

FIRST AND FINAL THINGS Shakespeare's Sonnet 145, and his Epitaph

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Abstract – This paper examines certain aspects of Shakespeare's Sonnet 145, and of the epitaph inscribed on his grave in Stratford-upon-Avon, arguably the first and the last poems composed by the dramatist. Although the grave is often described as being anonymous, it is suggested that Shakespeare does name himself obliquely in his epitaph, and that there are significant analogies between the manner in which he does so and the way in which he indirectly names his wife Anne Hathaway in a sonnet that may record an episode, whether real or imagined, in the history of their courtship.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Sonnets; Epitaph.

What some critics believe to be Shakespeare's earliest poem, and what some believe to be his final poem, have certain features in common which, together with the fact that they effectively bracket the poet's career as a writer, hint at the possibility that they might profitably be examined in the light of one another. The first of these works is Sonnet 145, which may date back to 1582, the year of the dalliance between Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway that led to consequences which, changing the course of Shakespeare's life decisively and irrevocably, doubtless played a far from negligible role in the eventual emergence of the dramatist we know. Andrew Gurr describes this sonnet as "Shakespeare's first poem" (Gurr 1971, pp. 221-26), and others have followed suit, although there have been some dissenters. What is perhaps the last poem Shakespeare composed – very possibly in the final weeks of his life as he felt death approaching – is the epitaph on his grave in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. This consists in a single quatrain made up of two rhyming couplets, written in octosyllables and heavily alliterative in style, and notwithstanding the hallowed setting in which it is found terminating on a somewhat unchristian note by calling down a malediction upon anyone having the effrontery to meddle with the dead poet's mortal remains.

There can of course be no absolute certainty that Shakespeare wrote the lines chiselled on the otherwise nondescript stone slab marking what has always been presumed to be his final resting place, but there was a seventeenth century tradition that this was the case,¹ and there are good reasons for identifying him as the most likely author. One of these reasons is the nature of the inscription itself, which is distinctly anomalous as compared with the others in whose company it is found. The epitaphs carved on the ledger stones covering the graves of other members of Shakespeare's family – his wife Anne, his daughter Susanna, Susanna's husband John Hall, and her daughter's first husband Thomas Nash – all allude to the personal qualities of the persons interred beneath them, or at least

¹ See for instance Schoenbaum 1987, p. 306, and 357 n. 49, and Hyland 2003, pp. 205-206. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor include the epitaph in their *Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2006, p. 811).

make some mention of what they were or did in life. After a few lines in English detailing her name, the fact that she was the wife of William Shakespeare, and her date of death and age, the remainder of the inscription carved on Anne's gravestone is written in Latin, and evokes the memory of the deceased woman as a devoted mother in the voice of one of her grateful children speaking in the first person: "Thou, my mother, gave me life, thy breast and milk" (Stopes 1901, p. 90). Following a preamble in English similar in kind to that of his mother-in-law, John Hall's epitaph too is in Latin, and records his having been renowned in the medical arts, affirming furthermore that "worthy was he to have surpassed Nestor in well-earned years" (Stopes 1901, p. 97). Also in Latin is much of the inscription carved on Thomas Nash's gravestone, and although it is not particularly forthcoming about the character of the person it commemorates it does at least do him the courtesy of mentioning that he was not without virtues and wealth (Stopes 1901, p. 101). In contrast with these, Susanna's epitaph is entirely in English, and describes her as being "Witty above her sex", adding that "Something of Shakespeare [she] was in this", although she was also "Wise to salvation" in the manner of her husband (Stopes 1901, p. 104). Not to be forgotten of course is the inscription, written in both Latin and English, forming part of the monument to Shakespeare affixed to the north wall of the chancel of Holy Trinity, lines which place the dead poet in the company of Nestor, Socrates, and Virgil, and eulogize his supreme gifts as a writer. The name "Shakespeare" dominates this group, figuring on four of the six memorials of which it is comprised, but what is curious is that it is conspicuously absent from the grave of the poet himself.

