

2. From Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia*

1598

Rev. Francis Meres (MA Cantab and Oxen) is famous for his *Palladis Tamia* (1598),¹ often described as a “commonplace book” or collection of useful quotes and information. The title is a nonsense Latin phrase, though *Palladis* vaguely translates as Athena (Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom) while all Latin words prefixed with *tam-* have the sense of *continuing, thus, ongoing*, etc. So *Wits Treasury* is both an approximate translation and a subtitle. While the book is what it says, an anthology, it may also be described as a middle-brow dissertation with a great number of examples and references. *Palladis Tamia*'s thesis is that in its writers and literary greatness England, especially under Elizabeth I of course, equals and even surpasses the glories of ancient Greece and Rome. Meres ensures that everything fits by listing numerous forced analogies:

As Greece had three Poets of great antiquity, Orpheus, Linus and Musaeus, and Italy other three auncient Poets, Livius Andronicus, Ennius and Plautus: so hath England three auncient Poets, Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate.

As Homer is reputed the Prince of Greek Poets; and Petrarch of Italian Poets: so Chaucer is accounted the God of English Poets.

As Homer was the first that adorned the Greek tongue with true quantity: so Piers Plowman was the first that observed the true quantitie of our verse without the curiositie of Rime.

Along with everyone else who ever shook an English quill, Meres mentions Shakespeare several times. He also offers an interestingly incomplete and ambiguous list of his works to 1598, including a still-undiscovered *Loves Labours Won* and *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, since ascribed by Vickers to George Peele.²

Even more intriguing, Meres has apparently heard of Shakespeare's private and as yet unpublished sonnets. These he remarkably describes as “sugred” and “privately circulated” among his “friends,” a phrase whose implications are rarely explored. Does Meres really know what he's talking about? The words “sugred” and “privately circulated” and “friends” hint both at the sonnets' literary quality and their quasi-public eroticism, which many, including myself, take to be bisexual. This applies whether one reads the collection as autobiographical or merely “literary” or some combination of the two (the likeliest explanation).

One hardly imagines however that the sweetest needed to be “privately circulated,” meaning scandalously, although apparently they were, unless they alluded to real people, meaning indi-

¹ *Palladis Tamia. Wits Treasury being the Second Part of Wits Common Wealth.* By Francis Meres Master of Artes of both Universities. (London: Cuthbert Burbie, 1598).

² See “King John,” by Michael Egan in Joseph Rosenblum, ed., *The Greenwood Companion to Shakespeare* (2005), Vol. 1, pp. 156-189.

viduals of social consequence. This strengthens the case for De Vere over the provincial actor and horse-holder.

The poems' subsequently pirated publication by Thomas Thorpe in 1607 under the title *Shakespeare's Sonnets* with a teasing dedication to a "Mr W.H.," described as their "onlie begetter," has fueled controversy ever since. The implications of Meres' testimony however are rarely factored in when the sonnets are discussed.

The oddness and unreliability of Meres's account of Shakespeare is underscored by his careless titling errors, e.g. *Midsummer's Night Dream*, *Gentlemen of Verona*, *Errors*. Meres mysteriously omits *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster* and *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of York*, (later the three Henry VI plays), *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and, as I have argued, *1 Richard II*.³

Meres additionally notes that Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford, was an established playwright to be mentioned in the same breath as Shakespeare. This has given comfort and support to both sides of the authorship debate. On the one hand, Oxford is recognized as a dramatist, among the best for comedy, but on the other Meres clearly believes that Shakespeare is somebody else.

As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras: so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous and hony-tongued Shakespeare, wites his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends, &c.

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so Shakespeare among ye English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage; for Comedy, wites his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love labours lost*, his *Love labours wonne*, his *Midsummers night dreame*, and his *Merchant of Venice*: for Tragedy his *Richard the 2*. *Richard the 3*. *Henry the 4*. *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

As Epilus Stolo said, that the Muses would speake with Plautus tongue, if they would speake Latin: so I say that the Muses would speake with Shakespeares fine filed phrase, if they would speake English. [...]

As Ovid saith of his worke; *Iamque opus exegi, quod nec Iovis ira, nec ignis Nec poterit ferrum, nec edax abolere vetustas*.⁴ And as Horace saith of his: *Exegi monumentaere perennius; Regalique; situ pyramidu altius; Quod non imber edax; Non Aquilo impotens possit diruere; aut*

³ Michael Egan: *The Tragedy of Richard II, Part One, A Newly Authenticated Play by William Shakespeare, Edited and Introduced with an Introduction and Variorum Notes* (2006).

⁴ The work shows that neither the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, nor even the gnawing tooth of Time itself. can wipe him out.

*innumerabilis annorum sfuga temporum*⁵: so say I severally of Sir Philip Sidneys, Spencers, Daniels, Draytons, Shakespeares, and Warners workes;

Non Iovis ira: imbres: Mars: ferrum; flamma, senectus,
 Hoc opus unda: ruēs: turbo: venena went.
 Et quanquam ad plucherrimum hoc opus euertendum tres illi Dii conspirabunt, Cronus, Vulcanus, & pater ipse gentis;
 Non tamen annorum series, non flamma, nec ensis,
 Aeternum potuit hoc abolere Decus.⁶

As Pindarus, Anacreon and Callimachus among the Greekes; and Horace and Catullus among the Latines are the best Lyrick Poets: so in this faculty the best among our Poets are Spencer (who excelleth in all kinds) Daniel, Drayton, Shakespeare, Bretton.

As these Tragicke Poets flourished in Greece, Aeschylus, Euripedes, Sophocles, Alexander Aetolus, Achaeus Erithriaeus, Astydamas Atheniesis, Apollodorus Tarsensis, Nicomachus Phrygius, Thespis Atticus, and Timon Apolloniates; and these among the Latines, Accius, M. Attilius, Pomponius Secundus and Seneca: so these are our best for Tragedie, the Lorde Buckhurst, Doctor Leg of Cambridge, Doctor Edes of Oxforde, maister Edward Ferris, the Authour of the Mirrour for Magistrates, Marlow, Peele, Watson, Kid, Shakespeare, Drayton, Chapman, Decker, and Benjamin Johnson.

The best Poets for Comedy among the Greeks are these, Menander, Aristophanes, Eupolis Atheniensis, Alexis Terius, Nicostratus, Amipsias Atheniensis, Anaxedrides, Rhodius, Aristonymus, Archippus Atheniensis and Callias Atheniensis; and among the Latines, Plautus, Terence, Naeuius, Sext. Turpilius, Licinius Imbrex, and Virgilius Romanus: so the best for Comedy amongst us bee, Edward Earle of Oxforde, Doctor Gager of Oxforde, Maister Rowley once a rare Scholler of learned Pembroke Hall in Cambridge, Maister Edwardes one of her Majesties Chappell, eloquent and wittie John Lilly, Lodge, Gascoyne, Greene, Shakespeare, Thomas Nash, Thomas Heywood, Anthony Mundaye our best plotter, Chapman, Porter, Wilson, Hathway, and Henry Chettle.

5 The monuments I've raised will outlast kings and kingdoms, the pyramids, tempests, conquests, the countless succession of years and even the flight of Time itself.

6 Neither the wrath of Jove, the iron of Mars, nor fire, nor the force of the sea, nor the rush of people, even poison, can destroy this beautiful work. Nor can it be overthrown by the three gods working together, Cronus, Vulcan and the Father of Nations; nor years, nor flame, nor sword, can eradicate this Eternal Beauty. [Trans. by Michael Egan.]