

# The Latin Mottoes in Peacham's *Minerva Britannia*

Noemi Magri

Henry Peacham's works have recently been taken into consideration as evidence of the fact that at the end of the 16th and in the first decades of the 17th Century, William Shakespeare (or Shaksper) from Stratford was not known as a poet or playwright. Actually, Peacham does not even mention him.

In particular, the front page of *Minerva Britannia*, published in 1612, with its peculiar picture of a hand stretching out from behind a theater curtain and with its Latin mottoes, the latter still being a source of misinterpretation<sup>1</sup>, seems to refer to a dramatist's concealed identity: an allusion which some Oxfordians, not without reason, refer to Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

I would like to give a full transcription and English translation of the Latin mottoes and then analyze their meaning.

On the top of the front page, between two burning candles—one on the left, the other on the right corner—reads the following inscription:

UT ALIJS

ME CONSUMO

The literal translations is "I consume myself for the others in a similar way" since *ut* means "likewise" while *alijs* means "for the others" and is the plural

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dative case. In other words, “In the same way as these candles burn out giving light to others, I do burn myself out giving other people the light of my knowledge and learning.”

This may fit De Vere’s liberality in sharing his knowledge with, and lavishing his fortunes on, fellow dramatists and writers.

Two scrolls are wound around the wreath. The one on the left reads as follows:

VIVITUR

INGENIO

The two words are separated by an interpunct as used in Latin inscriptions from Roman throughout Renaissance time and onwards. The double hyphen shows that vivitur is one word, and so is ingenio.

Literally, the phrase means, “One lives by means of his genius,” that is, “One remains alive in the memory of posterity by means of what his genius has produced; only genius, i.e., its works, remains [after death].”

Vivitur is a passive verb form, third person singular of the present tense indicative of vivere, meaning “live”; it takes no subject because it has impersonal meaning. Ingenio is instrumental ablative case, implying “by means of,” also, “because of.”

The concept of immortality acquired through the greatness of the works is completed by the inscription on the right scroll:

CAETERA

MORTIS

ERUNT

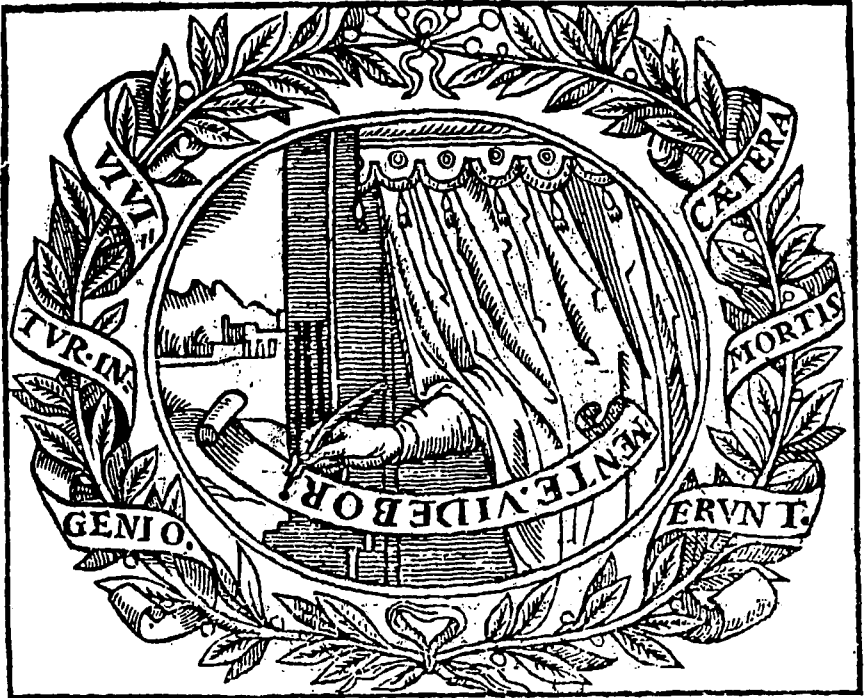
Literally, “The rest will be Death’s.” Caetera means “all the other things, all the rest,” and is neuter plural nominative case. Mortis is genitive case, expressing possession, meaning “of Death.” Erunt means “will be” and is in the future simple indicative of the verb esse, “be,” third person plural. In other words, “all the rest will belong to Death; everything else will be destroyed by Death, except genius; only the great works will survive, will be immortal.”

This concept is reinforced by the motto written by the hand on the scroll in the oval picture of the theater curtain:

MENTE VIDEBOR

Literally, “I will be seen in the mind,” that is, “I will be seen only in the mind’s eyes, with the use of imagination, with the power of thought.” This is said by, or referred to, someone who wants to remain in concealment. Mente is instrumental ablative case meaning “by means of the mind.” Videbor is the passive verb form of the verb videre meaning “see,” future simple indicative, first person singular.

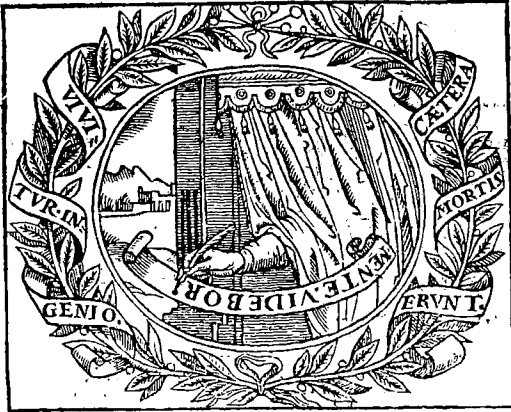
Closer inspection of the word videbor clearly shows that what seems to be



MINERVA  
**BRITANNA**


OR A GARDEN OF HEROICAL  
Deuises, furnished, and adorned with *Emblemes*  
and *Impresa's* of sundry natures, Newly deuised,  
*moralized, and published,*

By HENRY PEACHAM, Mr. of Artes.



LONDON

Printed in Shoe-lane at the signe  
of the Faulcon by Wa: Dight.



an "I" written by the hand at the end of the word is nothing but the quill's point. The hand is simply placing an interpunct at the end of the motto. The videbor is complete in itself; no letter is missing.

A motto, in spite of its conciseness and possible obscurity, always expresses a concept or sentiment or rule of conduct which must be understood at least by its bearer or its addressee; therefore, it must be complete in itself. If its meaning should be worked out through the addition of words or part of a word, there follows that it might vary according to not only the reader's imagination but also the various historical, social, and literary situations of the time. If it were so, the use of a motto would be pointless and lose its own significance.

On the semantic basis, the Latin mottoes, with their corroborating visual representation of the theater curtain, might lead to the identification of the Earl of Oxford. Moreover, the concepts expressed in the inscriptions can rightly be applied to his life: the taboo to publish his works under his own name, the concealed identity, immortality reached through the works, the destructive power of Death: these are the themes present in all the works of Shakespeare.

#### Endnote

1. See *Shakespeare-Oxford Society Newsletter*, number 3, Fall 1998 and number 4, Winter 1999. Also, Dan Oldenberg in *The Washington Post*, January 24, 1999. Also, *The Elizabethan Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1998), "Henry Peacham and the First Folio of 1623."