The fact that the graves, and the effigy of Shakespeare presiding over them, *do* quite visibly constitute a group raises questions concerning the relation between the inscriptions carved on them. It has been argued by Lachlan Mackinnon that "the connections between the epitaphs suggest that one hand made them", and that "that hand, in English and Latin, was Susanna's" (Mackinnon 2015, p. 83). Mackinnon presents an interesting, and on the whole sustainable, case for Susanna's being sufficiently proficient in versifying and in Latin as to be a plausible candidate for authorship. But whether such an argument is to be accepted or not, the "hand" in question, whomever it belonged to, seems not to have been responsible for the verses on Shakespeare's grave. If the inscriptions on the ledger stones adjacent to his own provide at least a bare minimum of information concerning the individuals they are commemorating, this is not the case with Shakespeare's epitaph, which does not contain any particulars concerning the deceased person whatsoever:

Good friend for Iesus sake forbear,
To digg the dust enclosed heare.
Blese be ye man yt spares thes stones,
And curst be he yt moves my bones.²

² This is a transcription of the legend as it appears today, on a slab that at a certain point in the first half of the eighteenth century replaced the original which had become sunken and dilapidated (Halliwell-Phillipps 1883, p. 234; and Dobson and Wells 2005, p. 130, s.v. "epitaph, Shakespeare's"). That it corresponds almost exactly to the original is attested by the transcription made by William Dugdale in 1656, which reads as follows:

Good freind for Iesus sake forbear
To digg the dust inclosed here
Blest be the man that spares these stones
And curst be he that moves my bones (Dugdale 1656, p. 520)

It should be mentioned that Dugdale, who was meticulous in recording the epitaphs on the other graves in the chancel of Holy Trinity as well, does not mention any name being inscribed on the "plaine free stone"

The inscription talks of dust, of stones, of bones – by no means atypical funerary fare, but a far cry from what is to be seen on the other graves in the group. There is no reference to the dead man's relation to other people either living or dead, whereas all the other stones specify the family affiliations of the persons lying beneath them. It is a peculiarly self-referential inscription, in the sense that to all intents and purposes it is a grave talking about itself. The only personal touch is found in the possessive adjective in the final phrase “my bones”, but that is a reference to a skeleton lying beneath the stone and not to an individual who once lived. Even more singular, of course, is the fact that the inscription does not state the name of the deceased person. Although the inscription accompanying the effigy of Shakespeare mounted on the wall of the chancel does contain the name “Shakspeare”, it bears no obvious relation to the poet's actual grave, which is separated from the wall by that of his wife.³ It is also somewhat misleading, since it contains the phrase “Shakspeare ... whose name doth deck ys tombe”, when the word “tombe” can refer neither to the mural monument itself (which is not a tomb) nor to the grave (which bears no name).⁴ And in any event, of course, the writer of the inscription could not have known that such a monument would eventually be installed on a nearby wall, and thereby supply the name that is missing from the slab covering the poet's grave. The curious impression might seem to be that those laying Shakespeare's body to rest had come to bury him and not to praise him, and the even more curious impression is that this might have been Shakespeare's own intention in planning for his obsequies as well. To all appearances, at least, Shakespeare's grave is anonymous.

Such invisibility is intrinsic to the Shakespeare myth as it has evolved over the years. Shakespeare's tendency to efface himself in his work, and to leave as few traces of his personal self in the world as possible, is something that has been commented on by numerous writers, and that has become something of a commonplace in Shakespearean criticism. Referring to Shakespeare in a letter, John Keats famously described the “poetical Character” of which the dramatist was in his view eminently representative as being something that “is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing”, and that it “has no Identity” (Keats 2009, pp. 147-48). Jorge Luis Borges would adopt Keats's phrase “Everything and Nothing” as the title of a brief and poignant sketch about Shakespeare which opens with the words: “There was no one in him” (Borges 1999, p. 76). In a not dissimilar vein, in a short story published in 1903, rather archly entitled “The Birthplace”, Henry James describes the dilemma confronting a character named Morris Gedge who is given a job as warden of a house reputed to be the birthplace of a celebrated (though unnamed) poet, and whose responsibilities include that of showing visitors around

he examined only a few decades after Shakespeare's death (Dugdale 1656, p. 520). This suggests that the anonymous nature of the grave is not, as has sometimes been conjectured, an accident due to later repair or renovation.

³ The space was presumably deliberately left vacant when Shakespeare was interred, so that it would be available to Anne when her time came. Mackinnon argues that if, as was common practice, “the couple lie with their heads to the west”, then their graves are so disposed that “come the resurrection, they will rise to face the altar with Anne properly on her husband's left” (Mackinnon 2015, p. 79). It should be noted that similar arrangements were not made in the case of Susanna, who was buried to the right of her husband.

