

John Weever – Another Anti-Stratfordian

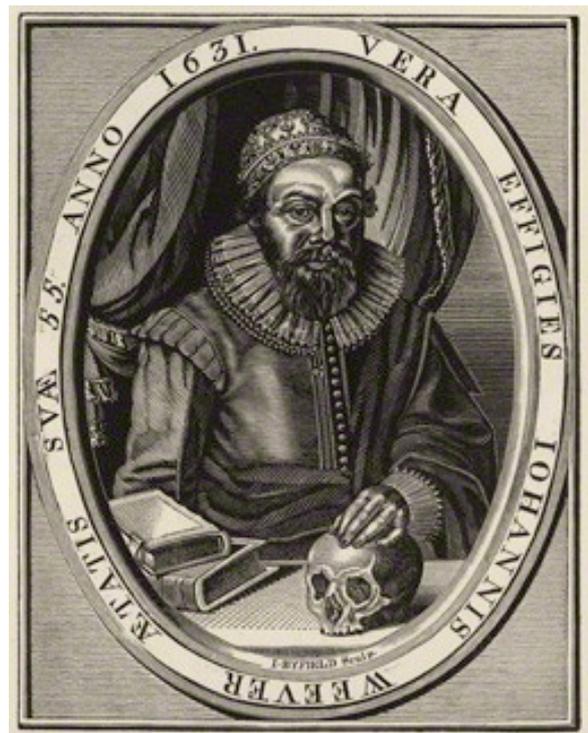
Alexander Waugh

Although Venus is mentioned by many English poets of the 1590s, few would disagree that by the end of that decade the one poet whom literary society would have most readily associated with the Roman goddess of love was ‘William Shakespeare.’ His *Venus and Adonis*, a witty poem describing Venus’s relentless efforts to seduce an obdurate youth was registered for publication in April 1593. By 1599 it had run to four editions with a fifth to follow in 1600. Shakespeare was the first poet among his contemporaries to base a whole poem on this Ovidian story and we may confidently deduce from contemporary letters and printed references that Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* was the most talked about Venus poem of its age. Indeed, so famous was this work that ever since Thomas Edwardes referred to a contemporary poet by the pseudonym, *Adon*, in 1595, scholars have unanimously accepted that he was referring to Shakespeare and no other.

So when John Weever in 1599, described ‘a certain writer’ who had written ‘bald rhymes’ about Venus we may confidently agree that all his literary contemporaries would have assumed him to be referring to William Shakespeare. The opprobrious description of Venus and Adonis as ‘bald rhymes’ also fits with other contemporary reactions to Shakespeare’s frankly erotic, and to some shocking poem. The word ‘bald’ in this context may be taken to mean brazen, bare-faced, blunt, or impudent, as Hotspur intended when he said ‘this bald unjointed chat of his, my Lord, I answered indirectly.’ (1 Hen. IV, iii).

It may seem odd then, that Weever’s Epigram no. 11 (from ‘the Fourth Weeke’) should have passed, for over four hundred years, unrecognised as a very obvious allusion to Shakespeare,¹ but to understand why this has happened, we need look no further than the title, *In Spurium quendam scriptorem*, which translates: ‘To Spurius, a certain writer’.

We do not need to consult the OED to know that ‘spurious’, when applied to writing, is defined as ‘not really proceeding from its reputed origin, source or author,’ for what is obvious is that Weever seems to be telling his readers that the reputed name of the poet (best known for his work about Venus) is spurious. Weever, it should be remembered, studied at Queens’ College Cambridge under William Covell, who, in 1595 (four years before the publication of Weever’s *Epigrammes*) had revealed that ‘Sweet Shak-speare’ was Oxford – ‘our de Vere’.²



John Weever 1576-1632

The epigram ‘To Spurius, a certain writer’ is only four lines long:

*Apelles*³ did so paint *Venus* Queene,
That most supposed he had faire *Venus* seene,
But thy bald rimes of *Venus* savour so,
That I dare swear thou dost all *Venus* know.

The surface meaning of this little poem is quite clear - that the spurious poet has portrayed Venus so perfectly that he gives the impression that he must have known her well. But with epigrams of this period, we should always expect a double meaning, not least one that is subversive. As Ben Jonson wrote, the very word epigram 'carries danger in the sound,'⁴ and Weever's subversive meaning here, is not at all hard to spot. He is insinuating, that the poet has had an affair with Venus, or, to put it more topically, that he has had an affair with a real woman whom he portrayed or satirised as Venus in his *Venus and Adonis*.

