

What did John Marston Know about Shakespeare?

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John Marston has been a shadowy but persistent presence in heterodox discussions of the Shakespeare authorship since the nineteenth century. It is hardly surprising that he should have something to offer to an investigation of concealed literary and theatrical identities in London in the 1590s: he was living and working in the Inns of Court and around the theatres from about 1594, when he matriculated from Brasenose College, Oxford University, until 1606, when he left the Middle Temple.

A cursory glance at Marston's poems and plays reveals an oddly persistent preoccupation with that popular but enigmatic body of work coming to be known as 'Shakespeare' through the 1590s, the most striking being *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image*, his parody/pastiche of *Venus and Adonis*, and the links and parallels in character, situation and dialogue between *Hamlet* and *Antonio's Revenge*. Other turn-of-the-century plays of Marston's—*Antonio and Mellida*, *What You Will*, *The Dutch Courtesan*, and *The Malcontent*—appear to exhibit a more generally ironic relationship to certain Shakespearean plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Measure for Measure*.

As the author of two volumes of verse satires, Marston took a 'professional' interest in duplicity, hypocrisy, and imposture, traditional satiric targets that he would have seen as notably instantiated in the use of 'front-men' or 'stooges' for aristocratic writers. There are a few passages in the satires where he could be referring to such a practice: the allusion to those who

... lick the tayle of greatnes with their lips:
Laboring with third-hand iests, and Apish skips,
Retayling others wit, long barrelled . . .

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might be one; though there are other, perhaps more persuasive ways of interpreting lines such as these.

What is a little surprising is that Marston's two volumes of satires have yielded such a meagre harvest to Oxfordians and others in search of evidence. There are hints and possibilities aplenty, but Marston seems to have 'scrambled the code' sufficiently to preclude many certain identifications of his satiric types with real individuals. In doing this he was no doubt practising the necessary disingenuousness of the prudent Elizabethan satirist, protesting loudly against those who 'not knowing the nature of a Satyre (which is under fained private names to note generall vices) will needes wrest each fayned name to a private unfained person'.¹ The protest is hardly to be taken at face value, though, and the inclusion of his satires among the works put to the torch in the 'Bishops' Bonfire' in St Paul's in 1600 suggests his early readers did not do so.

The fact remains that with the exception of Joseph Hall, whose own verse satires, *Virgidemiae* (1597-98), are attacked by name, very few of the dozens of characters in Marston's *Certaine Satyres* (1598) and *Scourge of Villanie* (1598) can be identified with certainty.

Marston and the Earl of Oxford

One unnamed figure in the *Scourge of Villanie*, Marston's second and larger volume, has been a source of great comfort to Oxfordians ever since being confidently identified by the elder Ogburns as Edward de Vere. The passage of direct and italicised address is familiar as the epigraph to Charlton Ogburn Jr's, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*.

Farre flie thy fame

Most, most of me below'd, whose silent name

One letter bounds. Thy true iudiciall stile

I euer honour, and if my loue beguile

Not much my hopes, then thy unvalued worth

Shall mount faire place, when Apes are turned forth. (SV IX 48-53)

Ogburn's insistence that 'e' is the 'one letter' in question, bounding as it does the name of *Edward de Vere*, gains support from the possible puns on de Vere's name in the words 'true'(50) and 'ever'(51), and from the fact that no plausible alternative has been offered. (Marston's editor Arnold Davenport made the rather desperate suggestion in 1961 that the 'one letter' and the 'silent name' are both simply the first person pronoun 'I'; that is, that Marston was referring to himself.)

One thing to note about the 'silent name' passage is that, although it is separated both typographically and syntactically from what comes before and after it, it is not *logically* unrelated to its immediate context. The lines immediately preceding it are as follows:

O what a tricksie lerned nicking straine
 Is this applauded, sencles, modern vain!
 When late I heard it from sage *Mutius* lips
 How il me thought such wanton Iigging skips
 Beseeded his grauer speech. (SV IX 44-48)

These lines come at the end of a serious critique of ‘academic’ satire, as recently exemplified for Marston by Hall’s *Virgidemiae*. Its ‘academicism’ seems to consist of two related vices: an inability to appreciate the value of a good story (a question Marston discusses at greater length in his first volume of satires); and a predilection for learned playfulness. But Marston, himself a recent Oxford graduate and perhaps something of an intellectual snob, is anxious to make it clear that he is not opposed to learning in poetry *per se*. Far from it:

My soule adores iudiciall schollership (SV IX 38)

Thus the address to the poet of the ‘silent name’ is a gesture towards the kind of learned wit, the ‘true judicial style’, that Marston admires and approves. This distinction between true and false scholarship in poetry makes sense if we think of the former as exemplified in ‘Shakespeare’, especially the early comedies with their extraordinarily dense wordplay and immense range of rhetorical figures, and the narrative poems with their wealth of classical allusion.

