

## Who was ‘the late English Ovid’ ?

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In the late summer or early autumn of 1605 an anonymous author published a report of recent and ongoing tragic events in Moscow. Its title was *Sir Thomas Smithes Voiage and Entertainment in Rusbia. With the tragicall ends of two Emperors, and one Empresse, within one Moneth during his being there: And the miraculous preservation of the now reigning Emperor, esteemed dead for 18 years.*<sup>1</sup>



**Sir Thomas Smith 1558-1625**

The title page states that it was printed by ‘I. R. and W. Jaggard for Nathanyell Butter’. These were all known printers of Shakespeare’s plays. ‘I.R.’ is most likely James Roberts, the printer who had registered

*Hamlet* in 1602 and printed the second (long) quarto of the play in 1604/5. In 1608 William Jaggard bought up Roberts’ printing business.

The text described political events in Russia during the visit of the English ambassador, Thomas Smith (1558-1625), who incidentally always spelt his own surname as ‘Smythe’. The events were ongoing at the time of publication, and as a result there is some ambiguity regarding dates and what exactly occurred. However, a letter from the ambassador to Robert Cecil states that he had arrived in Moscow on 26 July 1604, and further correspondence shows that he left at the end of July 1605. He witnessed the beginning of a period of succession crises and internecine conflict known in Russian history as ‘the time of troubles’.

The reigning Tsar, Boris Godunov, died on or about 13 April 1605, thought to have been poisoned. His teenage son, Fender Borisovitz, succeeded but, within a month, a pretender known as Dmitri appeared, claiming to be a descendant of Ivan the Terrible. Entering Moscow with a force of Polish soldiers, he had himself crowned Tsar and even wrote to James I proclaiming his authority and hoping for good relations with England. He brought with him a Polish woman, Marina Muisek, who claimed to be a princess and married her. Godunov’s widow was forced to witness the marriage.

During the great banquet that followed, a Pole struck a Russian, who cried out, ‘Murder!’ and this escalated into a massacre of Russians by Poles in the city. During the fighting, Gudonov’s widow and son died,

also thought to have been poisoned or, more probably, to have knowingly taken poison themselves. By the end of May 1605 Dmitri was overthrown and murdered and a new Tsar, Vasily Shuisky, was elected and eventually crowned in 1606.<sup>2</sup>

These events reminded the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* of a stage-play, in particular, of *Hamlet*, which had been played 'divers times' in London and also at Oxford and Cambridge Universities by the time the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarto was printed in 1603, and whose 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarto was in print by 1604/5. There is, indeed, some resemblance to the characters in *Hamlet*: a king dies (supposed poisoned), a usurper claims the throne, the late king's wife and the prince die (supposed poisoned) amid much bloodshed, and the dynasty collapses. The author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* made this comparison and, after bewailing the death of the Russian prince (the 'Hamlet' character) in particular, he says:

His father's Empire and Government was ...but as the Poeticall FURIE in a Stage-action, compleat yet with horrid and wofull Tragedies; a first, but no second to any Hamlet; and that now Revenge, just Revenge was coming with his Sworde drawn against him, his Royall Mother, and dearest Sister, to fill up those Murdering Sceanes...

The author then proposes that something might be written on these events, and wonders which English poet might be worthy of the task. He goes on:

Oh for some excellent pen-man to deplore their state: but he which would likely, naturally, or indeed poetically delyneate or enumerate these occurrents, shall either lead you thereunto by a *poeticall spirit*, as could well, if well he might, the dead living, life-giving Sydney Prince of *Poesie*; or deifie you with the Lord *Salustius* [du Bartas] divinity, or in an Earth-deploring, Sententious, high rapt Tragedie with the noble *Foulk-Grevill*, not onely give you the Idea, but the soule of the acting Idea; as well could, if so we would, the

elaborate *English Horace* that gives number, waight, and measure to every word, to teach the reader by his industries, even our Lawreat worthy *Benjamin*, whose Muze approves him with (our mother) the *Ebrew* signification to bee, *The elder Sonne*, and happily to be the Childe of *Sorrow*: It were worthy so excellent rare witt...

The author admits that he's no poet himself (though he is evidently acquainted with poetry and poets):

for my selfe I am neither *Apollo* nor *Appelles*, no nor any heire to the *Muses*; yet happily a younger brother...

