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The Riddle of the Monument

Peter Farey ¹

Referring to Shakespeare's monument in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Stanley Wells says that the English inscription on it "somewhat cryptically calls on the passer-by to pay tribute to his greatness as a writer" but admits to being rather unsure as to what some of it means.² In fact he is one of the very few Shakespearian biographers to say anything at all about it, other than to provide an illustration or, usually with their own unexplained corrections, to offer a straight transcript.

What is certainly not widely known is that it is possible to read the whole poem—but best if using one of the earliest accurate copies that we have of it—in a way that is completely different to the one(s) usually assumed for it.

All that is needed to enable one to see that new meaning is to change the assumed context. In this respect it is not unlike *The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane*, a popular song back in the 1950s that made one think it was indeed about a "naughty lady", but which turned out eventually to concern a baby only nine days old. Such phrases as "liquid refreshment," "powder and fancy lace," "needs someone to change her" and "things they're trying to pin on her" all took on a totally different meaning once the new context was revealed. In this case the epigraph changes from being a simple eulogy—if rather strangely worded and punctuated—to being a riddle.

One of the earliest clear representations we have of the inscription was given in the 1896 edition of Halliwell-Phillipps's *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*. It was white on black and, with these reversed, looked like this.

STAY PASSENGER, WHY GOEST THOV BY SO EAST,
READ IF THOV CANST, WHOM ENVIOUS DEATH HATH PLAST,
WITH IN HIS MONVMENT SHAKSPEARE: WITH WHOME,
QVICK NATVRE DIDE: WHOSE NAME, DOT H DECK Y' TOMBE,
FAR MORE, TEN COST: SEH ALL Y' HE HATH WRITT,
LEAVES LIVING ART, BVT PAGE, TO SERVE HIS WITT.

Here is as accurate a transcript of it as is possible if the differently sized capital letters are represented by upper and lower case ones and no attempt is made to replicate the many ligatures used. The letters 'u' and 'v' were interchangeable so, for readability, whichever is

the more appropriate is given, and the ‘y\s’ and ‘y\t’ changed to the more recognizable ‘this’ and ‘that’. ‘Sieh’ is usually assumed to be an error for ‘sith’, meaning ‘since’.

Stay Passenger, why goest thou by so fast?
read if thou canst, whom envious Death hath plast,
with in this monument Shakspeare: with whome,
quick nature dide: whose name, doth deck this Tombe,
Far more, then cost: Sieh all, that He hath writt,
Leaves living art, but page, to serve his witt.

To obtain the complete change of meaning, all we need to do first of all is to interpret some of the words in a different, though certainly no less valid, way:

READ becomes “To guess, to make out or tell by conjecture...*who...*” (*OED* 1.b), rather than “To inspect and interpret in thought (any signs which represent words or discourse)...” (*OED* 5.a).

WITH is taken to be a separate word, as it is of course shown, meaning “In the company, society, or presence of” (*OED* 22.a), rather than a part of the word “within” — “In the inner part or interior” (*OED* 1.a).

QUICK is revealed as “In a live state, living, alive” (*OED* 2.a), and not “Mentally active...; of ready apprehension or wit” (*OED* 21.a).

TOMBE goes back to being “A place of burial;... a grave.” (*OED* 1.a), rather than the monument, as it is usually—with no other known example for a wall-mounted memorial—taken to be.

HE is someone whose name is hidden as a rebus—a bit like a cryptic crossword clue—which is contained in the words “whose name, doth deck this Tombe, Far more, then cost”, and not the name before that, which is of course Shakespeare’s.

SIEH ALL is another type of rebus, this time commenting on that name, and based upon the letters that there, rather than there being an error of any kind.

Depending upon how one would normally interpret the last line—and opinions do vary on this—it may also be helpful to know that at that time BUT also meant “without” or “unprovided with” (*OED* A.2).

The result (with those two rebuses still unsolved) is:

Stay Passenger, why goest thou by so fast?
Make out, if thou canst, whom envious Death hath placed
with, in this monument, Shakspeare—with whom
living Nature died. <rebus—name>
<rebus—comment>. That HE hath writ
leaves Art alive, without a page to serve (up) his wit.

Now let us solve the rebuses. Before doing so, however, it might be helpful to see a contemporary rebus, as John Aubrey called it in his *Brief Lives* item on Sir Walter Raleigh, whose surname is of course the answer:

The enemy to the stomach and the word of disgrace
Is the name of the gentleman with the strong face.