⁴ The monument was commissioned in London, and executed by the sculptor Gerard Johnson. It has been suggested that the monument might originally have been intended to stand in Westminster Abbey, and that the inscription on it was composed for that purpose by John Donne (Centerwall 2006, pp. 277, 280). For the suggestion that the monument “was originally designed as part of a two-tiered sepulchre” that was to stand in Holy Trinity itself, see Price 1997 (this quotation, pp. 181-82).

the building. Although he is resolved at first to be as faithful as possible to the facts of the poet's life, he realizes very quickly that there is such a dearth of these that he has no significant information whatsoever to impart to his visitors. "There's very little to know", he tells his wife: "He covered His tracks as no other human being has ever done" (James 2013, p. 177). One day he encounters a young American couple who share the same perception, and the following conversation ensues:

"*This* man isn't anywhere. I defy you to catch Him."
 "Why not say, beautifully," the young woman laughed, "that, like the wind, He's everywhere?" (James 2013, p. 183)

The young American visitor suggests, quoting *Hamlet*, that "'The play's the thing.' Let the author alone", to which Gedge replies as follows:

"It's all I want – to let the author alone. Practically ... there *is* no author; that is for us to deal with. There are all the immortal people – *in* the work; but there's nobody else."
 "Yes," said the young man – "that's what it comes to. There should really, to clear the matter up, be no such Person."
 "As you say," Gedge returned, "it's what it comes to. There *is* no such Person." (James 2013, p. 186)

It is not only the Birthplace in Henley Street that inspires such meditations concerning the disjunction between the man of flesh and blood, or what remains of him after his death, and the idea of Shakespeare that exists in the popular imagination, born of an extraordinary body of work that seems to have nothing to do with any particular individual at all. Describing in a diary entry a visit she made to Stratford in May 1934, Virginia Woolf remarks on "the queer impression of sunny impersonality" she experienced on the grounds of New Place where Shakespeare's house once stood, a sensation that was confirmed by the sight of the grave in Holy Trinity:

Yes, everything seemed to say, this was Shakespeare's ... but you won't find me, not exactly in the flesh. He is serenely absent – present; both at once ... never to be pinned down. And we went to the church and there was the florid foolish bust, but what I had not reckoned for was the worn simple slab, turned the wrong way, Kind Friend for Jesus' sake forbear – again he seemed to be all air and sun smiling serenely; and yet down there one foot from me lay the little bones that had spread over the world this vast illumination. (Woolf 1982, p. 209)

The ironic discrepancy between the mystique with which a great personage is invested in the collective imagination, and the meagreness of the bodily remains that are left after his death, is something that Shakespeare himself draws attention to in more than one of his works. It is precisely this that Mark Antony is remarking on for instance in *Julius Caesar*, when he responds to the sight of the slain body of Caesar with the words "Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils, / Shrunk to this little measure?" (3.1.150-51). What is even more ironic, however, as Antony himself will make clear in the self-consciously prophetic speech he goes on to deliver towards the end of the same scene, is that to whatever degree his physical self has been reduced to a bundle of inert and mutilated flesh "Caesar's spirit" will continue to exert its sway over the world to devastating effect (3.1.273), that there is a very real and very ominous sense in which he has survived his own demise.

Ideas analogous to those recorded by Woolf after her visit to Stratford were expressed even at the time of Shakespeare's death and in the years immediately following, when the issue was debated of whether the poet might not merit a more prestigious

sepulchre than Holy Trinity could afford. In an elegy commonly attributed to William Basse, but very possibly the work of John Donne (Centerwall 2006), it is proposed that the poet's remains be interred in what has come to be known as Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, which is where Francis Beaumont had been buried only a month before Shakespeare died:

Renowned Spenser, lie a thought more nigh
 To learned Chaucer; and rare Beaumont, lie
 A little nearer Spenser, to make room
 For Shakespeare in your threefold, fourfold tomb. (Shakespeare 2006, p. lxx)

But whatever projects were afoot to have Shakespeare's body transferred to Westminster Abbey, they were evidently abandoned very quickly, presumably out of deference to the injunction on the poet's grave that his bones should not be touched. In a poem written to mark the publication of the Folio edition of Shakespeare's works in 1623, Ben Jonson's response to the elegy written either by Basse or by Donne was to dissociate the fame of the poet from his physical being:

My Shakespeare, rise. I will not lodge thee by
 Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie
 A little further to make thee a room.
 Thou art a monument without a tomb,
 And art alive while thy book doth live
 And we have wits to read and praise to give. (Shakespeare 2006, p. lxxi)

The point Jonson is making is that Shakespeare is his own monument and has no need of any other, or, changing the image slightly, that he is still living in the works he composed, so that it does not really matter where his mortal remains lie buried. Less than a decade later, John Milton would echo this sentiment in a poem prefaced to the Second Folio of 1632, in which he asks "What need my Shakespeare for his honoured bones", and affirms that the poet "Has built thyself a lasting monument" in what is once again referred to – as in Jonson's poem – as his "book" (Shakespeare 2006, p. lxxiii). Although the grave in Stratford might contain a scattering of "little bones", to use Woolf's phrase, the real Shakespeare resides elsewhere.

