

The Latin Inscription on the Stratford Shakespeare Monument Unraveled

by Jack A. Goldstone

The Shakespeare monument in Stratford-upon-Avon is frequently cited as one of the clearest pieces of evidence that William Shakspeare of Stratford was the author of the Shakespeare poems and plays. It was likely erected just before 1623, at the same time that the First Folio was being prepared for publication. Nina Green has argued that Ben Jonson, who authored an impressive dedication to Shakespeare for the First Folio, was also the author of the monument inscription, noting a large number of phrases or usages in the Folio dedication and other epigraphs by Jonson similar to the English portion of the monument inscription.

Certainly, the placement of the monument in the Stratford cemetery near Shakspeare's grave, and the inscription itself, seem clearly designed to identify the Stratford Shakspeare as the author of the works of Shakespeare. Most significantly, the first line of the Latin portion of the inscription lauds the person

Shakespeare funerary monument in the Holy Trinity Church located at Stratford-upon-Avon.



buried there as being “*Judicio Pylum*” (a Pylus in judgment, comparing him to King Nestor of Pylos), “*Genio Socratem*” (a Socrates in genius), and “*Arte Maronem*” (in artistry a Maro—evidently comparing him to Publius Vergilius Maro, better known today as Virgil). Such high praise seems to fit precisely the master story teller and poet who created the Shakespeare canon.

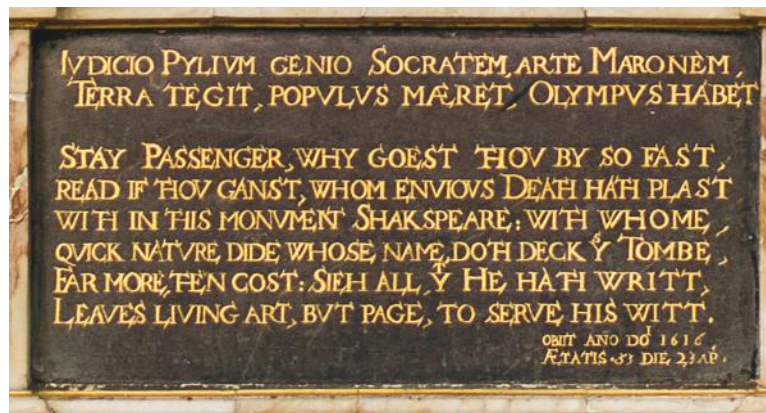
In fact, however, these are unusual choices as comparators to shower praise on Shakespeare. Nestor was hardly the most wise or talented judge known to the Renaissance; he was mostly known for exercises of judgment that led to bad outcomes. His most consequential advice was telling Achilles’ companion Patroclus to disguise himself as Achilles, the Greeks’ greatest warrior. This ill-advised ruse leads to Patroclus’ death at the hands of Hector. In book XI of the *Iliad*, Nestor tells Patroclus: “And let him give you his own fine armor to wear in war so the Trojans might take you for him, Patroclus...” (Fagles 323, emphasis in original). The most famous judgment of King Nestor of Pylos was advice to disguise oneself as someone of far greater ability.



The fight for the body of Patroclus from the Iliad (National Archaeological Museum, Athens).

Similarly, the “genius of Socrates” is an odd plaudit for a master poet and playwright, as Socrates never wrote a line himself, as far as is known, and did not create any plays or poetry. Indeed, according to Plato, Socrates would ban poets from his ideal republic. In *The Republic*, Socrates makes a distinction between poetry (including plays), which he demeans as presenting a twice-removed imitation of reality, and true reality, which is accessible only through philosophy. To Socrates, poetry is a misleading deception, presenting a world shaped by the gods of Olympus and full of misleading but compelling figures; poets should be driven out so that the wisdom of philosophy may hold unchallenged sway. How can this viewpoint be identified with the author of the most compelling poetry and dramas in the English language? Why not compare Shakespeare to one of the master philosophers of antiquity whose written works showed a deep appreciation of poetry and nature—Aristotle, or one of the famous ancient playwrights such as Sophocles or Euripides—as Jonson explicitly does in his dedication in the First Folio? The “genius

Jack A. Goldstone is the Virginia E. and John T. Hazel Jr. Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University. He won the Distinguished Scholarly Achievement award of the American Sociological Association and the Arnaldo Momigliano Award of the Historical Society for his works on 16th and 17th century history: *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (University of California Press, 1991) and “*Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History*,” *Journal of World History* (2002).



