

## *Latin and the Epigram*

Paper read at the Illinois Classical Conference, February 1968

Published in *Classical Outlook*, March 1970

By the time the critics have defined a literary form, it has probably gone through a metamorphosis. The epigram is no exception. This little thing started out in Greece, harmlessly enough, as a tombstone inscription. Still innocuous, it gradually shoved its way into books as a form of literature. After that, as you know, many things happened to it. By the time it had reached Rome, its form had diverged along two distinctly different paths. Its elegiac verse pattern was taken over by poets of love such as Catullus, while the idea of the short stanza that says much in few words became the tool of the critical mind and developed into the satiric epigram, which was especially congenial to the Roman temperament.

According to a modern dictionary an epigram no longer even has to be verse. It is "any witty or pointed saying, tersely and ingeniously expressed." Oscar Levant once said that "an epigram is a wisecrack that has played Carnegie Hall."

The chief difference between an epigram and a proverb, as I see it, is in the "seasoning" -- the salt, pepper, and vinegar that give the epigram its tart flavor. "Early to bed and early to rise / Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" is not an epigram because it lacks the dash of somewhat pungent humor which we find in a statement like "Home is where you go when you're tired of being nice to people." It is the unexpected thrust, the combination of a smile on your face with a dagger up your sleeve, that gives the satiric epigram its individuality.

This little verbal rapier is basically a criticism of existing conditions, a cryptic comment on the life around you as you see it. In general it is a way of letting off a short burst of steam about what you don't like. Perhaps it is a sad reflection on the illiteracy of our times that protesters now form picket lines instead of writing verses, and that our protests are scribbled placards. Certainly "Get out of Vietnam!" is a direct and forceful statement of disapproval, but it somehow lacks the character of Martial's *Non amo te, Sabidi*. In modern times the function of the epigram has been taken over to a large extent by the journalistic cartoon, and these cartoons beyond question achieve the same effect with the same brevity.

Of course, when we think of the satiric epigram in Latin, we think first of all of Martial, whose pages are filled with cutting remarks on people and conditions, and whose work is even entitled *Epigrammata*. Where could you find a better example of what an epigram is supposed to be than in Martial's remark to an acquaintance who wrote sloppy verses:

I do not send my poems for you to see,  
Because I fear that you'll send yours to me.

Unless it is his comment to another acquaintance:

You say that you would like to know  
What makes my farm delight me so.  
You've asked me, so I'll tell you true --  
When I am there, I'm not near you.

When a friend asked a favor, Martial wrote:

You say that what you ask is very small.  
That's good; then my quick "no" won't hurt at all.

When he is given food that he does not like, he says:

You feed me hard bread crusts with the excuse  
That they will make me fair in days to come.  
I look at you and think that all your life  
You must have eaten only soft bread crumb.

(Actually, the food referred to in the original is rabbit, but I took poetic license in my paraphrase because the bread image worked so much more smoothly).

To an old reprobate who invites Martial to share some wine he says:

Your rare old wines have won for you wide fame.  
But four wives drank and died, the gossips claim.  
Of course I know  
This is not so --  
I'm just not thirsty now. Thanks all the same.

No wonder my students enjoy Martial so much. He has a most delightful way of stabbing people.

The fact that Martial called his works "epigrams" did not make him the only Latin author capable of using this kind of writing. Suetonius tells us that Augustus himself had published a book of epigrams, composed mostly while he was in his bath. Perhaps it is lucky that they have not survived. But many choice epigrams (by our modern definition of the term) are tucked unobtrusively into the lines of other Latin poets.

Plautus knew how to use these barbed truths, usually stated in good down-to-earth language. For instance, in one play he has an actor make the observation that it is difficult to blow and swallow at the same time; and in another play he comments that "there is nothing more friendly to a man than a friend in need."

Ovid, always shockingly realistic in his viewpoint, says (in the *Fasti*) "How little you know about the age you live in if you fancy that honey is sweeter than cash in hand," and in his *Ars Amatoria* there are such statements as "If you want to be loved, be lovable." From Publius Syrus comes "Let a fool hold his tongue and he will pass for a sage," while one of Seneca's observations is that "love of bustle is not industry."

