

A 'New' Oxford Poem: Verses Upon the Stanley Tomb at Tong in Shropshire Epitaph to Sir Thomas Stanley (d. 1576)

By Richard Malim

The following verses are in Tong Church in Shropshire at the ends of a tomb there. They are believed to be one epitaph poem and were recorded by Sir William Dugdale in *English Baronage* 1664: "Thomas Stanley, Knight, second son of Edward [the fourth] Earl of Derby, etc. These following verses were made by William Shakespeare, the late famous tragedian." The epitaph reads as follows:

East End of Tomb

*Ask who lies here, but do not weep.
He is not dead; he doth but sleep.
This stony register is for his bones;
His fame is more perpetual than these stones,
And his own goodness, with himself being gone,
Shall live when earthly monument is none.*

West End of Tomb

*Not monumental stone preserves our fame,
Nor sky-aspiring pyramids our name*.
The memory of him for whom this stands
Shall outlive marble and defacer's hands.
When all to time's consumption be given,
Stanley for whom this stands shall stand in heaven.*

While Chambers principally on dating grounds dismisses the Shakespeare attribution, Wells and Taylor include the poem in *The Complete Works* (Oxford U.P. 1988 p.783) and in *William Shakespeare – A Textual Companion* (Norton 1997 p.457) write: “Stylistically, there is no reason to deny Shakespeare’s authorship of these verses: his early connections with the Stanley family are demonstrable...” Actually there are no known connections between the Stanley family and William Shakspeare of Stratford Upon Avon, but plenty with Oxford whose daughter married William Stanley, the sixth Earl of Derby and nephew to Sir Thomas Stanley, for whom the verses were written.

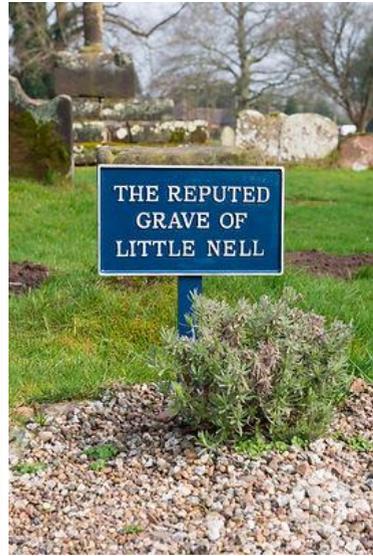
However the ‘orthodox’ case has a bad problem with the dating of the poem. In the first place Sir Thomas died in 1576: with Shakspeare twelve years old it is thus impossible for him to have been the writer. Honigmann (*Shakespeare’s ‘The Lost Years’* Manchester U.P. 1998 p.77) suggests that the verses were for Sir Thomas’ son Sir Edward also buried in the Church as the custom apparently was for rich men to order up their epitaphs during their lifetimes. However Sir Edward did not die until 1632, and it seems desperately unlikely that Sir Edward had the verses written over sixteen years before his death by Shakspeare. Honigmann and Chambers however pin their hopes on this interpretation. Forlornly Burrow the editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (2008) suggests that the verses might have been addressed to Sir Thomas’ younger brother Sir Edward who died in 1609.

Oxfordians have no such problems: Oxford aged 26 had just returned from Italy in the year of Sir Thomas’ death and would have been available to write the epitaph then. Extreme speculation is unnecessary.

There is one further wrinkle: in 1615, Sir William Gostwick one of James I’s new baronets died. There was erected in the middle of the Church at Willington, Bedfordshire a tomb with the same first six verses as the Tong Stanley tomb upon it – I suggest, a direct crib form that tomb which proves that the original full epitaph had been in existence before that 1615 date. (Burke: *The Extinct Baronetage of England, Scotland and Ireland* 1841 p.223)

Note that Dugdale made a much less direct (or confident) reference to Shakespeare is found in the Stratford Upon Avon section (Shakspeare’s monument in the Church) of his manuscript notes for *Antiquities of Warwickshire* 1656 (Vol VII p.10): “one of the famous poets of these later times”.

* Milton on Shakespeare rings a bell : “his hallowed relics should be hid / Under a star y-pointing pyramid”- Epitaph 1632



St Bartholomew's Church, Tong, Shropshire

Tong and an enduring Literary Fraud

Robert Jeffrey in *Discovering Tong* (2007) shows how a literary creation could become a valuable source of income for an enterprising local. Charles Dickens visited his grandmother who was a housekeeper at Tong Castle. Later Dickens used the village as the basis of description of Little Nell's final days in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The serialization of the book in 1840 to 1841 generated huge interest, especially her death scene. It was so popular that New York readers stormed the wharf when the ship bearing the final instalment arrived in 1841. After it was realised that Dickens had used the village at Tong as the basis for his description, visitors from both sides of the Atlantic, came in search of final resting place of a fictional character!

To cater for these literary tourists, George Boden (the parish clerk), much to the annoyance of John Auden (the vicar), forged an entry in the parish register and set up a gravestone in the cemetery. Today (as of 10 March 2016- *ed.*) a plaque marks 'The reputed grave of Little Nell'. Other mementoes were sold to the eager visitors.

Can any readers of the DVS newsletter think of a similar grubby fabrication, perhaps in the claimed identification of a famous writer's birthplace, to satisfy gullible literary tourists in the nineteenth century?