What Woolf describes as Shakespeare's being both present and absent at the same time, of his somehow being present *in* his absence, is precisely where the plot thickens. But before considering this matter further, let us go back to Sonnet 145. Although in the edition of the sonnets produced by Thomas Thorpe in 1609 this work is placed among the "Dark Lady" poems, it is anomalous in its metrical scheme and in other respects as well. Alone among the sonnets in the collection, it is written in iambic tetrameter. This, as it happens, is also the metre used in Shakespeare's epitaph. It is completely devoid of the nuance of language and psychological complexity that characterize the other sonnets, and is for this reason dealt with slightly by the majority of commentators. It describes a woman who is beloved, or at least ardently yearned after, by the poet. He describes those "lips that Love's own hand did make",⁵ which is hardly the sort of phrase that the poet

⁵ All quotations from Shakespeare's works are taken from the *Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2006).

would be likely to use in connection with the Dark Lady.⁶ But those divinely shaped lips pronounce the word “I hate”, a circumstance that seems to augur badly for the amatory aspirations of the poet. At the end however the woman, relenting, appends another two words to this phrase which alter its meaning entirely, and revive the poet’s hopes:

“I hate” from “hate” away she threw,
And saved my life, saying “not you”.

The effect of these words, the poet says, is that of day succeeding night, which “like a fiend / From heaven to hell is flown away”. We are thus given to understand that things at this point are beginning to look up for the passionate pilgrim worshipping at this particular shrine, and that the sonnet is therefore to be regarded as the record of a turning point in the history of the courtship in which he is engaged, although there is of course no way of knowing whether this episode occurred in actual fact or only in the fervid imagination of the future dramatist.

It has been conjectured by a number of critics that with the phrase “‘hate’ away” Shakespeare is punning on the name of the woman he was himself pursuing at the age of eighteen, and that the sonnet may have been an instrument of persuasion deployed in the wooing of that woman. Discussing the wordplay of the final couplet, Gurr argues that “the only explanation which makes much sense is that the play on ‘hate’ and throwing ‘hate away’ by adding an ending was meant to be read by a lady whose surname was Hathaway” (Gurr 1971, p. 223).⁷ Michael Wood takes this a step further, suggesting that the final line can be read as “Anne saved my life” (Wood 2003, p. 86). Wood evokes the rather engaging image of the teenaged bridegroom nervously reciting this poem at his own wedding feast, and if this is an accurate picture it is to be imagined that the “not you” conclusion might have raised a laugh or two on that occasion. It appears more likely however that Shakespeare penned the sonnet before he learned that Anne was pregnant with his child, a development which, far from saving his life, effectively put paid to the kind of life he had probably been envisaging for himself up until that point. It is not a particularly accomplished poem by any stretch of the imagination, though it is not without its interesting features,⁸ but it may afford a glimpse of a youthful Shakespeare as yet unscathed by the vicissitudes of life. In its play of oppositions – night becoming day, love-forged lips producing phrases of hate, hate mutating into love, or at least benevolent acquiescence – it may seem to anticipate *Romeo and Juliet*.⁹

⁶ He does however use the phrase “A woman’s face with Nature’s own hand painted” to describe the Fair Youth in Sonnet 20.

⁷ In an editorial postscript to Gurr’s article, Frederick W. Bateson, basing himself on E.J. Dobson’s *English Pronunciation*, agrees that “in Stratford in 1582 *Hathaway* and *hate-away* would have been a very tolerable pun” (Gurr 1971, p. 226), a judgement with which Samuel Schoenbaum concurs (Schoenbaum 1987, p. 91). Park Honan, while pointing out that “the pun ... is not very exact”, concedes that “the poem’s naïve diction and simple feeling suggest early work, and it may well date from about 1582 (Honan 1998, p. 74). Peter Ackroyd also suggests that the poem “was in fact composed for Anne Hathaway and has some claim to being the first extant work of William Shakespeare” (Ackroyd 2006, p. 85).

