JONSON AND THE POET’S CIRCLE

CHAPTER FOUR

ISSUING INVITATIONS

Jonson’s circle was a curious phenomenon in literary history. It met on occasion, and it provided the substance for a figure of some sophistication in the poetry itself. The actual circle and the trope are too entwined to be completely distinguished, but insofar as the latter can be sorted out I want to consider it by itself. In both phases the circle points up the poet’s situation outside the court. It is urbane but not necessarily of the city. In his relative independence, the poet defines his own gathering and imagines settings for it such as the households of the Sidneys and Wroths, the chambers of the poet-inviting-friends-to-supper, and the Apollo Room of the Old Devil Tavern. As a presumed audience, the circle becomes a coterie conditioned by the poet’s manner of address and articles of association. Neither the select group nor the broader one is the same as the audience of office-holders and courtiers created by the social structure and taken more or less as conditions dictate by the courtly poet.

Jonson’s poet-centered group also differs from other audiences. By comparison Donne assumed a more dispersed set and used primarily verse epistles and commissioned poems to address them and sometimes gain their support. Henry Goodyere was not highly placed; others such as Countess Lucy of Bedford, Lady Huntingdon, and the Drurys were capable of offering substantial patronage but did not constitute a circle. Although Donne held out hope for preferment at the court itself until late in his career, he found
neither a secure position there nor a substitute for one among scattered friends. Nor did his best verse address a definable group. The Satyres, most of the Songs and Sonnets, and the religious verse—most of the poetry we still read—are largely independent of the connections that the verse epistles cultivate, although Donne no doubt thought of his correspondents as apt readers for anything he wrote. Jonson’s following is more directly implicated in his major verse. Whether he addresses them directly or not, he is aware of the criteria his associates must meet and of his own status among them. The poet is not greatly concerned with services of the sort that were expected of a Raleigh or a Sidney and assumes the circle’s innocence of public dealings. No one seems inclined to raise philosophical or metaphysical questions, and even the moral ones that come up can be readily posed and understood. Instead, the poet identifies what is upstart or false and instills a commitment to decorum and a loyalty to common standards. The circle avoids not only malice, then, but complication and moral confusion.

Because the circle assembles at the poet’s bidding, he calls upon his choice words to define it and coax people into it. He forms it by exclusion, as any imposer of standards does, yet his is not really a strict order. It does not observe rituals, set up idols, forsake society, or push rhetoric to serious beseeching. Unlike Donne in his chambers, Jonson does not seek to include a world by epitome or command symbols that devalue the outside by comparison, as compasses, beaten gold, and hermitage do. The atmosphere is more of clubroom than of vested institution. The poet’s invitations to supper make no long-range claims, merely seal off a moment into which no haggard fates intrude. The requirements for admission do not allow much lyric effusion, and apostrophe usually moves toward epistolary address, which again is quite different from Donne’s. Actually, Jonson’s best verse often reveals a tension between lyric grace and the heft of reasonable theses struck as though in conversation. That tension can be seen as an outgrowth not merely of his own taste but of a group that mixes poetry with commentary and makes reason and judgment inseparable from praise.

Jonson’s restraint has a direct bearing on the nature of the circle-as-trope in that an exact apportioning of praise to worth requires a careful estimation of candidates who appear for initiation or commemoration. The circle cannot be safeguarded and cannot foster well-being among its members unless they are open to each other and aware of the dangers of posturing. Certain Jonsonian lyrics
have the look of toasts or formal scrolls read at festive occasions; others suggest an intimacy based on mutual values, when “not to sing, were enemie to reason.” The poet whom we see in the *Epigrams* is at home in a place selectively urban but not open to the streets except when it ranges into satire (as in “On Something that Walks Somewhere,” “On English Monsieur,” and “The New Cry”). Nothing drops in from alien or transcendent spheres and nothing rises unexpectedly from a demonic underworld. Jonson’s lyric personas are not susceptible to the appeals of remote places, to alchemy, the general flimflam of the times, or the broader appeals of London and other cities populated by Volpones and Sir Epicure Mammons. Despite Jonson’s avowed patriotism and occasional soldierly temperament, it does not extend to national issues, empire, or even Petrarchan loves.

If in country house poems the bounty of rural life assists the hospitality and manners with which the estate manages its provincial community, the London circle has comparable bonds and some distractions. In “An Epistle Answering to One that Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben,” Jonson is especially leery of gossip, faddishness, and the brittle lifelessness that he tags nicely the “animated porcelain of the court.” He is also skeptical about military service and honor, although he does not belittle them:

But if, for honour, we must draw the sword,
And force back that which will not be restored,
I have a body yet that spirit draws
To live, or fall a carcass in the cause.

He is as troubled by the “earthen jars” of court and the coarsening of values as he is by animated porcelain. Continuing that metaphorical distinction, he is determined to be his “own frail pitcher,” which requires that he remain aloof from the crowd that jostles and cracks individual vessels. He seeks to “Live to that point I will, for which I am man, / And dwell as in my centre as I can” (59–60). It follows from that brief manifesto that anyone who wishes to join the circle—as a third alternative to becoming clay or porcelain—must be “well-tagged, and permanent” in friendship, “Not built with canvas, paper, and false lights / As are the glorious scenes at the great sights”:

So short you read my character, and theirs
I would call mine, to which not many stairs
Are asked to climb.
The bond is that of reason and taste rather than an elaborate code or sense of status, and it suggests a lyric dominated by sententiousness. It discourages fanatical commitment and momentary enthusiasm. The short climb contrasts to the more elaborate initiations of knighthood; Jonson's statement of his few initiatory stations are purposely blunt and unceremonial. The candor of "carcass in the cause" brushes aside the intricacies of honor: sword play is not ballet; one does not pose or model class standing in heroic duels. Lyric possession in the second quotation comes to a minor outbreak in "mine" as a preliminary to lyric commemoration, which amounts to the welcoming of friends, and both are based on character above average. Good sense demands that one be readable and plain: the surprises of complex character and unmaskings are reserved for the Volpones and their tricky servants. Jonson's circle thus avoids the elaborated manners that a Calidore sorts out in arduous quest and all the intricate relations among courtesy, love, and friendship that a Cleopolis converts into sets of expectations. It meets at appointed times for special purposes, although its values are presumably not to be forgotten when it disperses.