Notice how the name is split into syllables, with a clue to each part (“raw” and “lie”). The first rebus works in a similar way, the name being apparently split into three parts, “whose name, doth deck this Tombe, Far more, then cost”. To solve this, one needs to find possible answers for the first part before moving on to the second, and a possible answer for both of them before moving on to the third. Only when all three parts “work” can that answer be accepted as most probably correct.

The monument is mounted on the North wall of the chancel in Holy Trinity Church, and is situated above Shakespeare’s grave—although this does not have his name on it, just the famous poem, updated here only to the extent that the other was:

Good frend for Jesus sake forbear,
to digg the dust enclosed heare:
Bleste be the man that spares thes stones,
and curst be he that moves my bones.

Whose name doth deck this tomb (i.e. the grave)? “Jesus”—rather surprisingly—is the only name there. So whose name is Jesus? The most obvious answer is “Christ”. And which names begin with “Christ”? There are Christa, Christian, Christiane, Christie, Christina, Christine, Christopher, and possibly others.

The next bit is “Far more,” marked out by those also rather strange but helpful commas. Can this help us decide which of those names it is? The ways names were spelled then were not necessarily how we would spell them today. “Far more” does contain the letters O,F,E and R, which would—used as a partial anagram—complete the name “Christofer,” and this was certainly a spelling used at the time.

This leaves the letters A, R and M, however, which means that, whether in this order or not, the person may have a surname starting with these three letters. As far as it has been possible to discover, the only “Christofer” to whom this could apply is Christopher Marlowe. Neither the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* nor the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* offers any alternative, either among the entries or in the full text.

This will only be right, of course, if the last bit, “then cost”, can provide the last syllable of Marlowe’s name, which—given their variable spelling—could be “len,” “ley,” “lin,” “loe” or “low(e),” all of which had been used for his name at times. A “lay” (or “ley”) according to the *OED* (n⁷ 4) was “an impost, assessment, rate, tax,” which—as anybody who pays one will confirm—is certainly a cost. The word “then” must therefore be a conjunction indicating that this is the last part of the clue, rather than meaning “than,” as it is usually—and by no means incorrectly—interpreted.

In the absence of any better suggestion, therefore, the answer must be “Christofer Marley,” which happens to be exactly how Christopher Marlowe signed his own name, and how the Privy Council minutes referred to him 10 days before his disappearance at Deptford.

This “sudden and fearful end” was nearly 23 years earlier, however, so what is going on? The next rebus, “Sieh all”, apparently tells us. In this case the word “rebus” is used in the more usual sense, also around at that time, in which describing what is actually seen gives the answer.³ The letters of “HE IS” in reverse order—or “returned,” as they would have put it at the time (*OED* II 8.b)—are “SIEH”. So “Sieh” tells us “He is returned”. With “Sieh,” however, is the word “all”. He is returned with “all”—“withal,” meaning (*OED* A.1) “in addition; besides; moreover”. In other words, he is commemorated in the monument and, moreover, has returned—may even be still alive?

So the result is now:

Stay Passenger, why goest thou by so fast?
Make out, if thou canst, whom envious Death hath placed
with, in this monument, Shakspeare—with whom
living Nature died. Christofer Marley:
he is returned moreover. That HE hath writ
leaves Art alive, without a page to serve (up) his wit.

One may well argue about what this actually means, but it is not too hard to see a meaning fully in line with Marlovian beliefs. Art (Christopher Marlowe) is still alive, but is commemorated in the monument too, whilst Nature (William Shakespeare)—formerly the “living” face of the author—is now dead. So Marlowe is now without anyone to dish up his “wit” for him.

At this stage, and despite the extremely low probability of being able to find by chance anything as complete as this, or as relevant to the circumstances in which it is found, many still claim that they are not convinced, that it is still too improbable to be true, that it must all be just a coincidence, or that it is simply the result of some Marlovian seeing what he wants to see in it. Some—less justifiably—reject it simply because they do not like what it seems to be saying. This is why two stages must be completed before one can be confident that any apparently hidden message is genuine. The first is to make sure that the message does actually say something meaningful, is as grammatical as might be expected in the circumstances, and has been arrived at fairly. It is reasonable to claim that these criteria have been met.

The second is to show that the alleged message cannot have happened just by chance. For such an obviously expensive project, the number of features of the inscription and grave which are rather strange or unusual is quite exceptional. By the normal law of averages, one would expect some of them to be either necessary to the finding of the riddle or to the supporting of it in some other way, and the rest to play no particular part in it. Yet examination of each of them shows that every single one of them supports it.