⁸ Gurr points out that since there appear to be no instances of octosyllabic sonnets before 1582, “we are left ... with the conclusion that he [Shakespeare] was the first explorer and innovator of his genre, an original here as everywhere else” (Gurr 1971, p. 225).

⁹ The words that conclude the sonnet—“I hate ... not you”—might be compared with those Portia pronounces when she is speaking to Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*: “There’s something tells me—but it is not love—/ I would not lose you; and you know yourself / Hate counsels not in such a quality” (3.2.4-6).

Shakespeare would play with proper names throughout his entire career as a dramatist, so a sonnet taking poetic liberties of this kind with the name of the woman who would shortly become his wife is in a sense premonitory of future developments. The poet's own name is not exempt from this compulsion to subject names to the most extravagant extremes of semantic manipulation, as the ringing of changes on the name "Will" in the sonnets indicates.¹⁰ The dramatist obliquely invokes his own name in several of his plays as well, producing sly in-jokes that would have been picked up both by his fellow actors and by the more knowing members of his audience. A boy named William Page is put through his Latin paces by the Welsh schoolmaster Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for instance, and acquits himself so creditably that one suspects that this may be the poet's way of reminding us that he is himself not quite as incompetent a Latinist as has been alleged. "He is a better scholar than I thought he was", says Mistress Page, who has been present at these proceedings, and Sir Hugh agrees that "He is a good sprag memory" (4.1.74-76). Another William appears in *As You Like It*, and he too is subjected to a catechism, this time at the hands of Touchstone:

Touchstone:	Is thy name William?
William:	William, sir.
Touchstone:	A fair name. Wast born i'th' forest here?
William:	Ay, sir, I thank God.
Touchstone:	Thank God – a good answer. Art rich?
William:	Faith, sir, so-so.
Touchstone:	So-so is good, very good, very excellent good; and yet it is not, it is but so-so. Art thou wise?
William:	Ay, sir, I have a pretty wit. (5.1.20-28)

The "forest" in the play is the Forest of Arden, the real-world version of which Shakespeare knew well, and the name of which is also that of his mother's family. Although Shakespeare is often supposed to have enacted the role of the elderly servant Adam in *As You Like It* (Honan 1998, p. 110), it is perfectly possible that he played the part of the individual listed in the dramatis personae of the play as the "country fellow" William as well, something that would have given a humorous metatheatrical twist to his exchange with Touchstone. However self-effacing he might be, the poet is not entirely absent from his work.

As I have argued elsewhere, there is reason to believe that Shakespeare is deviously playing on his own surname during the scene in *Romeo and Juliet* in which the Nurse recalls sitting with the infant Juliet "under the dove-house wall" when an earthquake suddenly erupted, and "'Shake', quoth the dove-house" (1.3.29, 35). This, I suspect, is Shakespeare's belated answer to Robert Greene (or whoever it was that was writing under his name), who in a malicious passage in the tract entitled *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, published only a few years before *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed, refers to the "*Iohannes fac totum*" who is "in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey" (Greene 1923, pp. 45-46). The author of that pamphlet accuses the individual he disparagingly identifies as an "upstart Crow" of being "beautified with our feathers" (Greene 1923, pp. 45), a comment calculated to cause deep offence to the party referred to. Shakespeare bided his time, but eventually retaliated by evoking an occasion in which a number of feathers were ruffled by the shaking of a scene (Lucking 2005, pp. 51-57). Whether it is Greene or Henry Chettle or Thomas Nashe or some other

¹⁰ Sonnets 135, 136, and 143.

disgruntled practitioner of the literary arts who is at fault, the culprit has become a legitimate target for mockery, and after the whirligig of time has run its course the upstart crow is revenged on the whole pack of them. But the temptation to exploit the associations of Shakespeare's name was by no means dispelled after this episode, and in his elegy to the dramatist prefaced to the First Folio Ben Jonson himself would later not only invoke those writers of antiquity who would want "to hear thy buskin tread / And shake a stage" – something that might deliberately recall the aspersions cast in *Greene's Groatsworth* – but subsequently refer in the same poem to all those lines in his plays in which the poet "seems to shake a lance" (Shakespeare 2006, pp. lxxi, lxii).