The basic joke was not original to Weever. It had already appeared as an epigram in Timothy Kendall's *Flowers and Epigrammes* of 1577, which, in turn, relied upon a Latin epigram by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey.⁵ Kendall's version reads:

To Cl. Marotus

Apelles learned hand, so fine
did paint fair *Venus* Queene:
That euery one suposd that he,
had *Venus* vewd and seen.
But workes of thine *Marotus* lewd,
of *Venus* sauour so:
That euery one sure deemes, that thou
dost all of *Venus* know.

We must not be distracted by this into thinking that Weever was plagiarizing Kendall or Henry Howard by simply repeating their slander on the French poet Clément Marot, '*Marotus*' (1496-1544), for although it is clear that Weever has borrowed the joke, he has noticeably removed Marot's name from his version. In his introduction 'To the generous readers' Weever explains that epigrams are topical: 'Epigrammes are much like unto Almanacks serving especially for the year which they are made.'⁶ Since Marot died twenty-two years before Weever was born, and since there is no discernable reason why Weever should have called Marot 'Spurius,' we may safely conclude that he was not rehashing an old joke about Marot, but using it to aim a familiar dart at a new target.

Stratfordian scholar, E. A. J. Honigmann in his book, *John Weever* (Manchester 1987), suggested

that Weever's title dedication '*In Spurium quendam scriptorem*' might be a cyphered allusion to '(?) John or Philip Spurling pensioners at Trinity [Cambridge], c. 1596).'⁷ Honigmann offers no evidence to support this self-queried supposition other than a vague similarity between the names 'Spurius' and 'Spurling.' Neither John nor Philip Spurling (whosoever they may have been) were known poets, let alone poets renowned for their portrayals of Venus in the mid to late 1590s. Furthermore there is no known reason why Weever should have chosen to conflate the name 'Spurling' with a suggestion of spurious authorship. Honigmann's hypotheses must therefore be rejected.

That 'Spurius' is intended to refer to 'Shakespeare' is not only supported by the allusion to a poet of Venus but also, perhaps, by Weever's numbering. In the introductory letter to his readers he wrote:

If you looke for some reasons because [why] I keepe no order in the placing of my Epistles and Epigrams, let this suffice, I write Epigrams, and there is an old saying: *Non locus hominem, des homo locum* &c: - the placing gives no grace unto the man, but man unto the place.⁸

If I am interpreting this correctly Weever is going out of his way to deny that he has invested any significance in the ordering of his epigrams. Why should he have bothered to do that? Other poets are known to have used ordering or 'placing' imaginatively. Note how John Davies revealed 'Shakespeare' to be a pseudonym, not just by comparing Shakespeare to Terence (the 'front man' for poets of Ancient Roman nobility), but also in the title sequence of his epigrams nos. 156-160:

Epig. 156: To my well accomplish'd friend Mr Ben Jonson

Epig. 157: To my much esteemed Mr Inego Jones.

Epig. 158: To my worthy kinde friend Mr Isacke Simonds

Epig. 159: To our English Terence Mr William Shake-speare.

Epig. 160: To his most constant, though most unknown friend: No-body.⁹

Was Weever deliberately laying a false scent then, when he asked his readers to draw no significance from the ordering of his poems? Both of his Shakespeare epigrams are contained in the chapter called 'The Fourth Weeke' – a neat collection of 23 poems separately dedicated to Sir Edward Warren.¹⁰ The one entitled 'To Spurius, a certain writer' is numbered 11 while the famous *Ad Guilielmum Shakespear* is number 22.