In the prose Preface to the *Scourge*, addressed ‘to those that seeme iudiciall perusers’, an interestingly similar characterisation appears. The relevant passage comes in the middle of an apology for the roughness and obscurity of his style, which he claims is a concession to those who ‘tearm all Satyres (bastard) which are not palpable dark, and so rough writ that the hearing of them read would set a man’s teeth on edge. For whose unseasond pallate I wrote the first Satyre in some places too obscure, in all places misliking me.’ He continues,

Yet when by some scuruie chaunce it shal come into the late perfumed fist of iudiciall *Torquatus*, (that like some rotten stick in a troubled water, hath gotte a greate deale of barny froth to stick to his sides) I know he will vouchsafe it, some of his new-minted Epithets, (as *Reall*, *Intrinsecate*, *Delphicke*,) when in my conscience hee understands not the least part of it. But from thence proceeds his iudgement. (100)

The stance is more antagonistic and discourteous than in the ‘silent name’ address, but Marston is speaking here as ‘W. Kinsayder’, the railing, intolerant ‘scourge’ whose signature appears at the end of the Preface, whereas the address in the ninth satire is delivered with that mask temporarily removed—

as evidenced by the fact that it has to be deliberately replaced:

I am too milde, reach me my scourge again (SV IX 54)

The identity of Torquatus in the Preface has commonly been taken to be Ben Jonson, but the supporting arguments are not strong. Titus Manlius Torquatus was a Roman general who gained the name Torquatus by defeating a gigantic Gaul in single combat and taking from him his ornamental neck-chain (*torquis*).² Penniman argued for Jonson on two grounds: first, that Jonson told Drummond he ‘had killed ane enemie and taken *opima spolia* [spoils of war] from him’, and second, that the ‘late perfumed fist’ might refer to Jonson’s notorious duel, which caused him to be branded on the thumb, and put him in danger of hanging (cf. the neck-chain).³

However, as Davenport points out, all this depends on the unfounded assumption that the *Scourge* was not published until some months after its entry in the Stationers’ Register in September 1598, Jonson’s fatal duel with the actor Gabriel Spencer having taken place later that year. Another objection is that while Jonson may have written some plays, he had evidently published none at this time, and could hardly be thought of as either ‘judicial’, a minter of new epithets, or the leader of a literary faction at this stage in his career. Accordingly, H.C.Hart argued in 1903 that Torquatus was Gabriel Harvey, purely on the basis that some of the ‘new minted’ terms can be found in his writings, and that he was older and had at least published at the time; however, there is little else to connect the two.

Davenport accepts Jonson as the likeliest Torquatus, and adds two pieces of additional ‘evidence’, both of which, in fact, point fairly conclusively away from Jonson. The first is that Crispinus, the acknowledged Marston figure in Jonson’s *Poetaster* (1601) V ii 284, applies the phrase ‘barmy froth’ to Horace, the Jonson figure, thereby demonstrating, according to Davenport, that Jonson thought of himself as Torquatus.⁴ But the borrowed phrase indicates rather that Jonson saw himself as one of those who might be thought, in Marston’s metaphor, to stick like froth to Torquatus’ side. In other words, Jonson was at most acknowledging his membership of a group of writers led by Torquatus, not claiming that identity for himself.

Davenport’s second piece of evidence is similarly reversible. Jonson uses the words ‘reall’ and ‘intrinsiccate’, but he uses them later than Marston’s attack, and at least in the case of ‘intrinsiccate’ he is ridiculing the use of the word by someone else—obviously not Marston, who was also ridiculing it⁵. Shakespeare, as it happens, uses this very unusual word unforgettably in Cleopatra’s death scene:

Come thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsiccate

Of life at once untie. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V iii 302-5)

As Davenport observes, ‘Shakespeare was not to be put off a good word by the ridicule of Marston and Jonson’. No doubt. But if, as is very likely, the play was performed many times, and for many years, before being entered on the Stationers’ Register in 1608, then Shakespeare’s memorable use of the word was probably their original target.

Surprisingly perhaps, the word ‘reall’, used with what is now its most common meaning of ‘not illusory’, may also to have been to a Shakespearean invention. The *OED* cites Shakespeare for the earliest usage in one of this group of senses. It occurs three times in the canon, most memorably in the King’s amazed reaction to the reappearance of Helena at the end of *All’s Well That Ends Well*:

‘Is’t reall that I see?’ (*AWW* 5 204)

Again there is no particular reason to accept the conventional dating of *All’s Well* to 1602-3; the play is unknown to scholarship prior to the First Folio, and since likely historical allusions in it refer to a much earlier period, an earlier date of composition and performance is entirely probable. ‘Delphicke’ does not occur in the established Shakespeare canon, but the prominent theatrical foregrounding of the other two epithets, and their lack of irony, in both these plays makes Shakespeare a likelier source and target than Jonson.