In a somewhat different manner, Shakespeare is clearly playing with the associations of his own surname in the coat of arms he arranged to have awarded to his father in 1596, with the expectation – given his father's age at that time – that it would pass to himself in fairly short order. This assertive but not excessively elaborate specimen of heraldic art, in the design of which it is generally assumed Shakespeare had a hand, is a typical example of what is known as "canting" arms, in which the bearer's name is represented in the form of a rebus. The coat features a gold spear tipped with silver, a motif that is repeated in the crest, in which a falcon is represented grasping such a shaft in its talons. In her extended discussion of Shakespeare's acquisition of his patent of arms, Katherine Duncan-Jones points out that the golden spear with a silver tip not only "alluded to the 'spear' of the family name", but "could resemble a silver-tipped pen" of the sort sometimes bestowed as prizes upon particularly gifted penmen, and so advert to the poet's own literary calling (Duncan-Jones 2010, p. 106). Whereas the relevance of the spear to Shakespeare's name is self-evident, Duncan-Jones also attaches significance of a somewhat less obvious order to the falcon depicted clutching the spear in the crest. The wings of the bird are partially extended, and Duncan-Jones surmises that "the intention is to suggest the moment called 'shaking', which in falconry was the bird's action immediately before taking flight", so that by assuming this posture "the bird is itself enacting the 'shake' part of the bearer's name" even as it is preparing to soar skyward (Duncan-Jones 2010, p. 110).¹¹ What the coat of arms amounts to then, if this argument is valid, is a rather intricate visual pun on the poet's own name, and one that possibly makes reference to other attributes of an even more personal kind he wished to advertise as well. The coat of arms would eventually be incorporated into the monument that would be mounted on the chancel wall above Shakespeare's grave in Holy Trinity, whereas the crucial image of the spear would also appear, impaled or quartered with other arms, on the gravestones of Susanna, John Hall, and Thomas Nash.

In view of this propensity to pun on proper names which we first find in Sonnet 145, and which is exhibited elsewhere in his work as well as in what we know of his life,¹² it might be expected that Shakespeare would have taken the opportunity to do something similar in the epitaph that constituted his final poetic utterance as well, since it is normally the name of the deceased person that occupies pride of place in a funerary inscription. One can imagine various sorts of tricks that the poet might have played with the word "will" in

¹¹ Other biographers more prosaically suppose that the crest depicts a "falcon shaking his spear" (Potter 2012, p. 204).

¹² One of the more piquant anecdotes concerning Shakespeare's personal life that have come down to us is the story recorded by John Manningham in 1601 about the dramatist pre-empting Richard Burbage, who had been performing the role of Richard III, at an amorous assignation, and upon being informed that "Richard the Third was at the dore ... caused returne to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third". To clarify the joke, Manningham felt the need of adding the comment "Shakespeare's name William" (Manningham 1868, p. 39).

the testamentary sense as well as in others, as Portia for example does in *The Merchant of Venice*.¹³ At first sight, at least, Shakespeare would appear to have abstained from seizing this final opportunity to take his own name in vain. But here, as I suggested earlier, the plot thickens, for it is perhaps arguable that clues to the author's identity are in fact to be discerned in the inscription on his grave, though not in a form that leaps readily to the eye. It has been suggested by several commentators that Shakespeare might have been acquainted with a riddle, eventually printed in *The Book of Merry Riddles* in 1629 but certainly circulating long before that date, which divides the name of an individual into separate elements which the reader must reassemble in order to discover who is being referred to. That name, coincidentally, is none other than the poet's own. John Kerrigan suggests that this puzzle might lie behind some of the wordplay of Shakespeare's Sonnet 136, and quotes the riddle as follows:

My lovers will
I am content for to fulfil;
Within this rhyme his name is framed;
Tell me then how he is named?

Solution. – His name is William; for in the first line is *will*, and in the beginning of the second line is *I am*, and then put them together, and it maketh *William*. (Shakespeare 1999, pp. 367-368)¹⁴

What I should like to suggest is that a device analogous to this – and analogous also to the play on the words “hate” and “away” in Sonnet 145 – might be operating in Shakespeare's epitaph as well, and that the verses contain elements which, though detached from one another, can be recomposed into a name. The elements I have in mind are the words “sake” in the first line of the quatrain, and “spares” in the third. These words both fall in the same position in their respective lines, in the third and penultimate foot, and in both cases it is on these words that the metrical stress falls. My suggestion is that these two words, taken together, and as they would have been pronounced in the early seventeenth century, come remarkably close to sounding like “Shakespeares”, and so – in however obscure and indirect a way – do serve to identify the occupant of the grave. If this is so, then Shakespeare's name, like so much else that concerns him, is in a certain sense both present and absent at the same time.