Horace, with his *curiosa felicitas*, invented some of our best-known phrases, from "carpe diem" to *mediocritas aurea*. These are on the fringe of epigrammatic writing, especially after someone else picked up the *mediocritas* and added the comment that it is difficult to keep "moderation" from becoming "mediocrity."

Juvenal wrote many epigrammatic lines, such as "The blind person envies the one-eyed man," "Our prayers are answered by malicious gods," and "No poisons are drunk from earthenware cups." On the other hand he looks with jaundiced eyes at the other side of the picture: "There are many things that a man with a hole in his jacket dare not say" and "Unfortunate poverty has nothing harder in it than the fact that it makes a man ridiculous." Perhaps one of his most quoted lines is his question: "Who will guard the guards themselves?"

We could fill a fair-sized shelf in our library with selections from the epigrammatic statements of the classical writers. But we won't catalog any more at the moment. Too big a helping of highly seasoned tidbits can become a little sickening. But it seems to me beautifully ironic that one of the most incisive epigrams from all classical literature comes straight from the works of the gentle Vergil. No lines quite compare with *Varium et mutabile semper / femina*.

When we turn to the satiric epigram in English, we often find little more than a paraphrase of a statement made in Greek or Latin years before. From Ben Jonson to Ogden Nash epigram writers have followed the pattern set by Martial and his fellow poets. It has been said of Ben Jonson that he translated more than he wrote. When I was in graduate school I once made a study of the influence of Martial on Jonson's non-dramatic works and found how true this is. Jonson addressed one of his epigrams to Martial and translated two of Martial's epigrams outright. But usually what he did was to combine the ideas from several of Martial's poems. An example of this is his epigram on inviting a friend to supper. This poem expresses Jonson's own personality and tastes as much as anything else he ever wrote, but we find that it is merely a composite of three epigrams by Martial: the apology and enumeration of foods come from Martial 5.78; the line "I'll tell you more, and lie, so you will come," with the following additions to the menu, is from Martial 11.52; and the final promise of an evening which will be followed by no regrets from Martial 10.48.

The most meaningful of the ancient Latin epigrams strike the universal characteristics of human nature, such things as hypocrisy, selfishness, the false evaluation of a person based on his financial status. The English poet sees his contemporaries in the Latin poems and he adapts his expression to the modern environment. Usually the adaptation is somewhat removed from the original, but sometimes the parallel is so close that an exact translation best expresses the English poet's observation of the passing scene. I have tried to paraphrase Martial's *Non amo te, Sabidi* in English, but I can't, for it has already been said in English so effectively that there seems no other way to say it:

I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.  
The reason why I cannot tell;  
But this one thing I know full well,  
I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.

Such writers as Dryden, Pope, and Sam Johnson were all well trained in the classical authors, and from them come some of our most caustic examples of epigrammatic writing in English. For instance, recall Pope's delicious description of the pedant in his "Essay on Criticism":

The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,  
With loads of learned lumber in his head.

Isn't that a perfect description of someone you know? Then there is Pope's couplet engraved on the collar of a dog he gave to the king:

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;  
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?  
(*"De te fabula..."*)

Martial would have loved the Earl of Rochester's little "epitaph" on Charles II:

Here lies our Sovereign Lord, the King,  
Whose word no man relies on;  
Who never said a foolish thing,  
Nor ever did a wise one.

Although this type of poem is unquestionably the descendant of the Latin epigram, the relationship may sometimes be tenuous. A much closer family relationship exists in satiric epigrams which are being written in Latin in the Twentieth Century. In 1961 Dr. Josef Eberle, a Stuttgart newspaper editor, published an anthology of Latin poems written in our time, called *Vivacamena*. People in fifteen countries of the world contributed to it. A number of these contributions can be classified as epigrammatic. From among them the following, each accompanied by my own paraphrase, seem particularly well done.

“*Cave, Canis*” by Van Johnson, Tufts University:

*O canis indocilis rerum,  
vox numquam faucibus haesit:  
saevitia terruit multos  
sed paene neminem laesit.*

*Id esse cognoscimus verum,  
cum fauces saeviter hiant  
inani furore feroces.  
quo modo ceteri sciant?*

[O dog, so relentless and grim,  
Your voice never fails you.  
Your savage bark sounds terrible,  
But prints from your bite are few.