There are several reasons for thinking that Marston’s Torquatius may have been the Earl of Oxford. The first is simply that Oxford, like the historical Torquatius, wore a chain or cord around his neck. Whether this was related to the office of Lord Great Chamberlain or merely personal inclination, the fact is that the Marcus Gheeraedts portrait shows him—unlike many other portraits of the same period and social class—wearing just such a cord, threaded through a ring attached to the heraldic boar of the de Veres. The second is that his legal credentials and past experience on the bench, and his likely membership in the Privy Council by 1598, give added force to the epithet ‘iudiciall’ (though the primary meaning seems closer to ‘judicious’ or ‘witty’). Thirdly, there is some evidence of his interest in spelling reform (further indications of an unusual preoccupation with words).⁶ And fourthly, his known associations with a number of poets including Spenser, Watson, Nashe, Lyly, and Munday, his probable associations with many others, and the long list of literary and scholarly recipients of his patronage, give historical substance to Marston’s jaundiced metaphor of the ‘rotten stick’ with its retinue of ‘barmy froth’—the literary patron and his protégés.

The ‘late perfumed fist’ remains something of a puzzle, but it may be worth noting that both Marston and Hall sometimes use the word ‘fist’ without its bellicose modern connotation, as ‘hand’. Torquatius’ ‘perfumed fist’ may

thus be a complimentary allusion to the betrothal of Oxford's second daughter Bridget to Francis Norris, later Baron Rycote, in 1598—the father's hand having caught the fragrance of his daughter's hand as he offers it in marriage to another.

Further support for the identification might be drawn from the other appearance of the name 'Torquatus', in the final satire of the *Scourge*.

Come a loft Iack, roome for a vaulting skip,
Roome for *Torquatus*, that nere op'd his lip
But in prate of *pummado reuersa*,
Of the nimble tumbling *Angelica*.
Now on my soule, his very intelect
Is naught but a curuetting *Sommerset*. (SV [XI] 98-103)

Davenport presumes that this Torquatus is different from the one in the prose Preface. Other commentators have presumed, reasonably enough, that it is the same one; but the attempts to link him with either Jonson or Harvey, neither of whom had any sporting interests we know of, are unconvincing. But the lines might certainly be read as a railing allusion to Oxford's famous virtuosity as a horseman—and, perhaps justifiably, to a certain immodesty about it when he was in his cups.

As for 'Angelica', Davenport cites Chambers' suggestion that this refers to Angelica Alberghini, the wife of Drusiano Martinelli, an Italian player known to have been in London in 1579. She is thought to have been one of the Italian women of whose 'unchaste, shamelesse and unnaturall tomblinge' Thomas Norton had complained six years earlier (Davenport 364). There is no evidence of a visit to London later than 1580, which is of course far too early for Jonson. Both the date and the Italian interest point to Oxford, and paint a not unattractive picture of a garrulous boon companion regaling his friends with tales of erotic entertainments twenty years ago. Some Oxfordians will no doubt wish to agree with Davenport that this is not the same Torquatus as the other, more dignified figure; but the portrait seems to me to be quite continuous with the Oxford portrayed, also satirically of course, in Harvey's poem, 'Mirror of Tuscanism' (1580).

But if Torquatus was Oxford, then there is some possibility (based on two of the three 'new minted epithets') that Marston thought Oxford was 'Shakespeare'. Other connections, however, seem to point in a different direction.

Marston and the Earl of Derby

The 'silent name' passage in Satire IX of the *Scourge* is immediately followed, as mentioned earlier, by a re-donning of the satiric mask ('I am too milde; reach me my Scourge again.' (SV ix 54)). There follows an attack on a second 'judicial' poet:

O yon's a pen speakes in a learned vaine.
 Deepe, past all sence. Lanthorne & candle light,
 Here's all invisible, *all mentall spright*.
 What hotchpotch, giberidge, doth the Poet bring?
 How strangely speakes? yet sweetly doth he sing.
 I once did know a tinckling Pewterer,
 That was the vildest stumbling stuttrer
 That euer hack'd and hew'd our native tongue,
 Yet to the Lute if you had heard him sung,
 Iesu how sweet he breath'd. You can apply.
 O sencelesse prose, iudiciall poesie,
 How ill you'r link'd. (SV ix 55-66)

Davenport's suggestions as to the identity of this poet 'who wrote prose that Marston thought learned, obscure and clumsy, but wrote mellifluous verse' (351) are Thomas Watson, whose *Hekatompathia* interlarded sonnets with learned prose comments, but which was published sixteen years earlier—Watson himself having been dead for six years—and the minor sonneteer William Smith (cf. 'pewterer'?), whose metaphoric occupation might fit him for the second poet mentioned in the passage, but *ipso facto* not the first. Neither suggestion is convincing.

The *linking* of prose and poetry, unusual in non-dramatic writing, might be taken to refer to the drama, where the intermixing of the two was common enough. One such play, performed at least once and probably many times between 1595 and 1600, when it was first published, was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a poetic drama full of lanterns, candles, sprites, and perplexing dreams that just might fit the description given in the first five lines above. The combination of 'sweet singing' and 'judicial (i.e. witty) poesie', conceded to the poet's writing in verse, is reminiscent of Francis Meres' exactly contemporaneous descriptions of Shakespeare—in whose 'mellifluous and honey-tongued' poetry lives the 'sweet witty soul' of Ovid.

