

## Notes

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### William Basse: Who Was He?

...thy grey muse grew up with older times,  
And our deceased grandsires lisp'd the rhymes.

Ralph Bathurst on William Basse, 1651

**S**tudents of Shakespeare of all stripes are familiar with William Basse (or Bas) as the author of a poem in praise of Shakespeare. As Sidney Lee wrote in the *Dictionary of National Biography*:

Basse is best known by his occasional verse, which has never been collected, and chiefly by his "Epitaph on Shakespeare." The poem is in the form of a sonnet, and was first attributed to Donne, among whose poems it was printed in 1633. In the edition of Shakespeare's poems issued in 1640 it is subscribed "W.B.," and Ben Jonson makes a distinct reference to it in his poem on Shakespeare prefixed to the folio of 1623, which proves it to have been written before that date.

Lee is imprecise in his description of the poem as a sonnet. It in fact consists of sixteen lines of rhyming couplets:

Renowned Spenser lye 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.  
To ledge all four in one bed make a shift  
Until Domesday, for hardly will a fifth  
Betwixt this day and that by fate be slain  
For whom your curtain may be drawn again.  
If your precedence in death doth bar  
A fourth place in your sacred sepulchre,  
Under this carved marble of thine own  
Sleep, rare Tragedian Shakespeare, sleep alone:  
Thy unmolested peace, unshared care  
Possess as Lord, not Tenant, of thy grave

That unto us and others it may be  
Honour hereafter to be laid by Thee.

Unlike most students of Shakespeare, Ruth Loyd Miller, in the second volume of her edition of J. Thomas Looney's "*Shakespeare*" *Identified*, looks into Basse's background. While his dates of birth and death remain unknown, Miller showed that Basse had been a servant, a retainer, of Francis, Lord Norris, later the Earl of Berkshire, and the husband of Bridget Vere, the second daughter of Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Norris, a violent, troubled man and a likely model for Cornwall in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, died of self-inflicted wounds from a crossbow in 1623. Basse was later attached to the Wenman family of Oxfordshire.

A manuscript collection of poems by Basse, *Polyhymnia*, bears the autograph of Francis, Lord Norris. The manuscript is dedicated to by the author to Bridget. Scholars state this was the grand-daughter of Francis, the Countess of Lindsey; but as Miller shows, the dates render this identification of the dedicatee impossible. The collection was probably dedicated to Bridget Vere, the wife of Lord Norris and the daughter of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.

There is at least one more slight connection between Basse and Shakespeare. Izaak Walton, in his *The Compleat Angler*, describes William Basse as the author of "choice songs," one of which is "Tom of Bedlam." There were many songs by various hands bearing this title, of course. But it is worth remarking that Basse is credited with a song associated with the character impersonated by Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Basse first became active as a poet at about the time when *Lear* must have been written.

Basse's first verses date from 1602 and his "Urania," his last known work, is dated 1653. Nothing is known of his parentage or education. His poems are marked by simplicity and a love of the countryside. His "Angler's Song," quoted by Walton, begins with the plain but striking words: "As inward love breeds outward talk..." It seems likely that our knowledge of Shakespeare would expand if we could learn more about the mysterious man who wrote in praise of him as a "rare Tragedian," William Basse.

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