“We” know that you are harmless  
When your lips curl back and show  
A row of dangerous looking teeth;  
But how will others know?]

“*Lupi Mites*” by Arminius Libertus, Vienna:

*Pacificè servare volunt quod vi rapuerunt.  
Sic est pacificus ventre tumente lupus.*

[They grab by force whate'er they want,  
And then they ask for peace;

Just so the wolf devours his prey,  
Then wants bloodshed to cease.]

“*Nonconformistae Cuidam*” by Josef Eberle, Stuttgart:

*Desides, negas, discordas, opponis.  
O qui communis es opinionis  
semper contemptor, ut tibi figures:  
olim et tu -- abibis ad plures.*

[You reject, deny, disagree. oppose,  
Scorn any accepted view;  
Or so you think. But what about  
When the masses accept you.]

Clemens Plassmann, of Dusseldorf, wrote a number of anagrams for this volume. They, of course, are untranslatable without complete disintegration. Here is one of them:

“*Mars et Ars*”

Furoris facem aluit Mars;  
tranquillam pacem maluit Ars.  
Profecto hostes arcet Mars;  
in bello autem marcet Ars,  
et quanto crescit acies Martis,  
heu, tanto crescit macies Artis.  
Est iracundus urus Mars,  
humanitatis murus Ars.  
Dementis, eheu, ira Martis  
delentur dona mira Artis.  
Vae mundo, si Mars oritur  
horrendus, et Ars moritur.

In 1962 Dr. Eberle published an entire book of his own original Latin epigrams, called *Cave Canem*, and in 1964 a second book, under the title *Sal Niger*. Here are a few samples, the first one from *Cave Canem* and the others from *Sal Niger*:

“*Diogenes*”

*Homines quaeritans usus lucerna  
nil nisi sordes invenerat pridem.  
Nobis electrica lux hodierna  
clarius monstrat quaerentibus -- idem.*

[By the lantern's light Diogenes

could find only evil men;  
Today's electric bulb reveals  
The same sad fact again.]

“*De Crasso*”

*Caesar calvitium lauro texisse videtur,  
auro tu vacuum vis operire caput.  
Quid dolus hic sibi vult? Et calvus manserat ille  
Caesar, et auratus tu stupor ipse manes.*

[Caesar liked his laurel wreath  
Since he was bald, 'tis said;  
And you delight in a golden crown  
Placed on your empty head.

But how can laurel wreath or crown  
Make any one forget  
That Caesar's head remained quite bald  
And your head's empty yet.]

The following is in my estimation one of Eberle's finest. For that reason I found it the most difficult to express in English:

“*Mensura*”

*Siquis in hoc mores populo vult noscere, spectet,  
quomodo tractentur lingua, senecta, pecus.*

[How does a nation respect its language?  
What does it do for its aged?  
How are its animals treated?  
By these things its worth can be gauged.]

My last two Eberle epigrams are comments on the modern politician:

“*Testimonium*”

*Si turpiter iste politicus illi  
illeque reddit idem -- dignus uterque fide.*

[The politician calls his opponent a liar;  
He answers, "That word describes you."  
Which can you believe?  
Well, I won't deceive --  
The statements of both men are true.]

“*Discrimen*”

*Multa potest paucis vates edicere verbis,  
pauca potest multis dicere lingua fori.*

[The poet tells you many things  
In words select and few;  
The politician's fluent words  
Speak gobbledegook to you.]

The epigram is a literary weapon which will be used in literature by the literate disillusioned forever, I think. And as long as the satiric epigram is written, the influence of Martial and the other Latin poets is inescapable.

But I have, like Eberle's politician, said little in many words. All of the paraphrases in this paper, by the way, are in my own inimitable doggerel. And now I think that I had better stop before too many of you recall Martial's:

Why do you wear on your neck a scarf  
When for speaking you appear?  
That protective covering would have more use  
If it covered your listener's ear.