But if the poet of the 'silent name' is Oxford, the poet of the 'learned vaine' and lyric sweetness cannot be. So who is he? The word 'strangely' (59) could be taken as a punning reference to the Derby family. Ferdinando Stanley, the Fifth Earl, had been (like his father before him) Lord Strange—well-known to the theatre world as the patron of an acting company—before succeeding to the earldom; but he had died four years earlier, succeeded after less than a year by his brother William, to whom the word might therefore be indirectly applied.

Interestingly, the same possible pun occurs in an earlier cluster of cryptic references, surrounding the character 'Labeo' in Marston's verses 'in prayse of his Precedent Poem', in which he defended his Ovidian poem the *Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image* as a deliberate parody. In one of the few certain allusions to Shakespeare in Marston's work, he compares the carnal triumph of Pigmalion with that of 'Labeo':

And in the end, (the end of Loue I wot)
Pigmalion hath a iolly boy begot.
So *Labeo* did complaine his loue was stone,
Obdurate, flinty, so relentlesse none:
Yet *Lynceus* knowes, that in the end of this,
He wrought as strange a metamorphosis. (27-32)⁷

Line 30 echoes *Venus and Adonis* so directly that it cannot be coincidental:

Art thou obdurate, flinty, hard as steel?
Nay, more than flint, for stone at rain relenteth. (199-200)

The identity of 'Labeo' has thus reasonably been supposed by anti-Stratfordians of every stripe, and even some Stratfordians, to be that of the author of *Venus and Adonis*. 'Labeo' also appears several times in Joseph Hall's two volumes of satires (1597/8); in the first volume he is castigated for writing salacious poetry:

For shame write cleanly, Labeo, or write none.(II,i,1)⁸

In the second volume he is also accused of evading moral responsibility for his writing by adopting a false identity, or rather, by transferring his authorial identity to someone else:

Who list complaine of wronged faith or fame
When he may shift it to another's name. (VI,i,187-8)

The same apparent accusation of evasive collaboration had in fact also been made in the first volume:

Or better write, or Labeo write alone. (II,i,2)

Walter Begbie proclaimed in 1903 that Labeo/Shakespeare was Francis Bacon by arguing, not very convincingly, that this same 'Labeo' was the unnamed poet invoked by the phrase '*mediocria firma*' (part of Bacon's family motto) used in a list of poets which Marston defends from Hall's censure in the *Certaine Satyres*.⁹

More recently, Fred Manzo has drawn up a list of parallels between the lives of one of the possible historical 'Labeos', Marcus Antistius Labeo, a prominent Roman jurist of the early Empire, and the Earl of Oxford.¹⁰ Many of these parallels are generic, and are interchangeable as between Edward de Vere and William Stanley, who was also well-schooled in the law, and had held prominent public offices. Where the Derby case seems somewhat stronger than Oxford's is in Marston's reference (in the passage with which we began) to the

'strange metamorphosis' wrought by Labeo in bringing his mistress to eventual compliance. Derby's courtship of Elizabeth de Vere, Oxford's eldest daughter, was similarly passionate, public and protracted, beginning at a royal pageant at Elvetham in 1591 and culminating in their eventual marriage in January 1595. Nothing we know of Oxford's life at this time, or for sixteen years past, much resembles this known and recent situation in Derby's life. And the adjective in 'strange ... metamorphosis'(32) is again applicable to Derby, via the well-known title of his deceased older brother.

If Marston's Labeo was Derby, finally, it is of some interest to note the similarity of 'Lynceus', the person Marston names as his authority for Labeo's amorous triumph ('Yet *Lynceus* knows'), to the man whom Gabriel Harvey, in the 'Mirror of Tuscanism', had called a 'Lynx to spy out secrets and privities of States' ¹¹ That man was the Earl of Oxford, the lady's father, and thus the best authority Marston could have named.

Whether these considerations outweigh the few 'Oxford-specific' connections Manzo cites for 'Labeo' is debatable. Of these the unusual suffix 'eo' seems the most persuasive, suggesting a choice made with Oxford's occasional signature E.O. in mind. That original choice was made, however, by Hall rather than Marston; so perhaps our solution is that Hall did believe, or at least suspect, that Oxford was Shakespeare, but that Marston believed, or knew, otherwise. Even Hall may have had some inkling of a more complex situation afoot: His exhortation to Labeo to 'better write, or write alone' implies the doubleness of collaboration, rather than the duplicity of a pen-name.

It seems then that Marston's Labeo/Shakespeare may not have been Hall's Labeo/Shakespeare, that Marston had come to see Derby as the dominant Shakespearean writer. In the poem 'Reactio', towards the end of a long series of defences of particular poets and works—some of them named—against Hall's criticisms, Marston challenges the critic to cease his carping and to try his own hand at some of the genres he has attacked. The first is the genre of Spenserian romance, a rather unfair inclusion, as Hall had specifically excluded the *Faerie Queen* from his general strictures on romance:

Come, manumit thy gloomie pinion,
And scower the sword of Eluish champion (*CS IV 133-4*)

A few lines later, he invites him to

Sommon the Nymphes and Driades to bring
Some rare inuention, whilst thou dost sing
So sweet, that thou *maist shoulder from aboute*
The Eagle from the stairs of freendly Ioue: (141-2)

The italicised line-and-a-half (printed thus in the original) are an exact

quotation from Hall's prefatory verses, 'His Defiance to Envie' to his first volume. Half-a-dozen other lines or phrases are quoted from this same poem of Hall's within Marston's next twenty lines; but the last of them bears repeating:

Doe not his Poems beare a glorious saile?