The Inscription on the Shakespeare Monument. The first two lines, in Latin, are the subject of this article.

of Socrates” was to gain immortal fame not for anything he ever wrote, but solely for standing as the front man for another author (Plato) whose words, put into the mouth of Socrates, made the latter famous.

Thus, the first two phrases in this part of the Stratford monument are best understood as saying “disguised as a person of greater ability, and famous for words written and put in his mouth by another.” In contrast, the third comparison seems clear: “Arte Maronem” compares Shakespeare to the most famous epic poet of Latin antiquity, Vergilius Publius Maro (known to us as Virgil), author of the *The Eclogues*, *The Georgics*, and *The Aeneid*. Or does it? Again, however, it is an odd comparison, as Virgil was a leading pastoral poet and at the time was most often compared to Shakespeare’s rivals, Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. The latter authors were far more famous for their achievements in the field of pastoral poetry than Shakespeare—indeed Spenser has been dubbed “England’s Virgil.” Sidney had written a famous pastoral poem called *Arcadia*, while Spenser wrote a pastoral called *The Shepheardes Calendar*, and explicitly took Virgil as the model for his masterpiece, *The Faerie Queene*. Why choose an ancient poet more identified with Shakespeare’s chief rivals than with Shakespeare himself for the latter’s final praise?

However, another “Maro” was known during the Renaissance. That was the medieval writer Virgilius Maro, known as “Grammaticus” (the Grammarian). This Maro was known for two works, the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*, that were parodies of scholarly writings. They were cast in the form of late classical grammatical texts and claimed to be based on the expertise of ancient grammar authorities; but, in fact, they were filled with outlandish tales and references that were obviously mistaken or were deliberate twists or inventions presented as facts. *The Epitomae* and *Epistolae* based their authority on citations from a host of authentic sounding classical authors whose names appear nowhere else, and on quotes that similarly appear in no other sources.

Those truly familiar with the classical canon would recognize these as clever fabrications by someone with knowledge of the major classical and patristic works. Maro's works thus appear to have been a form of medieval scholastic humor, an inside joke for accomplished scholars to appreciate. Thus, the words "in Art, a Maro," if actually referring to Virgilius Maro the Grammarian, could be interpreted as, "using the arts of outlandish claims and false attribution to claim authority and authorship, even though all educated readers would recognize such use as fraudulent."

Of course, Maro the Grammarian was fairly obscure. Why would one think that "Maro" in the inscription referred to Maro Grammaticus rather than the far better-known figure of Virgil? The answer may lie in an observation made eighty years ago by E.K. Chambers. He noted that the Latin inscription contains an obvious, yet inexplicable, grammatical error in the first line. The two Latin lines take the form of a heroic couplet, but as Chambers observed, the meter is wrong: the second word has a long vowel in its second syllable, and so should the fourth word; but the "o" in "Socratem" is a short vowel.



*Ben Jonson, poet, playwright—
and mastermind behind the
Shakespeare hoax?*

In Chambers' words, "It was no very accurate scholar who shortened the first vowel of 'Socratem'" (Chambers 183). The obvious choice would be "genio Sophoclem," a comparison to the genius of the ancient playwright Sophocles. The long "o" in "Sophoclem" would make it a grammatically correct choice (as was pointed out to me by Roger Stritmatter). Moreover, Jonson explicitly compared Shakespeare to Sophocles in his dedication to the First Folio; if Jonson was also the author of the monument inscription, why not use the reference here as well? But what better way would signal that this "Maro" was "The Grammarian" than to deliberately include in the same line a clear error in Latin grammar?

