

The Prefatory Pages of Shakespeare's First Folio.
The First and Last Poems

To the Reader.

This Figure, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;
Wherein the Grauer had a strife
with Nature, to out-doo the life :
O, could he but haue drawne his wit
As well in brasse, as he hath hit
His face ; the Print would then furpasse
All, that vvas euer vvrit in brasse.
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.

B. I.

Looking again at the prefatory pages of the Shakespeare First Folio I observe that the poem on the first page, by Ben Jonson, has something in common with the first poem on the last page which is by Leonard Digges. I refer to the printed poems. The first poem, ten lines long, is by Ben Jonson and is printed opposite the Droushout engraving of Shakespeare. The last couplet is ambiguous:

*But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.*

From line 3 onwards the poet has been speaking about the Graver or Engraver and has expressed the wish that he could engrave the whole contents of the Folio, presumably, his wit, in brass, which would seem to be impossible. There follows:

*But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.*

However, having read to the end we are obliged to go back and think: from the grammar 'since he cannot,' would appear to apply to the engraver. His picture, since he engraved it, could also apply to the engraver, but 'his Booke' applies to Shakespeare. So what about the 'he' in 'since he cannot,'? In fact 'since he cannot,' most sensibly applies to Shakespeare too, only now we have to emphasize the 'he', 'But, since he cannot, Reader, looke Not on his Picture, but his Booke.' i.e. since he cannot look upon his book because he is dead now; you, reader, do it for him. We find the same need, to halt and go back in the poem by L. Digges on the last of the Prefatory Pages of the First Folio. I will read the first 5 lines of this poem as if I had never seen it before:

*Shake-speare, at length thy pious fellowes give
The world thy Workes : thy Workes, by which, out-live
Thy Tombe, thy name must when that stone is rent,
And Time dissolves thy Stratford Monument,
Here we alive shall view thee still.*

It doesn't work! It can only work if we put in a full stop after 'thy name must.' and start 'When' with a capital W. Then we read it:

*Shake-speare, at length thy pious fellowes give
The world thy Workes : thy Workes, by which, out-live
Thy Tombe, thy name must. When that stone is rent,
And Time dissolves thy Stratford Monument,
Here we alive shall view thee still.*

Within these first five lines we find an extraordinarily clumsy expression, 'thy Workes, by which / out-live Thy Tombe, thy name must'. It's almost unbelievable that a poet could start a poem like this. There is bad grammar as we have noted and finally ambiguity. 'Here we alive shall view thee still.' Should it be, 'Here we who are alive shall view thee still.' or, 'We shall view thee still as if you were alive.'

The next lines are fine and indeed famous, '... This Booke / When Brasse and Marble fade, shall make thee looke / Fresh to all Ages : But the next clause beginning 'when Posterity...' is simply obscure in its meaning

*Fresh to all Ages : when Posterity
Shall loath what's new, thinke all is prodigy
That is not Shake-speares; ev'ry Line, each Verse
Here shall revive, redeeme thee from thy Herse.*

Prodigy means, a sign of a miracle. It really doesn't seem to make sense at this point. It seems to be saying, quite incredibly, that the time will come when the works of Shakespeare are the only thing that people don't loath. But then the word should not be 'prodigy' but 'wearisome' or 'horrible'. In any case we think the time will never come where people loath what's new. So now we seem to have come to meaningless and absurd exaggeration; and yet the poet, L. Digges go on to claim that this book will be indestructible by fire or time. Therefore his poem will also be indestructible and he must in any case know its great importance in that position; why didn't he take more trouble?

Thinking again about the first five lines and especially about that strange, uncomfortable inversion 'thy Workes, by which, out-live / Thy Tombe, thy name must', it suddenly hit me that here there must be a name! He is contorting things in order to do something special. Surely here there must be hidden an anagram; not necessarily of the modern sort where every letter has to correspond, but what I call an 'acoustic' anagram, which Shakespeare mostly uses where the same sounds are there regardless of the spelling or the repetition of letters. The consonants in 'name must' are 'n', 'm', 'st' or 'st', 'm', 'n'