No single poem reveals that standard of hospitality, the ritual use of an occasion and its objects, and the resisted temptation to push to the edge of Mammonlike rapture better than "Inviting a Friend to Supper," which proposes a tentative program in its call to the occasion. It has a sense of place, but convivial doings are more important to its tempered lyric grace. I agree with Ian Donaldson that this sort of poem, rather than moralizing poems like "An Epistle to a Friend to Persuade Him to the Wars," best represents Jonson. His self-proclaimed devotion to morality, reasonableness, and consistency are evident in it, but we also glimpse another Jonson—the gourmet, the man-among-men arranger, the epicure aroused to song, the classical scholar who knows what degree of spirituality and intellectual achievement is proper to such gatherings. As a host he is concerned with objects at hand and presumably with furnishings as well as with conduct and manners. His initial mock deference is not a sign of stiffness but is an open pretending, staged for the occasion, which allows for performances and social ficitions:

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.
Rhyme heightens that self-conscious artifice, which the speaker (as honest charlatan) exposes by exaggerated formality.

That the speaker should describe the menu in such detail may seem a surprising descent from higher concerns. But as providential supply sustains the cheer of "To Penshurst," abundance reinforces this urban well-being. Some of the delicacies, however, he holds out and then retracts in order to confess that the friend's presence is worth lying for:

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; to these a coney
   Is not to be despairsed 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.

Although he ritualizes his items, he obviously does not invest them with the talismanic dimensions that Sir Epicure would give them. He restricts enthusiasm even as he suggests legitimate reasons for it. Economy and taste govern the selections, and he knows how far he can go before he begins to suggest the trickster.

Such a circle is not summoned to roister and is not to break down its cohesiveness with gossip. Its opposite in this respect is the audience of the town crier offering news of the day to urban masses. Those whose activities the crier broadcasts are very busy and make up a society of sorts, but their intelligence in "The New Cry" is all of conspiracies and men in the know:

The counsels, projects, practices they know,
   And what each prince doth for intelligence owe,
And unto whom; they are the almanacs
   For twelve years yet to come, what each state lacks.
They carry in their pockets Tacitus,
   And the Gazetti, or Gallo-Belgicus;
And talk reserved, locked up, and full of fear,
   Nay, ask you how the day goes, in your ear.

Jonson's table will be mirthful but not part of a costume Arcadia. Nor are his guests, at the other extreme, pilgrims of truth seeking
the ends of Socratic dialogue while they banquet—merely men in sound company who know their Virgil, Tacitus, and Livy.

With the issuing of such invitations, which I have dwelt upon to suggest the conversational tone, the equipage, and the atmosphere, Jonson assembles the group, defines an informal code, and offers a middle range of language for its model closer to epistle than to song. He does not pretend to achieve tight organization or to offer the Bacchanalian gifts that poets promise from time to time. (He would have been embarrassed I expect by Herrick's faery feast and swooning devotion to sack.) He aims for a loose association that will find its festivity in the specific occasion rather than in such calendar holidays as Herrick's Mayday, which are open to a wider community and refer to a greater expanse of times, places, and peoples.

If James Howell's account of one such occasion is to be trusted, Jonson's actual gatherings were very similar to the one "Inviting a Friend" proposes. Howell speaks of good company, excellent cheer, choice wine, jovial welcome. However, he also sounds a note of danger that stems from the self-centered nature of the poet's call, his demand for personal loyalty, and his dislike of criticism. "An Epistle Answering" is right to see gossip and clannishness as serious dangers to such a coterie. Having no functions other than sociable ones, such a group is paradoxically more vulnerable to antagonisms than a court where enmities are expected and do not necessarily undermine the authority of the system or its titular head. The stakes are high enough around an Elizabeth or a James to attract would-be initiates in great numbers whatever the difficulties they face; standards can survive the failure of individuals to measure up. When such an evening as Jonson plans descends to carping and defensiveness, however, it is poisoned at the root—in the trust the coterie must have in the taste and judgment of the poet-host. At the particular gathering that Howell remembers, Jonson villified certain others "to magnify his own Muse"—an "ill-favour'd solecism in good manners" in Howell's opinion. Normally willing to abide by the tone of the privileged group and normally adulatory toward Jonson himself, even Carew disapproved of that tendency. After Jonson's intemperate response to criticism of *The New Inne*, which must have been voiced to friends as well, Carew asked rather pointedly:

Why should the follies then of this dull age
Draw from thy Pen such an immodest rage
As seemes to blast thy (else-immortall) Bayes,
When thine owne tongue proclaimes thy yitch of praise.⁴
However, these criticisms apply more to the actual than to the figural group, in which the personality of the host can be idealized. Whatever Jonson's temptations to self-inflation and excess in chastizing literary foes, an important part of a fictive chartering of a group is its assignment of just reputations by a speaker who undergoes preparation for the role in the poems he presents. The best safeguards against carping and envy are the good judgment he assumes—obviously easier to achieve hypothetically than in action. One of the poet's functions as critic and moralist is precisely to sort out legitimate from illegitimate enthusiasm and justified dislike from personal spite. The forward march of classics into modern settings depends upon him, and as a persona he seldom disappoints. Lyric, satire, and encomium get mixed and somewhat redesigned from their sources when they come within his influence. For one thing they cannot be dressed in the style they have in poets seeking patronage, which may partly explain Jonson's superiority over Donne in verse epistles and his preference for reasonable praise. His epistles lie on the fringes of lyric, seldom finding legitimate opportunities for apostrophe. Nor do they play with Platonist ideals of love or social grace or take round-about ways through golden ages or Mount Acidales, where the poet might find a place momentarily apart from associates. Locating the circle in the midst of society, the poet runs different risks than he might in these other places.

Although the circle is not strictly speaking besieged, when we consider the comedies as well as the lyrics we discover quite different host figures and purposes for the gatherings they arrange. Where country estate poems examine the standards of private households and their generosity, and where the invited supper group collects to confirm and enact standards in a convivial format, the comedies concentrate on assets exuberantly catalogued and pursued as spoils, and of course upon upended ideals. Indeed, it is in the plays that Jonson scrutinizes in-groups most closely and anatomizes the gilded expectations that lead men by their appetites—lead them to inflated ideas of their own worth and correspondingly to inflated inset lyrics addressed mainly to personal possessions.

**FLEECING THE GUESTS**

The overestimation of goods that brings sheep to their shearers is probably Jonson's most frequent satiric target. Intriguers extend to their victims promises of clothes, plate, and jewels and the tal-
ismanic object gold. Although a universal transformer of the ordinary into the grand and a catalyst of quick agreements and contracts, gold creates at best a loose circle that must break up at the unmasking, as temporary allies scatter in the face of judicial order. Jonson's strength lies both in depicting those fixations on spoils and in giving an assortment of con men a striking language with which to entice a following. Those men are reverse images of Jonson's better hosts and thus of the motives that pull people into complicitys.

Their language is often lyric, albeit ironically so, and it indicates the strict limits of permissible enthusiasm in the epistles and epigrams. But the relationship between the positive circle and its negative images is more complicated than mere inversion might suggest. As Arthur Marotti has pointed out, Jonson's Horatian pose of sanity and moderation has little to do at times with his true strength. When we consider the outbreaks of lyricism in the plays and masques, we are struck by the variety of items that enlist enthusiasm and the styles in which they are celebrated. Freed from the constraints of his own voice and preference for a moral constituency, Jonson can let a Sir Epicure Mammon rise to ecstasy over potential holdings and humanitarian projects. On the one hand, Jonson in his own voice praises plain language, as in Discoveries, and wishes to be known as a poet of morality and reason: "Many Writers perplexe their Readers, and Hearers with mere Non-sense, Pure and neat Language I love, yet plaine and customary." He connects that spareness and lucidity with both the nature of things and character: "The conceits of the mind are Pictures of things, and the tongue is the Interpreter of those Pictures. The order of Gods creatures in themselves, is not only admirable, and glorious, but eloquent; Then he who could apprehend the consequence of things in their truth, and utter his apprehensions as truly, were the best Writer, or Speaker" (p. 628). On the other hand, the excess that certain characters gather in the plays generates a linguistic richness that is also reflected, but more under control, in "Inviting a Friend." It cannot be automatically discredited, although from Volpone, for instance, money extracts a clearly over-blown apostrophe:

Good morning to the day; and, next, my gold:
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Haile the worlds soule, and mine. More glad then is
The teeming earth, to see the long'd-for sunne
Peepe through the hornes of the celestiall ram,
Am I, to view thy splendor, darkening his:
Volpone perhaps remembers the functions of the logos in shooting light into darkness and in organizing chaos, but he looks past all such instructive parallels that he might have found between gold and the sun. What he sees is a rival center or god figure seated in a domestic shrine. He not only disregards what might have been there but cancels the creation’s relationships of places and objects. The little corner filled with gold becomes the world, not as analogy or epitome but as obsession. Actually to possess what one worships is to be doubly blessed. Such a shrine clearly does not stand in the gathering place for reasonable friends but compresses paradise into transportable property, hidden in a niche. As Mosca observes money can even be medicinal: “This is true physick, this your sacred medicine, / No talk of opiates, to this great elixir (1.4.71—72).

Despite this depravity Volpone masters a diction and an imagery that would do credit to a religious adept. To celebrate substances of such status, words must rise toward the logos that originally assigned all things their worth. In this respect Jonson’s alchemists, illusion-makers, and deceivers are cousins to the visionary poet. After Volpone has demoted the sun in the presence of his treasure, he drives away the rival joys of dream, love, and beauty with the same “dumb god” that gives speech to others but has none itself:

Thou are vertue, fame,  
Honour, and all things else! Who can get thee.  
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise.

His victims have similar views: they hope to invest a little to get a lot in plate, money, cortines. Thought of doing so turns them into songbirds.