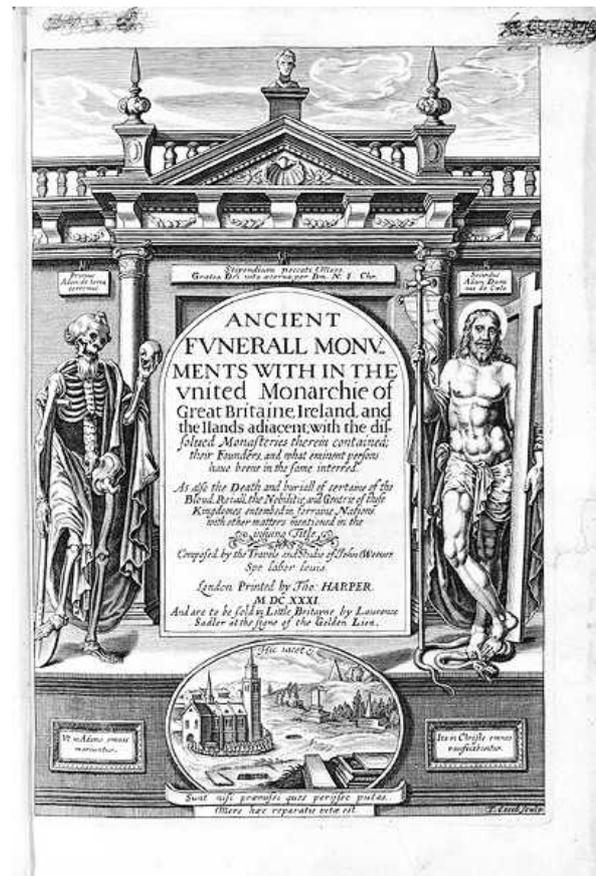
That both poems are about Shakespeare and that both refer to Venus shows that they are connected. 11 and 22 (apart from the obvious fact that one is double the other) are similar numbers in so far as both are represented by twin or double numerals. Without further Cabbalistic ado, I simply flag the possibility that Weever, in numbering his two Shakespeare epigrams 11 and 22, may have been subtly adverting to their connection, and to the fact that they are both aimed at the same addressee. If this is the case and he was intentionally coupling Epigram 11 with Epigram 22, we should also be alert to the tantalizing possibility that the half-hidden and subversive double meaning of the first continues into the veiled narrative of the second. In other words that the 'Venus' with whom Shakespeare is implicated in Epigram 11, may have borne him illegitimate offspring, obliquely hinted at in Epigram 22: "Ad Guilielmum Shakespear":

Honie-tong'd Shakespeare when I saw thaië issue
I swore Apollo got them and none other,
Their rosie-tainted features clothed in tissue,
Some heaven born goddesse said to be their
mother...

There is no space here for any lengthy analysis of Weever's intriguing double-meanings or their relevance to the biography of Edward de Vere. Let me instead divert to a brief examination of the oft' repeated Stratfordian assertions that John Weever was a friend of the Stratford Shaksper and that he recognized him as a poet and playwright.

The first contention (that Weever knew Stratford Shaksper personally), is pure speculation, unsupported by any evidence, and requires no further comment. The second, however, (that Weever knew Stratford Shaksper

to be the poet) is supported by documentary evidence. In the year before his death in 1632, Weever published a learned volume entitled *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, being a comprehensive study of church monuments, which does not include the Shaksper travesty at Stratford.



The archives of the Society of Antiquaries in London hold the manuscript of this book as well as a secondary folio (MS128) that has been catalogued as follows:

128. A folio Book marked B. with this title on the cover, "The Rul'd Paper Booke". Containing numerous collections from Books and manuscripts in the handwriting of John Weever the Antiquary...

On page 23 of this folio may be found a transcription of the epitaph inscribed upon the Shaksper monument at Stratford, beside which appears a handwritten marginal note that reads: 'Willm Shakespeare the famous poet.' Honigmann comments that it was 'someone – probably Weever' who wrote this marginal note.¹¹ We should, however, consider the possibility that

Weever wrote neither the main text nor the marginal note.

Examining the manuscript folio on 25 March 2013, I made the following observations:

- 1 There are specimens of many different hands represented in this folio and from a comparison of the handwriting of MS128 with that of letters signed by Weever (reproduced in Honigmann) it would appear that the secretarial hand of passage relating to Stratford may not be Weever's.
- 2 The writer of MS128 has transcribed the first two words of the Shakspere-Stratford epitaph '*Judicio Pilum*' instead of '*Judicio Pylum*' - two Classical errors in two consecutive words, - unlikely for a noted Cambridge classicist and scholar of Weever's high renown.
- 3 The writer of MS128 has wrongly transcribed 'Shakspeare' as 'Shakespeare', changed 'this Tombe' to 'his Tombe'; 'sieh' to 'sith' and recorded the date of Shakspere's death as 24 April where the monument clearly has 23 April carved upon it.
- 4 The name 'Weever' appearing on the first page of MS128 has been crossed out in red ink by a later, (probably 18th century), annotator.

The manuscript is written on paper bearing a watermark 'OC'.¹² MS128 records epitaphs from churches in the 'Diosese of Lichfield and Coventrie which contains the Countie of Stafford, all Derbyshire, the better part of Warwickshire and near half of Sghropshire.' But the only epitaphs from the Stratford church recorded in MS128 are Shakspere's monument and tomb

(both considered ambiguous or tongue-in-cheek by anti-Stratfordians) and a satirical epigram about the Earl of Warwick's rent-collector (the usurer, John Combe) which hints and winks that he spent much of his 'bachelor' life sowing wild oats and fathering illegitimate children among the poor of Stratford:

*How ere hee lived judg not
John Combes shall never bee forgot
Whilst poore have memorie, for hee did gather
To make the poore his issue, hee their father
And record of his Tylth & Seedes
Doth Crowne him in his latest deedes*

This same epitaph shows up again in a manuscript of jocular epitaphs (c. 1650) in the hand of Nicholas Burgh.¹³ It is entirely different from that recorded by Richard Brathwaite in 1618.¹⁴ It is curious that the author of MS 128 should have ignored all other monumental inscriptions from a church at Stratford which is rich in fine examples.