It is perhaps not without relevance that there is a character in one of Shakespeare's own plays who explicitly writes his own epitaph before committing suicide, this being the protagonist of *Timon of Athens*. Though we are not in this case dealing with a deliberately contrived riddle, there is a certain ambiguity attaching to this literary instance of epitaph writing as well.¹⁵ The text Timon has carved on his gravestone, which Shakespeare copied virtually verbatim from Thomas North's translation of Plutarch, has occasioned editors some uneasiness, because one line seems to contradict the other:

¹³ “So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father” (1.2.23-24).

¹⁴ Kerrigan argues that “the echo of ‘will’ ... fulfil” in Sonnet 136 “suggests that Shakespeare knew the puzzle” (Shakespeare 1999, p. 368). Katelijne Schiltz tells us that “the earliest traces of the *Book of Merry Riddles* go back to 1575”, and asserts that Shakespeare's familiarity with the collection is attested “by their mention in the first act of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*” (Schiltz 2015, p. 36), although in fact the allusion in this latter play is only to an otherwise unspecified “book of riddles” (1.1.184, 186).

¹⁵ I say “explicitly” because there are other characters in Shakespeare, such as Hamlet and Othello, who in the final moments of their lives implicitly try to do the same in the stories they enjoin other characters to tell about them after their deaths.

Here lies a wretched corpse,
 Of wretched soul bereft.
 Seek not my name. A plague consume
 You wicked caitiffs left!
 Here lie I, Timon, who alive
 All living men did hate.
 Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass
 And stay not here thy gait. (5.4.71-78)

Some commentators on the play have argued that *Timon of Athens* is in an unfinished state, and that had he got around to completing it Shakespeare would have eliminated one or other of the problematic lines.¹⁶ This seems more than likely, but what is of interest in the present context is the epitaph as we have it, not as it may have been modified by the dramatist in the course of a hypothetical process of revision of the play. And in the epitaph as we have it is the injunction in the third line to “Seek not my name”, although the name of the dead man is in fact unequivocally announced two lines following.

Something else that might be mentioned in this connection is the possibility that Shakespeare composed a number of epitaphs for real persons in the course of his career, although these are generally so uninteresting from the strictly literary point of view that they have seldom attracted much attention. One of the epithets that have found their way into the *Oxford Shakespeare* – and so can make some claim to being of recognized Shakespearean provenance notwithstanding its undistinguished poetic quality – is that inscribed on a tomb in St Bartholomew’s Church in Tong, Shropshire which contains the remains of Sir Thomas Stanley and his son Edward, but the date of whose construction is unknown. One part of the epitaph, which like the inscription on Shakespeare’s own grave is written in iambic tetrameter, contains the lines “This stony register is for his bones; / His fame is more perpetual than these stones” (Shakespeare 2006, p. 811). The “bones/stones” rhyme is of course found in Shakespeare’s epitaph as well, but this is perhaps not in itself particularly remarkable given the funerary context in which it is found. The other part of the epitaph on the Stanley tomb, written this time in iambic pentameter, contains the lines “Not monumental stone preserves our fame, / Nor sky-aspuring pyramids our name”. The curious thing is that notwithstanding the assertion that monuments will preserve neither fame nor name, the inscription concludes with a rather inelegant quibble on the name of the deceased men: “Stanley for whom this stands shall stand in heaven” (Shakespeare 2006, p. 811). At the same time that the epitaph effectively denies the need to record the name, it proceeds to publish it all the same, just as Timon’s epitaph exhorts the passer-by not to seek his name but then proclaims that very name immediately afterwards.

There is another poem by Shakespeare that is perhaps relevant in this connection. This is Sonnet 71, which enjoins the addressee “No longer mourn for me when I am dead”, and later: “When I perhaps compounded am with clay, / Do not so much as my poor name rehearse”. The interesting part of the sonnet, however, is where the poet says:

Nay, if you read this line, remember not
 The hand that writ it; for I love you so
 That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot

¹⁶ See for example the note to these lines in Shakespeare 1986, pp. 139-40n. The relevant passage from North’s Plutarch is printed as Appendix A to the Arden Edition of *Timon of Athens* (Shakespeare 1986, pp. 141-42).

