation’s frame with “wine and wit and all kinds of laughter”, “love’s very essence, or what is sweeter or more delicious than love”; Horace’s poems include details of scattering flowers and reminders of death and death’s dark fires as well as of the miracles of the wine-cup. The epigrams are, as one would expect, less intense; more obviously controlled, they belong in the arena of public and social poetry and in considering “Inviting a Friend to Supper” they are of special interest. Looking at the variations in this group as a whole, however, is useful for pointing up Jonson’s tactic in his invitation.

It is notable, for instance, that Jonson chose to omit the guest’s name, though the three Martial poems, the Philodemus epigram, Horace’s poems and the Catullus invitation all nominated the special guest, if not others of the company as well. Jonson understood, it seems, what commentators are now at pains to point out: in these poems “we are in danger through unfamiliarity with the convention of exaggerating the element of literal truth”.¹⁰ He evidently decided it was safer to omit the name, lest his supper should appear (to borrow his phrases) too much of an age and too little for all time. He retained, however, a point common to all the poems cited above, that the special guest is to be person greater in some way than the host. “Inviting a Friend to Supper”

7 Poem 44, Bk. XI in W. R. Paton, ed., *The Greek Anthology*, 5 vols., Loeb Classical Library edition, London and New York, 1915–26, p. 91.

8 R. G. M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book I*, 2nd edn, Oxford 1975, p. 244.

9 The poems of Horace are *Epistles* I. v and *Odes* I. xxi and IV. xxii, respectively, and the work of Catullus is Poem 13 in *Catullus, Tibullus and Pervigilium Veneris*, Loeb Classical Library, rev. edn, London and New York 1931.

10 Nisbet and Hubbard, p. 244.

aligns itself with the mainstream of the invitation-poem tradition on this matter, but takes a corrected course in it on another, to recover a factor basic to Philodemus' poem but very much less prominent (if mentioned at all) in the Latin poems. That factor is conversation and intellectual entertainment.

Howsoe'er, my man
 Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus,
 Livy, or of some better book to us,
 Of which we'll speak our minds, amidst our meat . . .

Martial, it is true, mentions conversation in two of his poems, but the focus remains firmly on what will be eaten and drunk, rather than on the quality of the conversation. Jonson in giving particular emphasis to this element in the evening, and letting it determine the tone carried through in the details of the food and wine, is closest to Philodemus whose poem is really specific only about talk between friends. The early association of epigram with the symposium (and "conversation and intellectual entertainment" define that term) may well have been in the mind of Jonson, classical scholar and theorist that he was, when he decided upon his poem's balance. Be that as it may, for Jonson as for Philodemus in his poem to Piso, "sincere friends" are the integral factor in the supper. The recovery of this focus is important, allowing "Inviting a Friend to Supper" to reach from conviviality to the broader themes of loyalty, liberty and free debate, to the classical values which underpin civilization and which are the concerns central to Jonson's art.

The ramifications of this change in emphasis dictate the way in which Jonson modified what would be eaten at his supper and the entertainment his guests might anticipate. Taking up again, then, the discussion of the food, it becomes increasingly obvious as the poem develops that this occasion is designed more for friends' conviviality than for the consumption of extravagant "cates". The convention, in the poems where food is specified, had always ruled out a banquet to display the host's wealth, a point that is indicated variously, from Catullus suggesting the guest bring his own (Poem 13), through the range of dinners offered in the Martial epigrams. The most insistently humble meal in the latter grouping will, the guest is told, include "a kid rescued from the jaws of a savage wolf" and "a chicken, and a ham that has already survived three dinners" (X.xlviii). But Jonson takes care to give a more refined version of the traditional unpretentious circumstances and the explanation is to be found, I think, in his more serious regard for the guests he is inviting, in

the more serious significance attached to friends gathered freely to "speak [their] minds". Martial's mauled kid's meat may have had the added benefit of being especially tender, but it is difficult to avoid an impression of casual vulgarity in recommending such fare. Jonson's "mirthful board" has to bear the weight of more thoughtful attitudes. Again a distinctive kind of courtesy replaces the desire simply to be witty when Jonson declares that the "fat birds of poultry-yard and marsh", about which Martial would only lie, may yet be served with the short-legged hen and her sauce.

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Is not to be despaired of, for our money;
 And though fowl now be scarce, yet there are clerks,
 The sky not falling, think we may have larks.
 I'll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come:
 Of partridge, pheasant, woodcock, of which some
 May yet be there; and godwit, if we can;
 Knat, rail and ruff, too.