or ‘st’, ‘n’, ‘m’, the last of which is the most suggestive: st-n-m. The line continues, ‘*when that stone is rent*,’. Surely Stunom or Stonum is a name that one knows. Is it the name a person or place or both? When I first looked it up I came to the name of a town in America, but most American towns are based upon English ones, or at least many are. A few days after coming to this name I had lunch with my cousins, Miles and Diana, and idly asked them if they knew of a place called Stonum. Of which they immediately replied, “Oh yes, Stoneham is a suburb of Southampton.” I then got myself to the reference library and looked up the history and geography of Stoneham. First I found a family called, Distoneham, but this name existed earlier than the 16th/17th century and then faded out. Then I found out that in the district of Stoneham, which is quite small, there was the Manor House that belonged to the family of the Earl of Southampton, which was really rather extraordinary. Immediately it seemed possible that the man who wrote the Sonnets actually lived near the Earl of Southampton and this geographical closeness could be the reason for them knowing each other. Maybe the Sonnet writer could have been the tutor of the young boy. It would seem that the Distoneham family became just plain Stoneham a name which exist to this day. I have also looked up the life of the Earl of Southampton in the ‘History of National Biography’ but it says extremely little about his early life except that he went to Cambridge when he was very young. And he also sold this manor in the region of Stoneham and made his centre in London. Unfortunately the nearby church, St. Marys, where any Stonehams would naturally be buried, have only got records going back to approximately 1660. In any case somebody born as a Stoneham in Southampton is by not means necessarily going to be buried there. They might always even be buried in Wilton. A next step would be to find a book about Southampton’s early years and whether he did have a tutor for instance. I feel I am warm and the phrase following, ‘*Thy Tombe, thy name must*,’ seems to confirm this idea; ‘*when that stone is rent*,’ it is a mirror surface, something again that Shakespeare frequently does. The name it seems was sometimes written, Stoneham, sometimes Stonum, sometimes Stannum, so there was great flexibility about the vowel sounds. I have also come to a thought about the word ‘*prodegie*’ which in this case you may think is rather far-fetched.

*Shall loath what's new, thinke all is prodegie
That is not Shake-speares;*

‘*Shall loath what's new*,’ rings a kind of bell with me in that I know quite a lot of people who loath the idea that there is number and geometry behind Shakespeare’s plays; they simply can’t stand it! Across from them of course stand the other people who are excited and in love with the idea. Since it makes no sense at all to suppose that one day people will loath everything that’s new, there must be a particular context intended and this context must surely be that which has to do with Shakespeare. And that which one day will be new that is to do with Shakespeare is the discovery of the Numbers and the Figure. So when I come to ‘*prodegie*,’ which makes no sense here in the ordinary way again it rings a bell in relation to my work because all the time there is one question, did this happen with awake, ordinary consciousness or did it happen by some kind of miracle or wonder?

‘... *thinke all is prodegie*’



TO THE MEMORIE

of the deceased Authour Maister

W. SHAKESPEARE.

SHake-speare, at length thy pious fellowes giue
The world thy Workes: thy Workes, by which, out-line
Thy Tombe, thy name must when that stone is rent,
And Time dissolues thy Stratford Monument,
Here we aliue shall view thee still. This Booke,
When Brasse and Marble fade, shall make thee looke
Fresh to all Ages: when Posteritie
Shall loath what's new, thinke all is prodegie
That is not Shake-speares; eu'ry Line, each Verse
Here shall reuiue, redeeme thee from thy Herse.
Nor Fire, nor cankring Age, as Naso said,
Of his, thy wit-fraught Booke shall once invade.
Nor shall I e're beleuee, or thinke thee dead
(Though mist) untill our bankrupt Stage be sped
(Impossible) with some new straine t'out-do
Pasions of Iuliet, and her Romeo;
Or till I heare a Scene more nobly take,
Then when thy half-Sword parlying Romans spake.
Till these, till any of thy Volumes rest
Shall with more fire, more feeling be exprest,
Be sure, our Shake-speare, thou canst neuer dye,
But crown'd with Laurell, line eternally.

L. Digges.

To the memorie of M. W. Shake-speare.

WEE wondred (Shake-speare) that thou went'st so soone
From the Worlds-Stage, to the Graues-Tyring-room.
Wee thought thee dead, but this thy printed worth,
Tels thy Spectators, that thou went'st but forth
To enter with applause. An Actors Art,
Can dye, and liue, to acte a second part.
That's but an Exit of Mortalitie;
This, a Re-entrance to a Plaudite.

I. M.

There are people who may think that there was no consciousness of this in a man who wrote his wanton 'woodnotes wild'. It's just a miracle that it works out that way; so perhaps 'prodegie' is also a kind of acoustic anagram: 'prodegie' – 'geometry'?