It would appear then from the forgoing that whosoever wrote MS128 had not actually visited the Holy Trinity, Stratford, in person but had simply transcribed the three satirical inscriptions from another source.

None of the Stratford material from MS128 is reproduced in Weever's extensive and serious study, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* of 1631 confirming, perhaps, that John Weever, like Thomas Vincent (Elegy 7, *Manes Verulamiani* 1626), William Davenant (*Madagascar* 1638) and the anonymous author of 'Modern Jests, Witty Jeeres & Pleasant Taunts' (1630), believed that the shrine at Stratford was not to be taken seriously but *cum grano salis* - with a pinch of salt.

Notes

- 1 The author spoke briefly of this Weever-Shakespeare allusion at the De Vere Society's London conference (28 September 2013) but it seems to have been lost in the accompanying *furor* over *Polimanteia*.
- 2 In *Polimanteia* (1595); see A. Waugh, 'A Secret Revealed' *DVS Newsletter*, (Oct 2013), pp. 2-4.
- 3 Apelles: Ancient Greek painter (c. 330 BC) renowned for his beautiful and lifelike portrait of Venus (*Aphrodite Anadyomene*).
- 4 In the dedication of his *Epigrammes* to the Earl of Pembroke, Jonson wrote of 'my Epigrammes which, though they carry danger in the sound, doe not therefore seeke your shelter: For when I made them, I had nothing in my conscience, to expressing of which I did need a cypher.' Jonson further tries to placate the censors by explaining in (Epig. 2) that his readers should not assume that because he had called them *Epigrammes* his poems were necessarily 'bold, licentious, full of gall, / Wormewood, and sulphure, sharpe, and tooth'd withal,' and in Epigram 18, addressed 'To my meere English Censurer' Jonson explicitly tries to dissociate his epigrammatic style from that of Davies or Weever.
- 5 For more on the origins of this joke see Andrew W. Taylor: 'Between Surrey and Marot: Nicholas Bourbon and the Artful Translation of the Epigram' *Translation and Literature* 15.1 (2006) 1-20, and online at http://130.102.44.246/journals/translation_and_literature/v015/15.1taylor.html
- 6 John Weever: *Epigrammes in the oldest cut, and newest fashion* (1599), 'To the generous Readers,' A7a. The whole pamphlet is reproduced in facsimile in E. A. J. Honigmann. *John Weever: A Biography of a Literary Associate of Shakespeare and Jonson, Together with a Photographic Facsimile of Weever's Epigrammes (1599)*. Manchester University Press, 1987
- 7 Honigmann. *John Weever*, p. 124, n. iv.11
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 From *The Scourge of Folly* [1611]. This title sequence is remarked upon by Diana Price in *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (2012 ed), p. 63. She overlooks, however, the significance of title of Epig. 160 in which the possessive pronoun 'his' is intended to refer to 'Shake-speare' in the preceding epigram.
- 10 The John Warren who wrote the anti-Stratfordian poem 'Of Mr William Shakespeare' printed in the prefatory matter to the 1640 edition of Shakespeare's poems, may have been one of the several Johns listed in the pedigrees of the family of Weever's friend, Sir Edward Warren of Poynton and Stockport.
- 11 Honigmann, *John Weever* p. 70.
- 12 In the printed version of this article (*DVS Newsletter*, May 2014, pp 12-15) the author appealed to readers for information about the MS countermark 'OC' which he suspected of being the initials of Oliver Cromwell, a replacement for the 'crown' countermark of Charles I. Paper historian, Peter Bower has since suggested they were the initials of Octavien Chevallier, a French papermarker, who established a business at Verger, near Angouleme in 1556. All consideration of MS128's watermarks has consequently been removed from this version (intended for online publication) pending further investigation.
- 13 The John Combe epitaph in MS128 also has a right-aligned marginal note reading 'John Combes / a Bachelor / a great usurer.' The same epitaph (ascribed to 'W. Shak') dating from the mid 17th Century, appears in Bodleian MS Ashmole 38, f. 189, rp in S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975), p. 186, who ascribes it to Nicholas Burgh.
- 14 E. K. Chambers discusses this epigram in *William Shakespeare: a Study of Facts and Problems* (1930 ii. 138-9).