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IX.91 by Martial

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George Held
IX.91

Martial
C.IX.91

If I were invited to dinner in one heaven
by Caesar's summoner and another by Jupiter's,
though the stars were nearer and the Palace
farther, I should give the gods above this reply:
"Keep seeking whoever might prefer
to be the guest of the Thunderer:
My Jove, you see, retains me here on earth."

Commentary

Wherever power obtains, sycophancy is sure to follow. In this regard ancient Rome has arguably been unmatched, what with its succession of powerful emperors and the flock of courtiers who curried their favor. Among the latter was the poet Martial (40–104). Born Valerius Martialis on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, Martial, like many other ambitious young men from the provinces, went to Rome in his early twenties to make his name. In writing 1,500 epigrams, he achieved his goal. Beyond that, he sought preferment at the palace of several Caesars and flattered them with poems of such lavish praise that they justify using the word “sycophancy” to characterize them.

In Epigram 91, from the ninth of Martial’s fourteen collections, the poet claims that if he were invited to dinner at both the Palace of Domitian and Jupiter’s banquet hall, he would choose the earthly host’s table. Imagine a poet (laureate?) who published such a poem to President G.W. Bush or President Obama. What howls of derision would issue from the mouths of other poets, not to mention politicians, though whether they scorned the poet’s act of sycophancy or envied his preferment might be hard to tell.

Because Martial was scrupulous about form, I had to decide whether to use six lines, as he did, or break the extra-long line 5 into two and add a seventh line. In addition to avoiding an incompatibly long line, this allowed me to end with the rhythmically strong “r” sound of the final three lines, mimicking the regular punch-line tone of Martial’s epigrams.