Jonson finds a nice balance between the traditional extravagant enticements to dinner that are admitted to be lies, and his own commitment to honesty with "sincere friends". A bold falsehood in Martial is tempered in Jonson by possibilities not yet despaired of. At the same time, whether or not the more expensive fowl can be served, there is nothing too much wrong with the homely "Knat, rail and ruff" at a friend's supper. Edible English fowl, humble though they may be, are a different proposition from mutilated meat or left-overs.

As for entertainment, in lines 20-26, Jonson's friends, like Martial's in XI.iii, will enjoy a reading of literature, but in suggesting authors who pretty well span the great Roman literary period, Jonson offers pleasure of a different order from Martial's allowing a recitation of contemporary works, however excellent. Especially significant is the invitation to discuss the readings; this detail, absent from Martial, is perfectly appropriate to the tenor of Jonson's evening where learning can actively contribute to enjoyment rather than stand in its way. Jonson's tone is very much surer here than Martial's who finds it necessary, or amusing, to offer his guest reassurance that the evening's entertainment will avoid extremes of triviality or dullness. There will, he promises, be no "lascivious loins in practised writhings" on the one hand, nor reading of "a bulky volume" on the other (V.lxxviii). The first is hardly to be imagined at Jonson's supper, but to the friends who would like to hear and discuss Virgil, Tacitus and Livy the

second could not have appeared so formidable; and any pretentious reverence for these classics rather than the cultured man's due regard is of course most tactfully dismissed by the offer of perhaps "some better book". The readiness of the host to give direction to the evening, while allowing enough flexibility for a naturally evolving pattern, strikes precisely the right note of liberal friendship. To be reminded of its value one has only to compare the horrors of Timon's regimented dinner in Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* where "You drink by measure, and to minutes eat" (l. 158), pushed along by the host's prior organization of the whole thing "From soup to sweet-wine, and God bless the King" (l. 162).

After the outline of the evening's entertainment come the well known lines associating the Mermaid's Canary wine with Horace and Anacreon, and the ease and flexibility of the verse at this point suggest an almost casual felicity:

But that which most doth take my muse and me
Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,
Which is the Mermaid's now, but shall be mine;
Of which had Horace or Anacreon tasted,
Their lives, as do their lines, till now had lasted.
Tobacco, nectar, or the Thespian spring
Are all but Luther's beer to this I sing.

But in the poem's detail here, as much as elsewhere, can be seen the epigram's pattern: the juxtaposition of the literary tradition's paradigm with one aspect of the daily living process. An essential gathering, so to speak, coexists with a very possible supper. The former is not a resonance, and the latter is not to be seen as embedded in a theme. Both are present at the very surface of the poem, equally represented even at the simplest level of the words themselves: nectar and the Thespian spring have exactly the same reality as tobacco and Luther's beer—and it points to Jonson's confidence in the openly ambivalent quality of his supper that he lists the latter quite local joke about weak continental beer. Poets though divine are men, Jonson would point out, and they live in the social fabric as well as make art to outlast their lives. It is appropriate in this poem to remember the lives as well as the lines of Horace and Anacreon, just as it is to see Jonson supping as well as singing for posterity. That the muse, too, is taken with the prospect of a cup of Canary wine is one more deft and witty reminder that literature and life share prominence in this poem.

In a surprisingly thorough-going way, with all its urbanity, "Inviting a Friend to Supper" bears out Jonson's belief in what Ian

Donaldson describes as “moral continuities”¹¹ that are revitalized when they are renewed in practice. Jonson’s supper demonstrates the kind of free social intercourse that, for every appearance of easy informality, depends ultimately on a shared belief in the fundamental classical values. It is not casual informality but an awareness of the quality of friendship, honesty, loyalty, and so forth, understood partly through traditions in literature, that makes possible the ease of the evening. In this light the measured gravity of the poem’s opening lines, and the disturbing resonances at the end, of innocence and guilt and of liberty that can be affrighted, are tonal shades that Jonson’s poem can well vindicate. A good deal depends on this particular “Patterne of living well”, and it is entirely appropriate that the “pattern” and the “living” share equal prominence in Jonson’s poem.

So Jonson’s invitation is more than a classical theme given new life by local references, as it is more than a particularly accomplished occasional poem. Both views distort the work’s balance which, I have tried to argue, depends on acknowledging as *equally* important the ordinary occasions in day-to-day life and the body of values, transmitted by literature, that may inform them. It is not a matter of the poet’s “utilizing” one so as to focus on the other, but of a different kind of art, that of classical epigram, where excellence lies in demonstrating rather than discovering meanings. Jonson’s “Inviting a Friend to Supper” is a sophisticated version of the old and true way of epigram but it seems to me to open a case for reading the works of the man who had a particular interest in “the Kindes of *Poems*, with their speciall differences” (*Disc.* 1. 2401) with more regard for their nominated genre.

11 Donaldson, Introduction, p. xvi.