In The Alchemist Jonson gives Sir Epicure Mammon a similar appraisal of gold’s transformative power, as close to hymn as conversation is likely to get:

He that has once the flower of the sunne,  
The perfect ruby, which we call elixir,  
Not onely can doe that, but by it’s vertue,  
Can confer honour, love, respect, long life.
Sir Epicure is exuberantly detailed in both the goods he hopes to accumulate and the social works he plans to accomplish with them:

We will be brave, Puffe, now we ha' the medicin.
My meat, shall all come in, in Indian shells,
Dishes of agate, set in gold, and studded.
With emeralds, saphyres, hyacinths, and rubies.
The tongues of carpes, dormise, and camels heelees,
Boil'd i' the spirit of Sol, and dissolv'd pearle.
And I will eate these broaths, with spoones of amber,
Headed with diamant, and carbuncle.
My foot-boy shall eate pheasants, calverd salmons,
Knots, godwits, lamprey's.

2.2.71-81

This amounts to a fool’s golden age or at least a redemptive program to achieve it. That he is not totally preposterous, merely ninety percent so, is suggested by the hopes that even so sober a man as Edward Dyer entertained for alchemy. He is as much taken with gourmet delights as Subtle is with those properties that magic converts into gold, beginning with *material liquida* or “unctuous water” and going on to dirt:

a certaine crasse, and viscous
Portion of earth: both which, concorporate,
Doe make the elementarie matter of gold:
Which is not, yet, propria materia
But commune to all mettalls, and all stones.

2.3.144-49

As any child could have told him, of course, viscous portions of earth and water make mudpies, not gold bars.

Both Subtle and Mammon range to the far ends of earth for imagery to sustain their hopes. Although Subtle’s language is more apparently scientific and exact than Mammon’s, he ransacks the Egyptians, scripture, and the fables of poets; he disentangles perplexing allegories and interprets mystic symbols looking for what lies within substances that might commune with kindred. After all, devotional emblems and apostrophes to divine beings also expect marvelous transformations of earthly things into celestial ones. The language of symbols that seers use is a mixture of hope and lunacy, not calculation or ordinary intimacies. Both Subtle and Mammon are devotees of recipes and remedies: they assume that substances have a life of their own and can be personified, addressed, coaxed forth, reformed, or combined to startling ends if only one applies the right verbal formulas. Words become charms, gestures, magic; and bystanders are entranced by them.

Objects are not only addressable but capable of improving those who believe in them: they will return youth to the aged and health to the sick. Thus Volpone’s “Oglio del Scoto” is as powerful a
household remedy as gold itself. As in Subtle’s chemistry, the secret lies in the mix of elements, which may be individually undesirable but in their common ties release rare properties that a literalist of the imagination would not dream they had. Like Surley. Corvino is happy to provide a parody of that magical recipe:

All his ingredients
Are a sheepes gall, a rosted bitches marrow,
Some few sod earewigs, pounded caterpillers,
A little capons grease, and fasting spittle:
I know 'hem, to a dram.

Volpone, 2.6.17-21

Such unpromising ingredients reportedly will reseat one’s teeth “did they dance like virginall jacks” (p. 57) and make them white again; they will restore hearing and cure one’s ailing liver. Knowing his own power in the invention of verbal dodges and selling of formulas, Mosca likewise rejoices in the powers of gold and the illusions it encourages. As trickster, he has in common with his masters and with the poet the spell of words and the realization of secret kinships:

I feare, I shall begin to grow in love
With my deare seife, and my most prosp’rous parts,
They doe so spring, and burgeon; I can feele
A whimsey i’ my bloud: (I know not how)
Success hath made me wanton. I could skip
Out of my skin, now, like a subtill snake,
I am so limber. O! Your Parasite
Is a most precious thing, dropt from above,
Not bred ‘mong’st cloes, and clot-poules, here on earth.
I muse, the mysterie was not made a science;
It is so liberally profest! almost
All the wise world is little else, in nature,
But Parasites, or Sub-parasites.

Volpone, 3.1.1-13

For any such spell to succeed, of course, the illusionist must make his listeners into believing participants, but the key is fixation on the object. A practiced conjurer can convert a bat’s wing or a fly’s leg into a marvel, using one item that appears no different from the rest to bind them and make them work.

Thus issuing extraordinary powers all around, the comedies give free reign to Jonson’s imagination—until the moralist steps in to condemn those who have gathered for the spoils.

CHARMING THE LISTENERS

Whereas the goal of tricksters is to give a nudge to hopeful illusions and a tug at pocketbooks, the poet is admonished to use his fictions for educational and moral purposes. In this respect, as
Marotti suggests, Jonson has it both ways, especially in the comedies: the imagination gets its outing among objects rescued from ordinariiness, but final authority belongs to reason. Then, too, lyrics can be legitimately enthusiastic when the objects of praise so argue. Addressing the power of moonlight in *Cynthia's Revels*, for instance, Hesperus counters the extremities of the chase and the disturbance of night with a shining image of stately dignity. Where Volpone races beyond the limits of reason in his apostrophe to gold, Hesperus finds a relatively spare language for the silvery order of Cynthia:

Queen and huntress, chaste and fair,
Now the sun is laid to sleep,
Seated in thy silver chair,
State in wonted manner keep:
    Hesperus entreats thy light,
    Goddess excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade
Dare itself to interpose;
Cynthia's shining orb was made
Heaven to clear, when day did close:
    Bless us then with wished sight,
    Goddess excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearl apart,
And thy crystal-shining quiver;
Give unto the flying hart
Space to breathe, how short soever:
    Thou that mak'st a day of night,
    Goddess excellently bright.