What Shakespeare has contrived to do is write a poem which, while ostensibly instructing the person to whom it is addressed not to remember him, does so in such a way as to guarantee that there is no possibility whatsoever of his not being remembered. What he is saying is that if his friend reads this line in the future he should not think of the hand that wrote it – the hand, that is, which is writing the line at this very moment and drawing attention to itself by asking to be forgotten. One is reminded of Keats's "living hand, now warm and capable", reaching out towards the reader from "the icy silence of the tomb", in an extraordinary little poem that, startlingly, concludes with the words: "see here it is – / I hold it towards you" (Keats 2007, p. 237). The hand will be even more vividly present when it no longer exists, when it is evoked solely by the words it writes about itself. Similarly, when he subsequently refers to the "poor name" that should not be recollected in the future Shakespeare is implicitly invoking his own name in the very moment that he is asking his friend – with a telling pun on the word – not to "rehearse" it. While he is urging him not to rehearse his name in the sense of repeating it, he is also implicitly requesting him not to consign that name once more to the oblivion of a funeral hearse, two imperatives that are essentially in conflict with one another. Like the peculiarly ineffable spirit of Shakespeare haunting the places that Virginia Woolf visited in Stratford, the poet is present and absent at the same moment, and in a paradoxical sense indeed establishes his presence *through* his absence.

The epitaph on Shakespeare's gravestone adjuring the reader not to move his bones is generally understood to be a warning to future sextons of Holy Trinity not to dispose of the dead man's remains in the charnel house of the church, a fate that was commonplace in this period and that eventually befell Shakespeare's daughter Susanna (Weis 2015, p. 133). But the words might be taken in another and less material sense – as an admonition to leave the private individual alone, not to pry into his personal affairs, to allow him the oblivion of the anonymity he chose. One commentator suggests that the epitaph expresses the poet's desire "to be remembered only in his writings; facts about his private life should not be dug up" (Corn 2011). If this is so, then it is ironic that during the quadricentenary of the poet's death leaving him alone is precisely what has not happened, that there has been a great deal of stirring of bones of one sort or another. In addition to other activities of a more academic or celebrative nature, in the years leading up to the anniversary extensive excavations were carried out at New Place, on the very grounds where Virginia Woolf became conscious of the impossibility of pinning Shakespeare down, in order to determine the arrangements of the poet's final place of residence. Among other things, archaeologists have found what may have been the Shakespeare family's oven and their cold store, facilities for laundering and for brewing ale, various items of cookware and tableware, and a number of clay pipes that may have been used to smoke substances classified as illegal in many countries today (Thackeray 2015). Even more ironically, Shakespeare's place of burial has also been subjected to intensive scrutiny by means of sophisticated ground penetrating radar technology, an investigation that has led to the discovery that the skull of the poet might be missing, that part of him may be absent from his own grave. His bones, it may be, have been moved with a vengeance.

The epitaph, however, remains. If those terse and remarkably uninformative verses are indeed of the poet's own composition, then they were probably written at New Place, a stone's throw away from Holy Trinity Church, and a stone's throw away also from the house in Henley Street where the young poet possibly penned the work that has become known as Sonnet 145. Composed in the same metre, both the sonnet and the epitaph are poems signalling crucial moments of passage in the life of the poet himself: the one into love and sex and fatherhood, and the other into death. I have suggested that through the

probable pun on “sake” and “spares”, the epitaph “names” the occupant of the grave at the same time as it preserves his anonymity, just as the other epitaphs I have discussed name the deceased person at the same time as they assert either that the name is not recorded or that it is not to be sought. Not dissimilarly, the author of Sonnet 145 “names” the woman it is inspired by at the same time that it does not, so that the obliquity with respect to names that marks Shakespeare’s final poem is already present in his first. And such obliquity is to be found elsewhere in that early poem as well, making it perhaps a somewhat more subtle exercise in sonnet-writing than it is generally given credit for being. If the fair damsel of Shottery, in pronouncing the phrase “I hate ... not you”, is assuring the fledgling poet that she loves him, or contemplates the possibility at least of doing so in the future, she is choosing a singularly circuitous way of doing so. She is using indirections to find directions out, expressing herself in negatives, fuelling her suitor’s hopes by declaring the feelings he does not arouse in her rather than those he does. But, of course, Shakespeare himself is being no less circuitous in his sonnet, since he is using a rather strained play on words to obscure the name of the woman whose love he seeks at the same time as he does name her in cryptic form. It is a matter of biographical history that in this case at least the game of saying things by not saying them directly had a successful outcome, and that it is by means of Shakespeare’s name that Anne is identified on the stone that lies beside his anonymous grave in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church.

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