And then he makes an intriguing statement. **He agrees with 'the late English Ovid' that these events would be fearful if they were only dreams** but, because they are real, nothing can be said:

I am with the late *English* quick-spirited, cleare-sighted *Ovid*: It is to be feared Dreaming, and [I] thinke I see many strange and cruell actions, but say my selfe nothing all this while: Bee it so that I am very drowsie (the heate of the Clymate, and of the State) will excuse mee; for great happinesse to this mightie Empire is it, or would it have been, if the more part of their State affaires had been but Dreames, as they prove phantasmas for our yeares. (Quotations from sigs. K, K verso and K2)

The syntactical structure of this section, with a colon after 'Ovid', gives the words that follow the quality of a quotation, something that 'English Ovid' said or wrote, and with which the author agrees. However, 'English Ovid' is described as 'late'. Although 'late' could mean 'recent' (e.g. 'these late eclipses in the sun and moon'), when it is followed by a personal name it invariably meant, and still means, 'recently deceased'.

So the statement with which the author agrees was something that a recently deceased author (likened to Ovid) either said - or might have said - when asked to write

about real tragic events. To this situation we might compare, for example, Henry Chettle's complaint in *England's Mourning Garment* (1603) that several poets (among them someone he calls 'Melicert') had failed to write an elegy for the late Queen Elizabeth I. And the statement that the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* agrees with sounds very like what 'Melicert' might have said about that event:

It is to be feared Dreaming, and [I] thinke I see many strange and cruell actions, but say my selfe nothing all this while.

The poets whom the author imagined might be capable of writing about these Russian events are Sidney (who died in 1586 and was not known for tragedy), du Bartas (who died in 1590 and was best known for his religious creation epic, translated by Joshua Sylvester as *Divine Weeks and Works* and recently published in 1605), Fulke Greville (who was still alive but not yet in print) and Ben Jonson (who was still alive and had recently staged *Sejanus*, which had got him into trouble with the authorities).

Clearly, the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* was familiar with courtiers and literary matters. In his preface to the reader he claims to have had his information from someone in the ambassador's entourage, and he also knows that Greville was writing poetic tragedies at a time when they were only circulating privately. Greville's *Mustapha* was not published until 1609 and even then appeared anonymously..

The question is, to whom was he referring as **'the late English Ovid'**? Since the 1590s several authors had been likened to Ovid, usually for specific reasons and in relation to specific works. To be compared to Ovid usually meant one or both of two things – either writing amorous, explicitly sexual or even lewd verse, or writing verse or plays

employing the mythologies of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman, and even Michael Drayton, had all been compared to Ovid, though usually in relation to specific works: Greene for his prose romances, Marlowe for his translation of Ovid's *Amores*, Chapman for his 1595 poem called *Ovid's Banquet of Sense*, and Drayton for his *Heroical Epistles*, based (in structure only) on Ovid's *Heroides*. Greene had died in 1592 and Marlowe in 1593, more than a decade earlier and perhaps rather too long previously to be referred to as 'late'. Chapman and Drayton were still alive, which eliminates them as candidates.

It is just possible that Arthur Golding could be regarded as 'the English Ovid' in respect of his translation of *Metamorphoses*, but he was also still alive in 1605, though he would die in May the following year. However, one author was famously compared to Ovid. Francis Meres had clearly likened Shakespeare to Ovid in *Palladis Tamia* (1598):

As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare.

Certainly, most scholars today, on being asked who could claim the title 'English Ovid' would agree with Meres. Recent scholarship has shown how thoroughly the plays and poetry are indebted to Ovid, for example, Jonathan Bate in *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1993) and Jeremy MacNamara in *'Ovidius Naso was the Man': Shakespeare's debt to Ovid* (online essay, 1992-93). Michelle Martindale even resurrected the phrase in *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity: an introductory essay* (1994) by claiming that Shakespeare 'may have started his career with

a deliberate attempt to present himself as something of an English Ovid'

But William Shakespeare (of Stratford-upon-Avon) could not be described as 'late' in 1605. He was still alive and his name was on the title pages of many published plays, including the Q2 of *Hamlet* which had recently rolled off James Robert's press – a fact of which the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* almost certainly was aware, since he chose this printer for his own book. It follows that if he meant that 'the late English Ovid' was Shakespeare, there must have been a good reason for not identifying him by that name. If he was happy to identify 'English Horace' as 'Benjamin' (Jonson), why did he not identify 'English Ovid' by name?

### **Hamlet's silence (alias de Vere's silence?)**

In his given context of *Hamlet*, what the author says he agrees with in 'English Ovid' is particularly interesting, because the statement reminds us of Hamlet's own concerns with fear, dreaming, sleep, and silence. Many speeches on these themes can be recalled from the play. Compare, particularly, the following:

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

*Hamlet*, II,ii,254

Is it not monstrous that this player here, But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, Could force his soul so to his own conceit ... Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak Like John-a-Dreams, unpregnant of my cause, And can say nothing.