The trochaic measure here suggests an energy that charges and yet is contained by the intricate balancing of lines and stanzas. The meter extracts and holds every syllable (as in "excellently," for instance), and raises to a singable level certain words that are normally more evaluative than enthusiastic. The song itself not only enacts but calls for ceremony. It seeks to preserve a wonted state of light and order whose reigning brilliance will sustain station where night prefers blindness and changeability. The poet's reiterated plea and the glitter of his appointments for Cynthia suggest the joy of spectacle and anticipated blessings. Cynthia herself is usually assigned other occupations, including the chase and the kill, and other significance, especially mutability. But Hesperus here would make her bow and quiver ornamental and adorn her order in a stately propriety. The refrain returns ceremonially to an identity the goddess need only claim.
Jonson assigns flights of imagination not only to dramatic characters but to himself or a close imposter, as in the aging lover of "A Celebration of Charis." Such poems tell us a good deal about his combinations of satire and lyric and special means of countering the poet's impulse to scale heights. Proceeding first through self-deprecation and various reasons for an old man's plunge into love's excesses, Jonson finds his best lyric pretexts in Charis's beauty and truth, though even these issue an ambiguous call to an unchivalrous lover. He frames them initially in the sober utterance of a sage almost immune to ardor:

And it is not always face,
Clothes, or fortune gives the grace,
Or the feature, or the youth;
But the language, and the truth,
With the ardour and the passion,
Gives the lover weight and fashion.

"His Excuse for Loving," p. 129

The word "fashion" is curious after "truth" and "grace," but then to love is ordinarily to be fashionable and thereby to join the pursuits of youth. Jonson is again indirectly concerned with the appropriate circle and its rites, as love's publicist seeks to explain his infatuation to an implicitly skeptical audience. His beloved is not divine but human, and her triumphs are of dubious value when she forces men to abandon their habits. If Donne in Songs and Sonnets is preoccupied with the passage back and forth between the world and the lover's private affair, Jonson's speaker can neither wait to have his discovery of Charis acknowledged nor bear to hear the mockery of onlookers. His candor admonishes us to beware of the posing and stylization of other poets, who idle reason's motor in passion's fast current. Self-concern keeps before us the issue of proprietary interest in the beloved, but its irony says clearly that mismatches result in great foolishness; failure to recognize that would be disastrous to one's moral and psychological health. Obviously, a good deal of brush has to be cleared away before true monuments to love can be erected.

In "What He Suffered," the poet prepares to abandon self-satire for a "dexterous," straightforward song, and in "Her Triumph," he offers an authentic lyric on behalf of Charis. The latter poem ends with the pretty amplitude and rhetorical grace of a musical encomium:

Have you seen but a bright lily grow,
Before rude hands have touched it?
Have you marked but the fall o' the snow,
The anapest-iambic combinations and the rhetorical accumulation of the stanza suggest that what matters is less things that gain tangibility (by being compared with lilies and swans) than what can be made of them. Verbal gamesmanship transforms the ordinary into the marvelous despite the near-banter of rhyming "touched it" with "smutched it." In so balanced and so careful a measure, statement becomes ritual just as the triple "O's" and exclamations of the last line mark a formalized counting off and a pretended passion rather than a reaction to compelling love.

Such poems have a less finely tuned sensitivity to nature than Shakespeare's songs and less of the haunting local mythology that gives voice and animation to nature in Milton. The Spenserian resources of contemporary poets such as Drayton are also missing from them. Or to put it in terms of more distant precedents, even here, as the cultivation of a rationalized style urges, Jonson is more Horatian than Ovidian. But Jonsonian songs also exploit the melodic foundations of Elizabethan lyric and its stake in performance, especially in the masque. Actually, nearly all Jonson's poems read as though staged, usually before a cordial, small audience, and it is partly the expertise of the performance that holds our attention. The range of his entertainments from epigrams to masques allows for a varied craftsmanship. Neither musical grace nor the devices of the performer are necessarily opposed to the interests of the moralizer, but the latter tends to disappear when the voicing of "O so white" or "Goddess excellently bright" is granted center staging.

Another element missing from Jonson's lyric performances is the questing persona or first-person intelligence whose own reading of situations and reactions to them is of some moment. Jonson does not throw the circle into perplexity by setting forth on voyages of discovery. His persona is usually possessed of what he requires from the outset, though the course of reason and intricacies of syntax may not be easy to decipher. By comparison to Herbert's or Donne's dramatic presences or to the apparent sincerity of Vaughan, Jonson is more ventriloquistic than we ordinarily expect a lyricist to be. His masks and antimasks are not antipathetic, like
those of Blake or Yeats, but are those of an extemporaneous performer whose feelings find only limited scope for development. Nothing takes a quick way to crescendos or conclusions. Jonson does not accept subjects of ready-made acclaim that would allow the persona to become a public spokesman or showman. He is not a circus master, despite his love of theatricality and despite the cordiality of his circle. Nor is he broadly public, which is partly what I meant earlier in saying that he is only selectively cosmopolitan. He is more likely to condemn outright showmanship. When he encounters a piece of court walking by he finds it without praiseworthy features, though it tries desperately to be at the heart of things:

At court I met it, in clothes brave enough
To be a courtier, and looks grave enough
To seem a statesman. As I near it came,
It made me a great face; I asked the name;
A lord, it cried, buried in flesh and blood,
And such from whom let no man hope least good,
For I will do none; and as little ill,
For I will dare none. Good Lord, walk dead still.

"On Something that Walks Somewhere," p. 11

Such a great personage has lost its human qualities in becoming a walking showcase. Similar complaints fly like arrows into the stuffed shirts of diplomats in "The New Cry." By such portraits Jonson makes clearer the restrictive membership of the circle.