Then he demands once again,

Hath not he strongly iustled from aboute
The Eagle from the staires of friendly loue? (151-2)

The same Eagle twice in ten lines? It does sound a bit like a hint. But what or whom is he hinting at? Marston has challenged Hall to summon the nymphs and dryads of classical erotic poetry to help him to 'sing so sweet'. 'Sweet singing', it might be recalled—together with 'strange speaking'—is the particular attribute grudgingly conceded by the jaundiced satirist to the poet whose 'pen speakes in a learned vaine', and who follows the poet of the 'silent name' in the Tenth Satire of the *Scourge*. Incidentally, 'lyrical sweetness' is also the specific quality attributed to Shakespeare by Francis Meres, and to 'our pleasant Willy' in Spenser's *Tears of the Muses* (1591), a long poem dedicated to Alice, the Countess of Derby, and William Stanley's sister-in-law.¹² That particular 'Willy' has long been thought to be the poet Shakespeare (whether as Oxford, Stanley or Shakspeare), and the link with the 'elvish champion' Spenser is strikingly preserved in their close proximity in Marston's 'Reactio'.

The Eagle, finally, is the family crest of the Stanleys—rather more exclusively so than the boar is of the de Veres. To have Marston call attention to it in the way he does, and to find that the qualities of the poet/eagle are substantially those attributed by himself and others to 'Shake-speare' has to be slightly suggestive.

Histrionastix, Or the Player Whipp'd

The play *Histrionastix*, though published anonymously, can be safely attributed to Marston, in whole or part, on the basis of a mention of the play in Jonson's *Every Man Out of his Humour*, side by side with some phrases from the *Scourge of Villanie*. It was performed by Paul's Boys in 1599 shortly before *Every Man Out* and seems to have been an early shot in the War of the Theatres. Perhaps it was even the initial provocation to the series of theatrical attacks and counter-attacks that took place from about this time, and which involved *Cynthia's Revels* and *Poetaster* by Jonson, Dekker's *Satiromastix*, and probably Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. That there were subsequent performances of *Histrionastix*, perhaps with topical additions, after 1599 is a virtual certainty, since the quarto did not appear till 1610.

Just what part Derby may have played in the War of the Theatres is unclear, but it was undoubtedly connected with his role—evidently a crucial and active one—in the revival of the Children of Paul’s in 1599, nine years after their suppression, when it was reported in a newsletter that ‘My Lord Derby hath put up the plays of the children in Paul’s, to his great pain and charge’.¹³ This is also the very year when the Jesuit spy George Fenner reported that ‘our Earl of Derby’ was ‘busy penning comedies for the common players’.¹⁴ At the same time his wife was writing to her uncle Robert Cecil, asking that her husband’s men ‘be not barred from their accustomed playing . . . for that my Lord taking delight in them, it will keep him from more prodigal courses’.¹⁵

Histriomastix is a late moral interlude dealing directly, though in a largely allegorical mode, with the disintegration of a nation’s social and cultural life in time of war. The central figure is Chrisoganus, a learned and idealistic scholar and poet, who enacts the changing relationship between poetry and society in a series of formalised exchanges with the nobles of the realm, and also in a more naturalistic set of negotiations with a troupe of touring players, and their resident hack-playwright Post-haste. There is clearly some scope here for seeing Chrisoganus as a thematic focus for exploring the higher moral functions of drama for society, and perhaps also as a figure modelled on one or another actual playwright. Post-haste is normally taken to be a thinly-veiled Anthony Munday, and for Chrisoganus the usual suggestion is Ben Jonson. There are problems with this latter identification, not least the fact that it was only *after Histriomastix* was performed—and perhaps as a result of it—that Jonson began presenting himself on stage as the embattled moralist in characters like Asper (*EMO*) and Crites (*CR*).

Chrisoganus’ ‘poor scholar’ status makes an identification with either Oxford or Derby difficult, and perhaps that was the point of it. It is true though that Chrisoganus possesses precisely those qualities of judicious learning and poetic eloquence that characterise the two poets of the Tenth Satire of the *Scourge*. And, at a certain point, the playwright Shakespeare does seem to get into the picture. Sir Oliver Owlet’s Men are performing a play of Troilus and Cressida, and Troilus addresses Cressida with the following words:

Come Cressida my cresset light,
 Thy face doth shine bothe day and night,
 Behold, behold, thy garter blue
 Thy knight his valiant elboe weares,
 That When [sic] he shakes his furious Speare,
 The foe in shivering fearefull sort
 May lay him down in death to snort.¹⁶

Orthodox scholarship takes these lines as referring to a lost play of Troilus and Cressida by Dekker and Chettle which is mentioned by Henslowe.¹⁷ But

the pun on 'W. Shakespeare' in the fifth line makes this seem unlikely. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* was first published in quarto in 1609, but there is bibliographical evidence for an edition some five years earlier, and the date of first performance, even on Muir's orthodox reckoning, could be as early as 1599.¹⁸ If it were performed in its present form early in that year, before *Histriomastix* but after the first editions of Marston's verse satires in 1598, this would strengthen the case for seeing Thersites, the foul-mouthed railer of Shakespeare's play, as many orthodox critics have done, as a satirical representation of Marston the verse satirist.