Jonson, who prided himself on his mastery of Latin and Greek literature, was himself a grammarian as well as a playwright and poet, and published a book titled *English Grammar* in 1640. Is it mere coincidence that a noted grammarian might have authored an inscription that pointed to a classical author known as "the Grammarian?" A reference to the art of Maro the Grammarian would be a clear message that the classical inscription on the Stratford monument was itself an "inside joke" for the truly learned.

The three phrases are now completely matched, and clear in intent. To someone familiar with Nestor, Socrates, and Virgil only by their general reputation and without any detailed knowledge of their writings or of the more obscure Maro the Grammarian, the epigraph may appear as high praise. However,

to someone intimately familiar with the classics and the actual judgments of Nestor, the philosophy of Socrates, and the existence of Maro the Gram-marian, the three phrases were skillfully chosen to convey the opposite meaning—"here lies someone who disguised himself as someone who was his better; who gained fame through the words of another author placed in his mouth; and who made outlandish claims that were obviously false to those who knew their texts."

The second line of the Latin inscription is similarly ambiguous. It reads "Ter-ra Tegit, Populus Maeret, Olympus Habet." This is conventionally translated as, "The earth buries him, the people mourn him, and Olympus (heaven) possesses him." That is a passable translation, provided one supplies the missing pronoun "eum," meaning "him," for Shakespeare. But that pronoun is missing, suggesting other possible meanings. For example, the missing object of the verb phrases could be the translation of the Latin verb "tego/tegit"—to cover or protect, especially if one also translates the Latin word "maereo/maeret" not simply as "mourns" but as "is bereaved of." The pas-sage then would translate into English as "The earth covers [the truth], the people are bereaved [of the truth], Olympus possesses [the truth]."

Why consider this meaning, which would again point to someone other than the Stratfordian Shakspeare as being buried there? The use of the term "Olympus" is a marker that something is wrong with the usual interpretation. After all, Olympus was the abode of gods, not poets; none of the famous poets or playwrights of antiquity ended up there. In classical literature, the final resting place for the most virtuous and blessed mortals was Elysium, not Olympus, or for a privileged few, elevation to the stars as a constellation. Why say that Olympus now possesses Shakespeare? To a classicist, it would make no sense. If what is meant is heaven, then the Latin word, as used in the Lord's Prayer, is *caelis*. If Shakespeare is to be raised on high, why not put him in heaven, or in the stars (astra)? In the First Folio, Jonson does just that, saying of Shakespeare that "I see thee... made a Constellation there. Shine forth, thou Starre of Poets..." So, Jonson would certainly know that placing Shakespeare in Olympus after his death would be an error.

But Olympus was the abode of the Muses, and Hesiod begins his *Theogony* with a famous hymn to the Muses that contains this passage in lines 22 ff.:

They, the Muses, once taught Hesiod beautiful song, while he was
shepherding his flocks on holy Mount Helicon; these goddesses of
Olympus, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus first of all spoke this word
to me, "Oh, you shepherds of the fields, base and lowly things, little
more than bellies, we know how to tell many falsehoods that seem
like truths but we also know, when we so desire, *how to utter the
absolute truth*." Thus, they spoke, the fluent daughters of great Zeus.
(My emphasis.)