Let us look at them more carefully. Together with the list of all the anomalies I have been able to identify, I give the following in each case:

- a) why I claim that its inclusion in a list of such anomalies is justified, and
- b) why I think it supports the riddle in some way.

By “anomalies” I mean all of those things which—if they bothered to think about it, which hardly anybody would—the more literate people at the time might have thought just a bit odd, unusual, unexpected or wrong about the poems on the monument and grave. By “supports the riddle,” I mean helping its solution, concealment, or survival in some way.

1. “Read if thou canst,” in the second line, suggests that someone who has already got as far as this in the epigraph might not be able to read it.

- a) My original discovery of the riddle arose from a newsgroup discussion of the poem’s meaning in which it was generally agreed that this really wasn’t logical, and none of us could find any precedent for it.⁴

- b) The words “read if thou canst...whom” are, of course, the ones that tell you that there is a hidden name to be found, and challenge you to find it.

2. The one word “read” appears to be used both intransitively (if thou canst read) and transitively (if thou canst read whom).

- a) The grammatical meaning of the words actually suggests that any difficulty will be had in reading “whom” rather than anything else, which makes very little sense in the context of the poem’s overt meaning.

- b) The fact that some difficulty will be experienced in finding “whom” is obvious once one sees that the name is hidden in the form of a rebus.

3. Splitting the word “within” into two words.

- a) By the time the monument was erected this was very unusual. In a large sample of contemporary writing,⁵ only 3 such cases were found in 531 uses of the word. Even if it happened to be slightly more common in epitaphs—which there is no reason to believe—most literate people would have been more familiar with the printed word.

- b) The two words “with” and “in” being interpreted separately is essential for the hidden meaning to be found.

4. The word “Sieh” —an apparent mis-spelling of “sith” —in “Sieh all that hath writt”.

- a) There is no such word, so everyone assumes that this must be a mistake.

- b) As a rebus, it provides the highly appropriate comment on the hidden name: “he is returned” (i.e. Marlowe, thought to be dead for over a quarter of a century, is returned from the grave).

5. Saying that Shakespeare had been placed “within” the monument.

- a) This was described by Samuel Schoenbaum as a “more serious blunder” than the “Sieh”.⁶
 - b) The splitting of “within” into two words allows the meaning to be understood as “commemorated in” or “inscribed in”, for which the word “within” would be wrong in either case.
6. The use of the word “tomb” for the monument.
- a) The *OED* provides no example of the word “tomb” having ever been used to describe a wall-mounted monument—not even this one. Other than things mounted immediately on top of a grave, the word seems to have required at least the ability to hold a dead body, which is certainly not the case here.
 - b) This meaning is essential in pointing out that it is actually the grave which is “decked” by a name, rather than the monument itself.
7. The lack of any punctuation before “Shakspeare” in “with in this monument Shakspeare”.
- a) Clearly some pause is needed between the instruction that one is to read whom Death has placed within the monument and the revelation of just who that person is.
 - b) Leaving the words “with in this monument Shakspeare” strangely “unpointed” in this way encourages one to punctuate any part of it, as is required by the riddle’s “with, in this monument, Shakspeare”. (c.f. Marlowe’s *Edward II*, Scene 23, lines 6-16)
8. The colon (rather than a comma) before “sith” —which it is generally supposed to mean.
- a) The word “sith” would be a subordinating conjunction, one in which the main clause to which it is subordinate actually precedes it. In such a case, anything more than a comma is (and was) quite inappropriate.
 - b) The colon here gives a clear indication where the first rebus ends and the second begins.
9. The comma between “more” and “then” in “Far more, then cost”.
- a) Having a comma between these words did occur sometimes, but not usually. In the First Folio, for example, not having a comma outnumbered having one by about 20 to 1. The point is that the much less familiar use was chosen this time.
 - b) The comma here is very important in showing that “far more” and “then cost” are separate parts of the clue to the name.
10. The comma between “all” and “that” in “Sieh all, that He hath writt”.
- a) Exactly the same as for “more then” above, including the frequency of use.

b) Some punctuation is essential here to enable the word “that” to be interpreted as “the fact that...”. A full stop would have been better, but that would have totally wrecked the overt meaning.

11. The ambiguous, even cryptic, nature of the last line “Leaves living art, but page, to serve his witt”.

a) Saying what this actually means is something that nearly every biographer has shied away from. Wells gave what he called “The only sense I can make out of the last bit...”.

b) This allows several meanings to be found without too much effort, including the one that best fits what the riddle appears to be telling us.