In the passage from *Histriomastix* just quoted 'Shakespeare' is being implicitly compared with Troilus, and his real-life identity hinted at in two allusions. The first is to the serious and painful rift in 1597/98 in Derby's marriage to Elizabeth de Vere, whom Henry Howard privately accused of committing adultery with the Earl of Essex, a situation which seems to be reflected in the ancient parallel with the faithless Cressida. The tactless presumption of such an allusion by Marston to the Earl's marital troubles, though quite considerable, is not unimaginable given the provocation of the Thersites portrait and the fact that--on my proposed chronology--the analogy was already there to be inferred in Shakespeare's own play. Marston, in other words, was not so much proposing a parallel between the two couples as signifying that he understood a particular application presumably not intended for general understanding.

The second allusion in the passage is the 'garter blue' in the third line, which can of course be read as a reference to the Order of the Garter, in which Derby was formally invested in March 1601. The date means that we have to assume that the one surviving text of *Histriomastix* contains some additions, performed or otherwise, to the 1599 script, and that this passage must be one of them; but this does not seem unlikely.

The Entertainment of the Dowager-Countess of Derby

Marston's relationship to the Stanleys was not altogether that of a middle-class poet and playwright observing the nobility from a distance. A late work of Marston's that has come to be known as the Countess of Derby's *Entertainment* (or the *Ashby Entertainment*) indicates that he enjoyed some social connections with the Derby family. The *Entertainment* is a short masque written by Marston, apparently by invitation, to celebrate the betrothal in 1607 of Anne, the eldest daughter of Alice and Ferdinando, the Fifth Earl of Derby, to Grey Bridges, Lord Chandos. The occasion was hosted by the bride-to-be's younger sister, Elizabeth Lady Huntingdon, mistress of Ashby House, the seat of her husband Henry Hastings, the Fifth Earl of Huntingdon, at which her mother, the Dowager Countess Alice, was the honoured guest and dedicatee of the masque itself.

The *Entertainment* is of interest for reasons that relate to established cruces in the history of the authorship debate, and I shall do no more than allude

to them here. The first is the occurrence in the manuscript of the poem of the words 'Scilence' (110) and 'scilent' (371). These odd forms of 'silence/silent' suggest the possibility of a connection of some kind with the form 'scilens' (for 'silence') which occurs as a proper name eighteen times in succession in the Quarto of Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV* and once in the 'Addition' to the manuscript play *The Boke of Sir Thomas More*, written in the 'Hand D' which has been hailed by some Stratfordians (on ludicrous paleographic and inconclusive stylistic grounds) to be a Shakspeare autograph.¹⁹

The situation appears to be that if the 'sc' spelling for 'silence' is indeed as rare as has been claimed, then the person who wrote the surviving manuscript of Marston's *Entertainment* may well have been the same person who supplied the printer's copy for the *2 Henry IV* Quarto—and perhaps also penned the Addition to *Thomas More*. The problem in extracting any definite conclusion from these occurrences, apart from the question of the rarity of the spelling, is the impossibility of knowing in any of the three cases whether the spelling originated with the author, the scrivener or, in the case of *2 Henry IV*, the printer.

It may be worth noting, however, that Marston certainly did not write the Huntington Library Ms. of the *Entertainment* in which the 'sc' spellings occur. Its provenance in the Bridgewater Collection, established by the Countess Alice's stepson John Egerton, the First Earl of Bridgewater, makes it virtually certain that it was the copy presented to the Countess Alice herself, and therefore presumably one of those which, as Marston said in a surviving letter to Sir Gervase Clifton, he had caused to be transcribed from his own copy, and which were then 'given and stolen from me at my Lord Spencer's' (the Countess's mother's home). Furthermore, we know that Marston did not spell 'silence/silent' with an 'sc' since it occurs with an 's' several times in his verse satires, which he presumably proofread himself. In fact, the Huntington Ms. is in two hands, one Italian and the other English, and the 'sc' spellings both occur in the Italian hand.

One hypothesis that would fit the facts as we have them would be that the same scrivener (a Frenchman, perhaps, which could account for both the Italian hand and the 'sc' spelling) prepared the fair copy of the Shakespeare play for the printer, and also helped to prepare the presentation copy of Marston's poem for the Countess—and that he was available to do both these tasks because he was a member of the Earl of Derby's household. What light, if any, this may shed on the problem of the Addition D to *Sir Thomas More* is a subject for another paper. By itself, the orthographic anomaly common to the Marston manuscript and the Shakespeare quarto establishes the possibility that a canonical Shakespearean manuscript was prepared for the printer by a Derby family employee.