Similarly, there is another famous reference to the Muses in the *Iliad*, Book II—in the first verse of that work that explicitly places them in Olympus: “Sing to me now, you Muses who hold the halls of Olympus. You are goddesses, you are everywhere, *you know all things*—all we hear is the distant ring of glory, *we know nothing*...” (Fagles 115). Shakespeare was frequently identified with the Muses; indeed, Jonson invokes the Muses no less than four times in his First Folio dedication, although none of the invocations place Shakespeare with the Muses after his death. The use of “Olympus” in the inscription therefore could well point to the Muses, who were famous for knowing truths that ordinary people knew not, who “know how to tell many falsehoods that seem like truths” but also “know, when we so desire, how to utter the absolute truth.” If this allusion is correct, then the Latin inscription suggests that the monument itself bears “falsehoods that seem like truths” but also, for those who know and desire it, will “utter the absolute truth.”

Thus deciphered, for those familiar with classical literature in detail, the inscription on the Stratford monument reads:

Here lies someone who disguised himself as someone who was his better; someone who gained fame through the words of another author placed in his mouth; and who made outlandish claims that were obviously false to those who knew their texts. The earth covers [the truth], the people are bereaved [of the truth], Olympus [the Muses, who live there] possesses [the truth].

Of course, the author of the inscription could hardly state things so plainly on a monument located at the gravesite of the Stratford Shakspeare, if the intent was to continue to protect the identity of the true author and perpetuate the belief that the Stratford Shakspeare was the author. However, for those with a reasonable knowledge of classical literature, the message is specific in its allusions and has a meaning opposite to the usual translation, one that is cleverly disguised in words of apparent praise and wrapped in “falsehoods that seem like truths.”

The various anomalies in the Latin inscription are so many and so specific as to be quite puzzling. Why compare Shakespeare the author to Nestor, whose judgments had such mixed results? Why compare him to Socrates, who would ban poets, especially when doing so introduces a grammatical error, and a grammatically correct choice, Sophocles, had already been employed by Jonson in his dedication? Why say Olympus now holds Shakespeare, when that is incorrect according to the classical conception of where great mortals are taken after death (either to Elysium or elevated to the stars, a figure Jonson correctly employs in his Folio dedication)?

In short, either the inscription was composed by a Latin hack, who couldn't frame a grammatically correct couplet, didn't appreciate the inappropriateness of the Nestor and Socrates references, and didn't know that Olympus was for gods only, or it was composed by a Latin scholar who deliberately chose these references and purposely inserted a schoolboy grammar error in the meter of the first line so that, if there were any confusion whether "Maro" referred to Publius Vergilius Maro the poet or Virgilius Maro the Grammarian, it practically shouts "the Grammarian."

If Jonson was the author of the inscription, as Green suggests, then these anomalies are inconceivable as chance. Moreover, Nestor, Socrates, Maro and Olympus are all remarkable for their absence from Jonson's dedication in the First Folio. Not only are neither Nestor nor Socrates mentioned in Jonson's dedication (which includes a long list of famous people, past and contemporary, with whom the virtues of Shakespeare are compared), the one classical poet or playwright surprisingly omitted by Jonson in his dedication, which names Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Terence, Plautus, Pacuvius, and Accius (a noted grammarian as well as poet) is Virgil. In fact, none of the six prefatory dedications in the First Folio mentions Virgil (nor his surname, Maro).

The choices of Nestor, Socrates, and Maro were therefore not only unconventional and linked to very specific meanings to those familiar with classical literature, they also seem to have been specifically chosen to distinguish the person "praised" in the monument inscription from the one praised by Jonson in his First Folio dedication, as the names on the monument do not appear in the lengthy list of paragons cited by Jonson.

This interpretation of the Latin portion of the monument inscription does not point to a particular alternative author of the Shakespeare canon (although Oxfordians will note that the motto of the Oxford crest—"Nothing truer than truth"—offers another basis for reading "truth" as the missing word in the second line of the inscription). However, it offers a plausible solution to the oddities in the inscription and makes it clear that the monument's Latin inscription should not be taken at face value to testify to the Stratford Shakspeare being the author "Shakespeare." It requires no great stretch of interpretation of the Latin verse to suggest otherwise—indeed the inscription powerfully alludes to the opposite being the buried or hidden truth.

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