12. The apparent mismatch between the quality of the inscription's workmanship and that of the rest of the monument.

a) The inscription gives the impression of having been done locally, even though the quality of the rest of the monument is as high as one might expect from a London-based stone-mason.

b) The somewhat rough and ready quality of the lettering means that casual readers are less likely to notice—or, if they do, to be surprised by—many of the anomalous features mentioned above.

13. Shakespeare's gravestone having not even his name upon it.

a) This is, of course, usually reserved for graves where the name of the occupant is unknown, but there is no suggestion that this is the case here.

b) The fact that the only name on the grave is “Jesus” is essential to discovering what the name hidden there actually is.

14. The grave's extraordinary curse.

a) According to *Britannica* “Many Roman epitaphs included a denunciation on any who should violate the sepulchre,” but I have been unable to find any example from the 17th century other than this one. The finding of another example would, of course, hardly stop it being decidedly unusual anyway.

b) The survival of the words on the gravestone is absolutely essential if the riddle itself is to survive. This is one—apparently effective—way of ensuring that “these stones” were spared, together with the writing on them.

Each of these anomalies helps the riddle to work, either with regard to its apparent meaning, its overall solution (and the concealing of it), or its survival. In other words, they represent the compromise the author had to make to cover and protect both the overt and the covert meanings. The odds against every single anomaly both helping the riddle **and** having happened accidentally are huge, and are alone enough to demonstrate that the riddle did not happen by chance.

Something else quite extraordinary has been noticed, however. Each of the six words shown above as needing a different interpretation is flagged by having a “wrong-sized” initial capital letter. The odds against this alone happening accidentally are over 20 million to one, and it must therefore have been done as some sort of clue to be given to selected people to help them solve it.

Although we have already seen how the meaning changes in each case, we can look at why the size of the initial capital can be said to be anomalous.

15-17. The smaller capital letters used for the words “read,” “with” and “quick”.

Although it was not an invariable rule, the first word of a line of verse usually started with an initial capital, fewer than one or two lines in a thousand being exceptions at that time. And when exceptions did occur, they usually did so in some sort of pattern, which is not the case here.

18. The larger capital letter used for the word “Tombe”.

It was quite common for nouns to be given initial capitals, but only certain types of noun. The sample of contemporary literature produced 22 examples of “tomb” and 46 of “monument” only one in each case with an initial capital. More importantly, however, one would have expected the “tomb” in this case to match whatever had been done for the preceding word “monument,” and that had a smaller initial capital.

19. The larger capital letter used for the word “Sieh” in “Sieh all, that He hath writt”.

In the same sample used above, the word “sith” and its equivalents “sithence” and “since” appeared 420 times. Excluding those where the word began a line of verse, there was no case of there being initial capital when it was used in the way suggested here.

20. The larger capital letter used for the word “He” in “Sieh all, that He hath writt”.

Again in the same sample, the word “he” appeared 6211 times, of which 948 had an initial capital. 934 of these started a line of verse, leaving 14, and 9 of these follow a full stop. The 5 others all came from the one poem.

Every one of the anomalies identified so far helps the riddle in some way, something which is so unlikely to have happened just by chance as to be reasonably deemed impossible. We can therefore be sure that the possibility of such a meaning being found by anyone, regardless of their views on the authorship of Shakespeare's works, comes from something other than random factors, and it is beyond reasonable doubt that the designer of the epigraph intended to say that Christopher Marlowe was commemorated in it too. The question of what he actually meant by this, or whether he was in any position to know what he was talking about, may still be open to discussion, but the fact that he not only said so but said so intentionally has to be irrefutable.

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Notes

¹ This article is an amalgam of extracts from various articles and posts I have made on this subject over the years, and represents my latest thinking on the subject, as at 7 October 2009.

² Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for all Time* (2002) pp.45-8.

³ Mark Bryant, *Dictionary of Riddles* (1994), Cassel, p.40. The simplest example is probably ‘IOU’.

⁴ The only earlier example concerned an epitaph in Latin, which the reader may well have been unable to understand. The only other, by Ben Jonson—suspected by many of having penned the monument verse anyway—was written several years later.

⁵ Nearly 57,000 lines from the works of Henry Constable, Samuel Daniel, Thomas Heywood, Christopher Marlowe, William Percy, William Shakespeare, Philip Sidney, Rachel Speght and Edmund Spenser which were available online to the general public in 2001.

⁶ Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (1977), p.310