This is a speculation, but it receives some support from another aspect of the same *Entertainment*. Attached to the Huntington Ms. of the masque is a loose manuscript of one sheet which contains fourteen sets of verses, each to

be spoken by one of fourteen noble ladies who it seems were present at the betrothal, and ceremoniously included within the elaborate event. The verses, some of which are strongly reminiscent of the love-notes and cryptic verses in some of Shakespeare's plays, are signed 'W:SR:' according to Marston's editor Davenport. However, Peter Levi has argued more recently that the third letter of the signature is a superscript 'h' overwritten by either 'K' or 'R', that the hand in which the signature (but not the verses) is written is Marston's, and that the verses themselves are Shakespeare's (i.e. Shakspeare's) who, it is supposed, knew Marston through the theatre. His connection to the Derby family circle is supposed to be either through Marston, or through the daughter or sister-in-law of Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain, both of whom were among the fourteen noble ladies.²⁰

Levi does not consider the possibility that the author of the verses may have been someone whose poetic donation would have needed less strained explanations. The verses might very naturally have come from the pen - and the brain - of the bride's uncle William Stanley, the Sixth Earl of Derby, with whom her mother was shortly to be reconciled after some thirteen years of legal wrangling over the ownership of the Derby estates. And if the signature was indeed written by Marston, what more likely than that he would have used an abbreviation close to the theatrical pen-name?

The third point of interest about the *Entertainment* is simply that it establishes a connection between Marston and the Derby family, for this connection immediately points to another, somewhat earlier indication of the Marston-Derby connection.

Love's Martyr

Love's Martyr (1601), a long and obscure poem by Robert Chester, is remembered now for the gallery of famous names who contributed shorter poems to the volume in which it first appeared. The names are those of 'Ben Johnson', George Chapman, John Marston and 'William Shake-speare'; and there is a further poem (possibly by Donne) signed 'Ignoto'. Shakespeare's is of course *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, that most mysterious of all Shakespeare's poems. The Marston-Shakespeare connection here is close, at least textually, since Marston's three-part poem, 'A narration and description of a most exact wondrous creature, arising out of the Phoenix and Turtle doves ashes', follows Shakespeare's poem and directly comments on it (with Marston's usual ambivalence of tone where Shakespeare is concerned):

O twas a mouing Epicedium!
Can Fire? can time? can blackest Fate consume
So Rare creation?

Theories abound as to the meaning of the allegory of Shakespeare's poem. For my present purposes the important thing to note is the personnel. The

volume was dedicated by Chester to Sir John Salusbury, the husband of Ursula Stanley, the illegitimate daughter of the Fourth Earl of Derby, and thus the half-sister of William Stanley. Salusbury and William were not just brothers-in-law but close friends. Once more, the Derby family provides the context in which apparently random groupings of individuals begin to look like a coherent social and cultural circle. Marston, at least, was still associated with the extended family six years later when he attended the performance of his *Entertainment* at the Huntingdon estate at Ashby. Jonson and Chapman's connections have yet to be unravelled, but it may well be significant that the same trio of Marston, Jonson and Chapman were jointly responsible for the play *Eastward-Hoe* in 1601, and Jonson and Chapman suffered for it with jail terms. Marston, by whatever means, got off scot-free, a fact which may suggest that his connections were better or more direct than the others.

The Social Context

What does all this add up to? For one thing, a writer who seems not just to allude to the works of Shakespeare but to cling to them with an almost Oedipal tenacity in most of his own published works.

Perhaps his purpose was simply to 'guy' the passionate style of plays designed for adult companies (an implication, perhaps, of Hamlet's comments on the 'little eyases' in his conversation with the Players); or perhaps, as G.K. Hunter has argued, the intent was more seriously philosophical, an attempt to convey a broader 'vision of life' characterised by a strong sense of discontinuity and ambivalence.²¹ Such explanations seem too resolutely ahistorical and asocial to be persuasive. What is needed is a way of relating Marston to the people and events around him that might help to explain and motivate his long-lasting but ambivalent bond with 'Shake-speare' the poet and playwright.

The answer, I suggest, lies in the bits and pieces of evidence that point towards his special relationship with various branches of the Derby family, with that of the Dowager Countess Alice, to whom the Ashby *Entertainment* was dedicated, and also, it would seem, with the family of Ursula Stanley and her husband Sir John Salusbury, to whom Chester's *Love's Martyr* and its accompanying verses—his own and those of Shakespeare, Jonson and Chapman—were dedicated.

Marston's *entrée* to these elevated circles is a great deal easier to account for than William Shakspeare's could ever be, since Marston, the son of an old Shropshire family with noble connections and an Oxford graduate, was at least of a class—the educated minor gentry—whose deferential relations with the aristocracy were part of the ordinary fabric of Elizabethan cultural life. Furthermore, as Nina Green has shown, Marston was distantly related to (of all people) the Earl of Oxford, through his mother Margery Golding.²² This raises the possibility that Marston's earliest aristocratic contact was with the de Veres and that the Stanley connections followed the relationship between Edward de

Vere and his son-in-law.

