

## A Previously Unnoticed Source for a Poem by Ben Jonson

James A. Riddell

No modern editors note that Jonson's *Epigram* CXVII is virtually a translation of an epigram by Martial, but with a significant alteration. Jonson's "*On Groyne*":

Groyne, come of age, his state sold out of hand  
For'his whore: *Groyne* doth still occupy his land.<sup>1</sup>

Martial's XII.16:

*Addixti*, Labiene, tres argellos;  
emisti, Labiene, tres cineados.  
pedicas, Labiene, tres argellos.<sup>2</sup>

In the rather tame Loeb translation this is rendered: "You have sold, Labienus, three small fields; you have bought, Labienus, three favorites. You defile, Labienus, your three small fields." In the not-so-tame translation by Amy Richelin it is rendered:

You sold three fields, Labienus:  
You bought three fags, Labienus.  
You're bugging your three fields, Labienus.<sup>3</sup>

The blunter, less delicate translation by Richelin is much closer to Martial and also much closer to Jonson.

The striking difference between the two poets' treatments of the theme is, of course, Jonson's alteration from homosexual to heterosexual subject. But I suggest that the striking alteration is not the significant one, although the former does make the latter possible. Jonson's

epigram has a point that Martial's does not; it inheres in the pun that Jonson introduces with the word "occupy," which means both "to hold possession of" and "to copulate with."<sup>4</sup> The pun itself has been noted; the way that Jonson employs it to improve on his source has not.

*California State University, Dominguez Hills*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, VIII (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Martial, *Epigrams*, Loeb Edition, ed. and trans. Walter C. A. Ker, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1920).

<sup>3</sup> Amy Richelin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> See OED +8: "To deal with or have to do with sexuality; to cohabit." Jonson twice uses a form of "occupy" with just this meaning in "The Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthorndon" (H&S, I [1925], ll. 497 and 571).