



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 9

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## Did Ben Jonson write the inscription for the Shakespeare monument in the church at Stratford on Avon?

As has been pointed out by a number of observers, the Shakespeare monument at Stratford has certain anomalous features. Not the least of these is the inscription's inaccurate claim that "envious death hath placed within this monument Shakespeare". In fact, Shakespeare is buried, not "within this monument", which is on the north wall of the church, but in an unmarked grave under the church floor (Ogburn 38-9, 790) beneath the following lines of doggerel:

Good freind for Jesus sake forbear  
To digg the dust enclosed here  
Blest be the man that spares these stones  
And curst be he that moves my bones.

Another anomalous feature of the monument is that its original bust of Shakespeare may have depicted a man holding a large sack. An engraving made from a drawing by Sir William Dugdale and published in his *Antiquities of Warwickshire* of 1656 shows this sack quite clearly (see illustration).

Given these unusual circumstances surrounding the Stratford monument, it is perhaps not surprising that history yields no record as to the authorship of the inscription engraved on it. As given in Dugdale (688), the inscription reads as follows:

Iudicio Pylium, genio Socratem, arte Maronem.  
Terra tegit, populus mare, olympus habet.  
Stay, passenger, why goest thou by soe fast  
Read, if thou can'st whom envious death hath plac't

Within this monument Shakspeare with whome  
Quick nature dyed, whose name doth deck the tombe  
Far more then cost, sith all that he hath writ  
Leaves living art but page to serve his witt.

Although Shakespeare died in 1616, the Stratford monument was apparently not put up until some years later. Its erection may, in fact, have coincided with the publication of the First Folio in 1623. Since Ben Jonson's poem in praise of Shakespeare and his verses accompanying the Droeshout engraving are prominent features of the First Folio, it seems useful to consider the possibility that Jonson may also have written the inscription for the Stratford monument.

The most obvious point of comparison between the inscription and Jonson's poem in the First Folio is the similarity of themes. For example, the inscription states that Shakespeare's name "doth decke the tomb/ Far more then cost, sith all that he hath writ/ Leaves living art but page to serve his witt". This idea that Shakespeare's work serves as his monument is merely an echo of an identical sentiment found in Jonson's poem in the First Folio. There, Jonson says of Shakespeare: "Thou art a monument without a tomb". The inscription on the Stratford monument also plays somewhat cryptically with the issue of how much Shakespeare owes to "nature" and how much to "art" ("Quick nature/living art"), a theme elaborated at greater length in Jonson's poem in the First Folio. This similarity of themes is, then, in itself suggestive of Jonson's authorship of the inscription.

Another feature of the inscription that points to

Jonson's authorship is the occurrence in its six lines of a striking number of words that also appear in his poem and verses in the First Folio: "stay", "envious" [envy], "monument", "nature", "died" [dead], "name", "tomb", "art", "read", "leaves" [leave], "writ" [writings, write], "living" [life, alive, lives], "wit". In addition, the inscription uses the word "page", while both poems in the First Folio contain the closely-related word "book". In fact, there are only two key words in the inscription which are not repeated in one or the other (usually both) of Jonson's poem and verses in the First Folio. The use of identical word choice in the inscription and in Jonson's work in the First Folio thus goes beyond what could be attributed to mere coincidence.

Further support for the hypothesis of Jonson's authorship of the inscription is found in his use, in several other epitaphs of his composition, of phraseology similar to that found in the inscription. The inscription opens, for example, with an injunction to the reader to "Stay". This injunction is echoed in several other epitaphs by Jonson. His *Epitaph on Elizabeth, L.H.*, for example, begins:

Wouldst thou hear what man can say  
In a little? Reader, stay (Donaldson 272).

An identical injunction is found in his *An Epitaph on Master Philip Gray*, which opens with the words "Reader, stay" (Donaldson 338). Similarly, *An Epitaph on Henry, Lord La Warr/To the Passer-by* commences with the lines:

If, passenger, thou canst but read,  
Stay, drop a tear for him that's dead  
(Donaldson 387).

The first two lines of Jonson's *Epitaph on Cecilia Bulstrode* are cast in the same mold, urging the reader to:

Stay, view this stone; and if thou beest not such,  
Read here a little, that thou mayst know much  
(Donaldson 442).

Finally, his *Epitaph on Katherine, Lady Ogle* expresses the same sentiment with a slight variation in wording, instructing Lady Ogle's children and grand-

children to "look with pause upon it" rather than "stay":

Read it here.....Do but look  
With pause upon it: make this page your book  
(Donaldson 460).

Other similarities in word choice and phraeology between Jonson's epitaphs and the inscription on the Shakespeare monument are also evident in the lines quoted in the foregoing paragraphs. Among these similarities are the use of the word "passenger", and the injunction to the passerby to "read, if thou canst".

Did Ben Jonson write the inscription for the Stratford monument? The similarity between the inscription and Jonson's other work suggests that he did. The ramifications of Jonson's authorship of the inscription have yet to be explored. At the least, however, Jonson's authorship of the inscription suggests that the publication of the First Folio and the erection of a monument to Shakespeare in the church at Stratford were a co-ordinated effort in which Ben Jonson played a key part.

## Works Cited

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