There are other, complementary possibilities. Of the fourteen Ladies of the Bridgewater Ms. poems, one may have been the wife of John Danvers of the Middle Temple, Marston's place of study and residence; another was certainly the Countess Alice's sister, Lady Hunsdon, the wife of the Lord Chamberlain and a possible theatrical connection. There is every reason to suppose that Will. Stanley, a man of known culture, and known too for his obsession with the theatre, would have been present at this and other family gatherings.

If, however, as the *Entertainment* and Marston's letter to Gervase Clifton seem to imply, Marston's primary affiliation was with Lady Alice's branch of the family—the Spencers, the Huntingdons, and the Egertons; and if, as I have been arguing, Marston believed that the Sixth Earl was 'Shake-speare'—then that might account for some of the ambivalence we feel in his attitude to the Bard. Indeed, for the whole period of Marston's life in London, the Sixth Earl was embroiled in an acrimonious and financially ruinous lawsuit brought by his brother's widow, the Countess Alice, which lasted from 1594 till about 1608, when it was finally resolved in the Earl's favour. The Derby lawsuit certainly soured personal relations between the principals, and probably engendered some side-taking among their clients and followers, though some, like John Davies of Hereford, seem to have been able to maintain good relations with both branches. Perhaps Marston was not so diplomatic; judging from his satiric writings it would be hard to imagine anyone less diplomatic, and if Shakespeare's Thersites (or, as it may have been pronounced, 'Thársites') is indeed a portrait of Marston, then he obviously had annoyed the author of *Troilus and Cressida*.

Conclusions

What, then, did Marston know about Shakespeare? I think that like Nashe, Heywood, Davies of Hereford, and a few others, he knew a great deal—more than Joseph Hall and perhaps, for the first decade of the new century, more than Ben Jonson. I think he knew that the more active member of the Shakespeare partnership, at least at the time he was writing satires, in 1597-98, was William Stanley, brother-in-law of his sometime patron Alice Derby; that the 48-year old Edward de Vere, the 'Torquatus' and the 'silent name' of the verse satires, though something of a spent force in 1598, was the 'fons et origo' of the Shakespearean miracle, and deserved more credit for that than he had received.

And I think Marston knew, finally, what was at stake in keeping the authorship secret—perhaps for both men, but certainly for Stanley, whose name had been canvassed twice in five years as the favoured Catholic successor to Elizabeth's throne. He kept the secret, unfortunately, but not without dropping some pretty broad hints along the way. I suppose one has to be thankful for small mercies.

Notes

- ¹ *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. A. Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), p.176.
- ² Sir Paul Harvey, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1962), p.259.
- ³ Davenport, *Marston*, p.264.
- ⁴ *Ben Jonson*, ed. C.H.Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), Vol. iv, p.306.
- ⁵ *Every Man Out of his Humour*, II i 109; *Cynthia's Revels*, V ii 15. *Ben Jonson*, Vol.iii, pp. 472, 132. See Davenport, p. 265.
- ⁶ Nina Green has established a strong possibility of Oxford's interest in the work of late sixteenth-century spelling reformers, especially William Bullokar. Her inference is based on the orthography of Oxford's letters, as newly transcribed by Alan Nelson, University of California, Berkeley.
- ⁷ Davenport, *Marston*, p.65.
- ⁸ *The Poems of Joseph Hall*, ed. A. Davenport (Liverpool: at the University Press, 1949), pp.21, 91.
- ⁹ *Is it Shakespeare?* by a Cambridge Graduate [Walter Begbie] (London: John Murray, 1903), pp.15-24.
- ¹⁰ Fred W. Manzo, 'Who Was Joseph Hall's Labeo?' *The Elizabethan Review*, Autumn 1995, Vol.3, No.2, pp.52-59.
- ¹¹ Quoted by Charlton Ogburn Jr., *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (McLean, Virginia: 1992), pp.630-631.
- ¹² I acknowledge the work of John Rollett in drawing together the several images of 'honey' and 'sweetness' in probable references to 'Shake-speare'.
- ¹³ *Penshurst Papers*, ed. C.L. Kingsford, II (1934), 415. Cited in A. Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (Bloomington, 1952), 36.
- ¹⁴ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth*, ed. Green, V, 227. Cited in Harbage, 55.
- ¹⁵ *Malone Society Collections*, Vol. II, pp. 147-148 ("Four Letters on Theatrical Affairs"). Cited in Harbage, 56.
- ¹⁶ *The Plays of John Marston*, ed. H. Harvey Wood 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), III 265.
- ¹⁷ Geoffrey Bullough, 'The Lost *Troilus and Cressida*', *Essays and Studies* (1964), pp.25-40.
- ¹⁸ *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Kenneth Muir. *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp.5-9.
- ¹⁹ I am grateful to Jerry Downs, among others, for information and analysis of this particular crux.
- ²⁰ Peter Levi, *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* (London: papermac, 1989), Appendix 1, 'A Private Commission'.
- ²¹ John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*, ed. G.K. Hunter, *Regents Renaissance Drama* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), Introduction, xviii.
- ²² N. Green, *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, #44 (October, 1992).