The word grave, used ironically in the second line above, appears again in the portrait of William Camden, where it bolsters legitimate praise and indicates a compromise between judgment and lyricism of the sort that Jonson brings to his most judicious moments and his best candidates for membership. His praise is typically not of influential but of sound men whose inborn worth is reinforced by good deportment and extensive learning:

Camden, most reverent head, to whom I owe
All that I am in arts, all that I know,
(How nothing's that?) to whom my country owes
The great renown and name wherewith she goes;
Than thee the age sees not that thing more grave,
More high, more holy, that she more would crave.
What name, what skill, what faith hast thou in things!
What sight in searching the most antique springs!
What weight, and what authority in thy speech!
Man scarce can make that doubt, but thou canst teach.
Pardon free truth, and let thy modesty,
Which conquers all, be once overcome by thee.
Many of thine this better could than I;
But for their powers accept my piety.
Except for the reiteration of "what," Jonson permits very few stylistic flourishes or elaboration. Since Camden possesses mainly old-fashioned virtues, the poem does not try to be clever, despite its one outlandish claim that the country owes its renown to an antiquary and a teacher. The sequence grave, high, and holy rises by degrees above the mean, as do name, skill, and faith in coming to an exclamation against the general hindrance of plainness. The "things" in which Camden has faith are not exalted, or at least the word Jonson chooses is not, but they suggest both confidence in the world's rightness and the resources of Camden's scholarship. The renown and the sweep backward to the classics imply a circle almost as wide as a nation in this case but without the pomp of greatness.

Perhaps the most noteworthy—certainly the best known—example of Jonson's epigrammatic constraint is "On My First Son." Back of the poem lies an implicit household crisis and perhaps again a readership of a limited kind. In the foreground is a personal relationship seen in an elegiac phase framed by an implicit narrative. Constructed out of three four-line units, the poem limits grief partly by formality and movement from the past, when the father's sin was to hope too fondly, to the present wish to lose all father and thereby master grief:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy.
Seven years thou wast lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by the fate, on the just day.
Oh, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scape world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry;
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

The economy of the first unit limits the complaint and acknowledges the providential source of all gifts, the collection of all debts on schedule. The definite allotment of seven years is both intentional and just. Wisdom and discipline, however, do not prevent the poet from struggling against his own rationalizations. One should cease to be a father, but if possessiveness refuses to depart? And can one commemorate without some trace of possession? The questions of the second section indicate an anguish not easily quieted and an inability to settle immediately for epitaph, a form of dismissive closure that says in effect, "Here find the dead summed
up.” But in the poem’s overall development, even the relatively expansive complaint at the center yields quickly to constrictions in feeling and in style. The concluding four lines rewrite the opening four with greater control, setting aside the exclamation and the questions of the second part. As Jonson modestly subordinates the speaking of praise in “To William Camden” to its object, he concedes here that a poem does not make up for the loss of his best product. The only addition the poem makes to concluding epitaph formulas is the adjective “soft,” and even that has parallels in such conventional phrases as tread softly, go quietly, pass gently.

However, in the juxtaposition of “soft peace” and “best piece” and in the fictional quotation from the son, Jonson does complicate the tone. As the son lies quietly, the father, making a poem in and of his remembrance, stresses the making itself: peace to one is a piece to the other, and even if not his best piece, at least a peaceful product of his right hand. Such wordplay might seem questionable taste, but it is in keeping with the close distinction between love and like, which also calls attention to the verbal pieces out of which an exacting poem is made. Without adding to W. D. Kay’s and L. A. Beaurline’s speculations on that distinction, I am struck by the fact that making it to begin with requires a precise gauge of feelings. Discernment is imposed on feelings now and must be in the future, as the poem ends with a controlling resolution against temptations to stray ever again into self-gratifying excess.

The parallels between the lost son and the poem are curiously undeveloped, however, despite Jonson’s momentary attention to them. The poem is fully the poet’s and cannot be taken away as the son has been. It helps him curb excessive feeling and yet retains a memorializing hold upon the dead. But these advantages do not interest Jonson as much as self-assessment and control of the legitimate grounds of complaint do. The distinction between loving and liking is obviously important and is akin to the one between possession and praise. I take it that what one loves may be celebrated; what one likes must be owned as well. In any case Jonson prepares for the dismissal of the poem by making it not only second to the son but a further demonstration of refused possession.

In both “On My First Son” and “To William Camden,” Jonson avoids ornament and odic intensity, which is a kind of self-denial or poetic deference. To say that he also avoids irregularities and contains perturbations is not to say that he allows judiciousness to squeeze feeling completely dry, however. The course one takes to self-denial may not itself be thoroughly disciplined. The impulse to
attach great hopes to what one loves will always need watching. Jonson’s tendency is to reveal passion rising, against counterchecks, from a justifiable attraction to what is worthy before locating superior reasons for disciplining it. Where deference rings true, it usually suggests that those who merit praise are in the image of classical and English predecessors of the kind that William Camden studies as a Latin scholar and historian. Back of men and women of standards and good taste are the writers Jonson brings forward by citation and indirect allusion.

Imitation, in fact, is the chief form that deference takes. The refusal to claim personal possession is related to it, but not in any simple way, since imitation is more than mere copying. As Richard S. Peterson remarks, Jonson’s use of classical materials results in a metaphorical and mythical complexity; allusions are meant to be recognized as “signs in the finished work that its originality, organization, and continuing life depend on suggestive links to the great writers of antiquity.”

John Hollander’s version of that allusive structure, which is not always distinguishable from plagiarism, holds that “between the intimately private and the didactically public, there are many modes, and Jonson played in them all.” The public dimension comes not merely from a hoarding of lines, as Edmund Wilson remarks, but from an ambition to aim “at the one great statement that will render obsolete other sayings, which is part of the search for an ideal community guided by literary precedents.”