*Hamlet*, II, ii, 544-564

Hamlet's phrase 'And [I] can say nothing' is almost identical to 'but I myself say nothing all this while' and occurs, significantly, in the

player scene where Hamlet is distressed that a player can speak so eloquently and powerfully from pretended emotions, while he himself feels unable to speak from real ones.<sup>3</sup> Could the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* be echoing Hamlet's speeches?

I discussed this with Alexander Waugh, who then asked Robert Detobel what he thought about these parallels. Robert felt that the author was indeed 'paraphrasing *Hamlet*'.<sup>4</sup> If this is the case, then the implication is that 'the late English Ovid' used the voice of Hamlet to express his own thoughts – a notion that is oddly identical to the Oxfordian view concerning autobiographical features in the character of Hamlet.

Interestingly, it was not unusual in this period for an author to be referred to by the name of a character he had created or by one of his book-titles. For example, John Lyly had been referred to as 'Euphues' and Thomas Nashe as 'Pierce Penniless', and so on. Was the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* doing the same thing indirectly?

### **Conclusion**

Since the author of *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* considered the events in Russia to be 'a first, but no second to any Hamlet', it would follow that only the author of *Hamlet* would be capable of writing another great tragedy on this subject. Given this context, there would be a good case for interpreting 'the late English Ovid' as the author of *Hamlet*, who on the quartos recently published was 'William Shakespeare'. However, the name 'Shakespeare' is not mentioned, despite no quibbles in mentioning Jonson and the others by their proper names. This reticence may suggest that he knew the name 'Shakespeare' was a pseudonym.

In common with so many other contemporary allusions, we cannot be absolutely sure of this interpretation, but this 1605 reference to an unnamed 'late English Ovid' (in the contexts of *Hamlet*, excellent penmanship and rare wit) is, to say the least, intriguing and, from an Oxfordian point of view, highly significant.

Let us assume that the term 'late' (to refer to a deceased person) was normally used for, say, up to five years post-demise. Only three English authors had died since 1601. These were Thomas Nashe (d.1601), Thomas Churchyard (d. April 1604) and Edward de Vere (d. June 1604).

Nashe frequently mentions Ovid in his prose works and wrote one pornographic poem, his 'wanton' elegy, *The Choice of Valentines*, that might have been considered Ovidian. He also wrote entertainments and collaborated in writing plays, but he is not known for being able to write a great tragedy. Thomas Churchyard was a prolific writer of occasional verse mostly about his own

experiences as a soldier in Scotland and the Netherlands, but he is not known to have written anything for the stage.

This leaves only Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, as the candidate for 'late English Ovid'. Referred to early on as an excellent poet and a writer of plays, he is regarded by many today as the author of the works of 'Shakespeare', and significantly of the autobiographical *Hamlet*.

### Footnote

As we know, the world would have to wait another 200 years for the Russian events to be written up as a play by Alexander Pushkin in *Boris Godunov* (1833). Notably, in order to write it Pushkin studied Shakespeare's tragedies very closely and said of his play,

"Not disturbed by any other influence, I imitated Shakespeare in his broad and free depictions of characters, in the simple and careless combination of plots."<sup>5</sup>

### Endnotes

1. The book is viewable at Early English Books Online (EEBO).
2. Howe, Sonia E. *The False Dmitri: a Russian Romance and Tragedy described by British Eye-Witnesses, 1604-1612*, F.A. Stokes, NY, 1916/17 (This book does not, however, mention *Sir Thomas Smythe's Voyage...*) - readable online at Internet Archive (Texts).
3. See also: 'Hamlet's Silence' from Crawford, Alexander W. *Hamlet, an ideal prince, and other essays in Shakespearean interpretation: Hamlet; Merchant of Venice; Othello; King Lear*. Boston R.G. Badger, 1916. *Shakespeare Online*. 20 Aug. 2009 - readable online at <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/hamletsilence.html>  
Jagendorf, Zvi, 'Fingers on your lips, I pray': on Silence in *Hamlet*, English (1978), 27, 121-128. Matheson, Tom. *Hamlet's Last Words* in Shakespeare Survey, vol.48 - readable online at Google books. This essay mentions *Sir Thomas Smith's Voyage* and its author's comparison of events to *Hamlet*, particularly in respect of the deaths of the Queen and Prince by poison, but does not address 'the late English Ovid'.
4. Many thanks to Alexander Waugh and Robert Detobel for their e-mail exchanges on this.
5. Quoted on Wikipedia entry for 'Boris Godunov, play by Pushkin'