I think there is much in this page of two poems. The second poem is printed in a very special way so that there is this special curve going from the bottom to the top on the right the lines being reduced

neatly and steadily in length. It looks like half an archway, a quarter of a kind of a circle, something strange. When we read this poem by I. M. who I am pretty sure is John Marsten it seems like something of an anticlimax although it seems more fluent and easy than the first poem. It does not praise Shakespeare as highly. The first poem ends,

*Be sure, our Shake-speare, thou canst never dye,
But crown'd with Lawrell, live eternally.*

The second poem says in effect: Shakespeare, we never expected you to die so soon and leave the stage, but now that this book is published you will, as it were, live again. The only words that refer to a book are, *'but this thy printed worth,'* the rest refers to an actor. The *'Worlds-Stage'* could of course refer to a book but I'm pretty sure that it refers to the Globe Theatre. The last line seems to say, 'but now you have come back to applause'. Actually the word *'Plaudite'* doesn't precisely mean applause. It is a Roman word and it means the traditional gesture by which a Roman actor asked for applause. The poems are also different in the way they are addressed. The first one has *'TO the MEMORIE'* in large letters and continues, *'of the deceased Authour Maister W. S H A K E S P E A R E.'* The second one is written in much smaller print, *'To the memorie of M.W.(sloping letter) Shake-speare,'* with a hyphen. I believe these poems, one 22 lines and the other 8 lines, are written to different people. One is to the writer and the next is to the actor.

'this thy printed worth,' can have many meanings. Worth always has to do with how much, counting, how many lines. Here there are 8 lines and the other poem has 22 lines, so it's a bit less than a third and you could say that if we were to weigh out the value of what the author did, the writer, and what the actor did in presenting Shakespeare's plays, 3 to 1 might be correct. There seems to be another possible meaning to, *'An Actors Art, / Can dye, and live, to acte a second part.'*, a second part because in his lifetime he acted first, the first part, and the second part because he acted second to someone else. A third thought on these two poem: 22 and 8 add up to 30. We find circles everywhere, why not here? 30 lines is easy to make a circle with and to divide and it is interesting that the two lots of brackets, *'(Though mist)'* and *'(Impossible)'* in the first poem, are in the exact centre if you put the two poems together. The centre of the 22 lines, that is lines 11 and 12, are

*Nor Fire, nor cankering Age, as Naso said,
Of his, thy wit-fraught Booke shall once invade.*

'Naso' as I have discovered is Ovid, who was of course the great inspirer of Shakespeare. I would like to find out what Naso did say of his. A further thought on the last line of the second poem: *'This, a Re-entrance to a Plaudite.'* A plea for applause seems to imply a certain doubt, will I or will I not get the audience clapping, will they approve? If a man who is only an actor has been credited for a few centuries with being a great writer too, then when he is finally found out his rating will somewhat fall, and yet maybe he was a very good actor. Maybe it was a conspiracy that was none of his making, that he had to pretend to be a writer as well. So he pleads for applause, finally: 'Don't think I'm nothing, I'm still very much something.' The earlier reference directly to the word applause comes at line 5, *'thou went'st but forth / To enter with applause.'* That's what you wanted to do

'*To enter with applause*', which you hoped for. I seem to have got caught up, entirely without intension, in the great controversy.

Postscript just coming. I said something too lightly just now but it has led to a new thought. I suggested that the words that lie at the centre of the second short poem, *thou went'st but forth / To enter with applause.*' must imply intension i.e. thou went forth with the hope of entering with applause. I realize now that it really means something different. The sequence of ideas: go out, come back, applause occurs twice. It is neatly repeated in the last part of this short poem only the first time '*applause*' is used, and the second time '*Plaudite*' is used, which is in fact applause with a question mark. Suppose after all we are right in thinking that this poem is addressed to a famous actor from Stratford who died certainly in 1616 whose early life in Stratford has been more or less traced and has been identified as the writer of the plays. Seven years after his death, in 1623, a book comes out, the First Folio, praise is heaped on his name and those who were alive at the time remember when they read certain lines in the plays how these were the parts that this actor acted – to hear his voice again and to see his gestures he comes alive again, he re-enters. From then on, over the centuries, the applause surges up and down and up and down, finally ascending to a crescendo in the 20th century, a roar that is heard all around the world. But then, suppose it is discovered at last who this man really was, what he really was, and that his greatest acting role was that in which he pretended that he was Shakespeare the writer. At that point his '*Actors Art, / Can dye, and live, to acte a second part.*' His second part is smaller but still extraordinary. He stretches out his arms pleading for applause like a Roman actor.

Our attention has switched to someone else and Stratford is in disarray! But still why should we not give him that applause? Surely we should. The sequence seems to be: he acted many times, there was applause, he died, seven years later the book was published, there was more applause. That was where he entered. The nature of the book was discovered and the mask he wore was discovered but still there was applause, or there could be applause.