Wilson’s way of putting it suggests more pride in personal authority than is justified, but as the circle expands to include former writers and their types and figures, the poet can claim to be reviving the best parts of a civilization and making them part of the current performance. The circle absorbs the classics as its second nature. Most of the proper names cited in the epigrams belong to acquaintances who reconstitute just such an ancient standard.

It may seem by all this that the locus of lyric for Jonson sacrifices real places for traditional topoi and is more bookish and social than natural or topographical. If so, there would be nothing unusual about that, and certainly Jonson deals frequently with an already-processed nature. But itemized resources are also important to him, especially in “To Penshurst,” “To Sir Robert Wroth,” and the raptures of Sir Epicure. What is the relation between that provisioning of the circle and what inspires lyric apostrophe? I mentioned earlier the coincidence of decorum and possession in lyric, or appropriateness and appropriation (also the tendency in some kinds of lyric to challenge these by disorder.) For Jonson that is a key
confusion or running together, because all genres take experience piece by piece and assign its parts names and places according to schematic tropes. The poet is chiefly the arranger, or in refashioning genres, sometimes rearranger; it is he who knows best the categories and storage places out of which the host fetches the choice pieces of his entertainments. The provisions of "To Penshurst," for instance, are first stationed in the terrain for estate picture-taking around the modest, well-modeled house. Some of them are then brought in for the fire or the table in support of the country economy centered in the baronial power of "the great lord."

The natural resources of the estate are obviously not publicly available in the sense that anyone can select a tree or a deer for his own; but a given item once entered in the steward's ledger can be administered to guests. The poet-beneficiary of such generosity becomes perforce a minor laureate figure, not an orphic bird. He has no commission to disentangle mysteries or issue fables for riddle-solving intellects; if he celebrates nature's marvels, it is as provisions, not as a hieroglyphics to which he, rather than the estate owner, holds the keys. Indeed, he first of all controls enigmas and ambiguities, because these have a way of challenging mastery, not only withdrawing certainty from words and images but generating awe and generating as successors not Cotton or Carew but Vaughan and Crashaw. (It takes a true equilibrist and juggler of meanings like Marvell to salvage both Jonson's domestic rule and the topographical mysteries it normally discards, which is what makes "Upon Appleton House" so singular a poem, the key to its main difference from Jonson being its prolonged plunge into the woods.)

Giving a domestic twist to celebration and possession, Jonson acknowledges simultaneously the Sidneys' mastery of nature and his own status as a kind of poet-in-residence or songbird in the family tree, taking possession of the well-prepared provisions allocated to him after their improving journey through the pantry and kitchen:

And I not fain to sit, as some this day  
At great men's tables, and yet dine away.  
Here no man tells my cups, nor, standing by,  
A waiter, doth my gluttony envy,  
But gives me what I call, and lets me eat;  
He knows below he shall find plenty of meat,  
Thy tables hoard not up for the next day.

65–71
This may seem to place the poem on some byway of courtly encomium, with stress on patronage; but I look upon it as less than a tentative breaking loose signaled by the poem’s contrast between Lord Lisle’s place and extravagant “piles” elsewhere. The image of patronage is prominent to be sure in the host-guest relation as well as in the possession that fat aged carp agree to as they rush to get themselves hooked, listed, and tabled. But the estate is also simple: in every detail it declares its dislike of ostentation and its self-sufficiency. If Milton too claims a share in the local rule of nature in “Arcades,” and Marvell finds it possible to move off to the silva where a poet can read the enigmatic lessons of creatures and trees, the way for that independence has been prepared, in Jonson’s strange menu-minded way, by the bold declaration that “the same beer and bread and selfsame wine/That is his lordship’s shall be also mine” (“To Penshurst,” 63–64).

**Closing the Circle and Tying the Knot**

The relationship between poetic commemoration and the circle is elaborately charted in “To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison.” Its way of putting the poet’s relationship to a selected group has been acknowledged often enough to require little amplification here, but it is pertinent that Morison is himself the primary circle. The poet redefines his own role accordingly. Morison’s “fair example” gets abroad for others to heed without a great deal of help from the poet. Through the turns and counterturns of the ode the substance of brave minds and “simple love of greatness, and of good” (105) impose their force, and lyric rises naturally from them. Jonson thus claims to invent nothing except perhaps ways to showcase that reality. The circle makes of the poet not a myth-maker who spellbinds or hoodwinks but someone who identifies truths for his listeners and advises loyalty to them. Whether he joins others or they join him is a matter of indifference, so long as all parties recognize the same examples. Jonson ends with the same deference, subordinating the written record to deeds in which friendship is written “with the heart, not pen.”

The image of the circle serves him as well here to limit the poet’s powers as it does elsewhere to assign them. It again suggests containment and the intimacy of a discerning group. Such functions of the circle trope are not surprising, and all told, in its several occurrences, it strikes a balance between consistency and variety. However, Jonson requires other figures to fill out the concept of
the audience he would address and furnish with a state of mind. He does, after all, stage plays and masques for a broader society as well, less of his own selection, more interested in myth and more accustomed to pageantry. The style of the masques and of the lyrics that go with them is accordingly more elevated than that of the epigrams, and the objects they assemble are more conventionally emblematic. Since my purpose is to explore the privacy of a poet escaping courtly dominance, I will not assess in detail the implications of that broader audience. However, Jonson is sometimes no less zealous on behalf of the poet's formative influence over it than he is with the coterie itself, which partly explains his hectoring of audiences and bitter disappointments in them at times. He wants a national sphere of influence only if it can be managed without weakening the poet's rightful authority.

