CYGNUS WAS A PSEUDONYM OF SAMUEL DANIEL NOT 'SHAKESPEARE'

By Robert R Prechter

In March 2023, *The Guardian* (U.K.) reported on a poem found in the text of a playbook of Jonson's *Sejanus*:

> An almost unknown sonnet in the playbook or script of a 1603 play by Ben Jonson could be a "lost" work by William Shakespeare, according to two leading scholars. Beyond "compelling" stylistic evidence, the sonnet, titled To the Deserving Author, is signed with the mysterious pseudonym Cygnus, after the mythical figure who was turned into a swan – evoking Jonson's very own tribute to Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon as the "Sweet Swan of Avon".[1]

The poem does contain wisps of Shakespeare's language. The poet writes, 'in one…thou makest twain.' **Shakespeare** offers the same idea in Sonnet 39: 'O absence…thou teachest how to make one twain.' The poet's 'Masters of their Art' appears in *The Taming of the Shrew* (IV. ii) as 'master of your art.'

On the other hand, non-Shakespearean elements abound. The Bard's usual metaphors are absent. The poem's rhyme scheme begins ABBA, which is not Shakespearean but Petrarchan. Present, moreover, are five examples in which the poet splits a single phrase or clause between two lines, a practice called enjambment, as indicated by the underlined passages:

To the Deserving Author
When I respect thy argument, I see
An image of those times: but when I view
The wit, the workmanship, so rich, so true,
The times themselves do seem retrieved to me.
And as Sejanus, in thy tragedy,
Falleth from Caesar's grace; even so the crew
Of common playwrights, whom opinion blew
Big with false greatness, are disgraced by thee.
Thus, in one Tragedy, thou makest twain:
And, since fair works of Justice fit the part

Of tragic writers, Muses do ordain
That all Tragedians, Masters of their Art,
Who shall hereafter follow on this tract,
In writing well, thy tragedy shall act. CYGNUS

One of the scholars who attributed Cygnus' poem to the Bard asserted, 'The more one reads this enigmatic poem, the more "Shakespearean" it appears.'[2] On the contrary, a cursory check of Shakespeare's verse reveals no instance in which a dozen lines are filled with enjambment, and nowhere is a single split of sense rendered as starkly as those permeating Cygnus' poem. Shakespeare treats lines, couplets and stanzas as poetic constraints on expression. Examples of that approach are the opening lines of Sonnet 1 from *Shake-speares Sonnets* and the first stanza of *Venus and Adonis*, in which each line is a thought capsule:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the riper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory;
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel. *Sonnet 1*

Even as the sun with purple-colour'd face
Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,
Rose-cheek'd Adonis tried him to the chase;
Hunting he lov'd, but love he laugh'd to scorn;
Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-fac'd suitor 'gins to woo him. *Venus and Adonis*

Cygnus' comparative disregard for line endings makes his poem distinctively *un*-Shakespearean.

Enjambment, however, was a compositional habit of Samuel Daniel. Throughout *Civile Wars* and his various laudatory poems, that practice is on display, as we can see in just a few lines from his tribute to Sir Thomas Egerton:

Now when we see the most combining band,
The strongest fasting of societie

> *Law*, whereon all this frame of men doth stand,
> Remaine concussed with uncertaintie,
> And seeme to foster rather than withstand
> Contention, and embrace obscuritie…
> Unto the combate as is Righteousnes,
> Or suted her, as if she did belong
> Unto our passions, and did even professe
> Contention, as her only mystery…

Specifically, compare Cygnus' splitting of 'crew/ Of common playwrights' with the back-to-back constructions of the same type, especially 'crakes/ Of Tyrants threats,' from Daniel's tribute to the Countess of Cumberland:

> Nor is he moov'd with all the thunder crakes
> Of Tyrants threats, or with the surly brow
> Of power, that prowdly sits on others' crimes…

All Daniel's poems feature such constructions.[3]

Daniel later echoes one of Cygnus' more evocative lines. On *Sejanus*' portrayal of a bygone era, Cygnus reveals his mind's eye: 'I see/ An image of those times.' In his dedication to the Countess of Pembroke prefacing the 1609 edition of *Civile Wars*, Daniel uses the same key term when depicting his own portrayal of former times: 'many of these Images are drawne with the pencil of mine conceiving.' In Shakespeare, only one out of 65 usages of *image(s)* applies to a product of literary effort ('This play is the image of a murther done in Vienna.' *Hamlet* III. ii), and not one relates to the historical past. Between the two canons, Cygnus' usage is uniquely consistent with Daniel's.

If Daniel wrote Cygnus' poetic tribute, it is not his only one. He penned tributes in verse to King James, Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Henry Howard, Margaret Countess of Cumberland, Lucie Countess of Bedford, Lady Anne Clifford and Henry Wriothesley Earl of Southampton, all of which were published in Daniel's *A Panegyrike Congratulatory… Also certaine Epistles*. That book was published in 1603, the same year that Cygnus lauded Jonson. Shakespeare, in contrast, never wrote a tribute in verse to anyone.

In Cygnus' manner, Daniel's rhyme schemes are contrived as opposed to lyrical. His poems to Henry Howard and the Countess of Cumberland progress as

ABCABCDD, and that to the Countess of Bedford progresses as ABABCB/CDCDED, etc. One may appreciate the poet's cleverness, but one would not sing his lines.

Another poem among the eight tributes to Jonson's *Sejanus* is a sonnet by EV. B. This may also be by Daniel. The poem is likewise rhymed in Petrarchan manner and includes an example of the same split form highlighted above in his construction, 'spoil/ Of conquest,' as you can see across lines 3 and 4:

> When in the Globe's fair ring, our world's best stage,
> I saw SEJANUS set with that rich soil,
> I looked the author should have born the spoil
> Of conquest, from the writers of the age.

The sonnet by Cygnus was written in a hopeful tone, in a playbook before the play was performed, whereas the sonnet by EV. B. was written afterward, in disappointment over the play's poor reception. That before-and-after connection fits the case that the same person wrote both poems. The best candidate is Samuel Daniel.

Daniel was busy writing poems, plays and masques between 1603 and 1605, the same time as Jonson. His efforts include *A Panegyrike Congratulatorie to King James* (1603), *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* (1604), *The Tragedy of Philotas (acted 1604; published 1605)* and *The Queenes Arcadia* (acted 1605; published 1606). The two men likely had occasions to cross paths if not to work together on courtly entertainments. As a versifying historian himself (especially in *Civile Wars*), Daniel was perfectly suited to appreciate Jonson's history play in verse.

End Notes

1. Dalya Alberge, 'Ben Jonson work from 1603 may contain "lost" Shakespeare sonnet, say experts', The Guardian (U.K) (March 23, 2023).
2. Dr. Chris Laoutaris, as quoted in ibid.
3. Three works published in Daniel's name are virtually devoid of enjambment because (in my view) Daniel did not write them; see the Samuel Daniel chapter in Robert R. Prechter, Jr., *Oxford's Voices*, oxfordsvoices.com (2021–4).

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