One of the figures Jonson chooses for the relations of this larger ensemble is the curious knot, which in Daedalus's song in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* builds a bridge from the rationalized lyric to pageantry and puts its appeal in theatrical terms. The dance figure stands roughly for intricacies of an entertainment that can combine pleasure and instruction. It suggests the forming of a group more given to demonstrative and symbolic play than a small circle is—but equally devoted to morality:

```plaintext
Come on, come on, and where you go
So interweave the curious knot
As even th' observer scarce may know
Which lines are pleasure's, and which not.
First, figure out the doubtful way
At which a while all youth should stay,
Where she and virtue did contend
Which should have Hercules to friend.
Then, as all actions of mankind
Are but a labyrinth or maze,
So let your dances be entwined,
Yet not perplex men unto gaze;
But measured, and so numerous, too,
As men may read each act you do.
And when they see the graces meet,
Admire the wisdom of your feet.
For dancing is an exercise
Not only shows the mover's wit
But maketh the beholder wise,
As he hath power to rise to it.
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Pp. 362–63

In other invitation poems, Jonson is less openly concerned than he is here with the expressive mode itself. If in inviting the friend to supper, he holds out the attractions of food, poetry, wine, and
friendship, and in the Cary-Morison ode instructs Lucius Cary to reaffirm the bond that friends establish over "love of greatness, and of good," here he assumes that art will synchronize its audience even as it gives it interpretive problems.

A difficulty lies in the perplexities of humankind, however, and in a confusion of values that undermines the common bond when the circle expands. Where a William Camden or a Henry Morison sets a pattern that reasonable men follow, the actions of greater humankind here are "but a labyrinth or maze." Any dance that displays them will weave a curious knot, composed first of pleasure's doubtful lines and then meeting virtues. If pleasure is to be reconciled to virtue, opposing things must interact without confusion, perhaps as in the circles of Spenser's dancing graces. Measure and number are useful to any such coordinated end: an orderly dance is both pleasurable and good and therefore meant to be witnessed (as Spenser's dance apparently is not, if Calidore is an indication). When movement is patterned in the right way, the audience sees the aesthetic design; form becomes answerable to mind, or as Jonson says, "wit." Such a discernment of pattern is musical or lyric in that it follows a course of rising realizations through rhythm and melody. In the two key words "power" and "rise," Jonson brings meaning and form together in a single impression and proposes that a community fall into place precisely as the audience of an expressive act. He binds its members to the same insights and times their recognitions by his cadence. Where such graces meet, following wit—seizing the design—reconciles pleasure's motions to virtue's discipline.

I confess to finding the interpretable acts of that knotty dance vague even in the context of the masque, but presumably Jonson has in mind something like the stimulus to virtue that poetry's concrete universals have for Sidney in the Apology. Enacted patterns of virtue—as opposed to those that philosophy presents abstractly—gain commitment by the charms of music and lyric. Theoretically, no barrier exists to the showing of such art to a broad audience, though again Jonson wishes the poet to assemble and command it. Even here it need not necessarily be courtly, though most audiences of masques and triumphs were.

It is difficult to define precisely the extent of the authority Jonson would assign the poet in this performative function or the degree of difference between the poet's circle thus broadened and the courtly circle that commissions masques. But it seems reasonable to say that Jonson is like Donne in seeking a contract with
whatever portion of a society he can entice within range if not into committed membership. He takes a more significant step toward the marginality of the major lyricists of the seventeenth century than such followers as Carew, Suckling, and Herrick might suggest. His originality in conceiving the poet's authority and readership is still too seldom recognized. That originality is no doubt due in part to the fact that the times have forced him out of the courtly mold, which he looks upon uneasily and sometimes slips into. Among poets whom one might expect to find writing verse like his, such as Wyatt, Gascoigne, Raleigh, and Sidney, we discover very little of precisely his kind. He differs from them both in song and in plain style epigram. But more importantly, he does not repeat a great many of the rhetorical exercises and attitudes that appeal to the writers of romance, sonnets, and the anthologized pieces of Englands Helicon. Nor is he satisfied with the musicality of a Campion or the Spenserian graces of a Drayton. To speak in a lower-keyed voice, he changes the sound of praise and puts aside its most popular formulas. Partly because of his turning to classical predecessors, it is easy to overlook the house-cleaning he performed before he sat down to plan his entertainments and to write.

He is too seldom credited also with the variety of occasions and styles he expects his listeners and readers to absorb. In some ways he follows a more difficult course than Donne, whose showy breaks with predecessors in Songs and Sonnets yield a harvest of triumphs over antagonists real and imagined. Jonson is more conservative, though no less combative. The continuities between modern poetry and its classical predecessors call for the sort of social lyric that scholars like Camden drill into new generations of schoolboys under the influence of humanist educational theory. He avoids eccentricity as Donne does not. He does not seek out private chambers or woodland retreats in order to circumvent society, but corrects it to its face even while beckoning selected and qualified members of it to become complicitous in the occasion.
Cities are Sepulchers; they who dwell there
Are carcasses, as if no such there were.
And Courts are Theaters, where some men play
Princes, some slaves, all to one end, and of one clay.
The Country is a desert, where no good,
Gain'd (as habits, not borne,) is understood.
There men become beasts, and prone to more evils;
In cities blockes, and in a lewd court, devills.

Donne, "To Sir Henry Wotton"