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AN UNREPORTED CHAUCER EPITAPH IN ENGLISH

Though once graven in stone, the inscriptions associated with Chaucer's tomb at Westminster have been the subject of some dispute. In 1556, Chaucer's remains were moved from their former resting place inside the abbey church to his tomb's current location on the east wall of the south transept.¹ In the process, a new epitaph by Nicholas Brigham, at whose charges the translation was carried out, replaced the original epitaph. This original text, if we are to believe Caxton, who printed them in his 1478 edition of Chaucer's *Boece*, had been written by Stephano Surigone and could be found hanging on a tablet beside the tomb. The story of the epitaph is further compounded by early reports of a third commemorative text, which Chaucer editor Thomas Speght describes as verses located 'about the ledge' of the tomb.² These verses do not refer to Chaucer and may have been inscribed into the monument before the poet was moved there in 1556. All three of these texts—the original Surigone epitaph, Brigham's later epitaph, and the verses 'about the ledge'—circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period in which the tomb had already acquired a certain cultural and historical status.³

While the text on Chaucer's tomb became less legible with time, this trio of texts accumulated a number of variant readings. Early printed versions of some or all of these texts include those in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1570), Thomas Speght's Chaucer editions (1598, 1602), and William Camden's *Reges* (1600). More recently, research on early printed Chaucer editions has uncovered additional variants and recombinations of the three texts written into surviving copies by early modern and later readers. As this prior work by Dane and Gillespie, Wiggins, Sanders, and Johnston has suggested, Chaucer's epitaph was

¹ Derek Pearsall, 'Chaucer's Tomb: The Politics of Reburial', *MAE*, lxiv (1995), 51–73.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly Printed* (London, 1602 [STC 5080]), sig. c.i.v.

³ Debts, for example, were paid at the tomb in the period. See Thomas A. Prendergast, *Chaucer's Dead Body: From Corpse to Corpus* (New York, 2004), 1–3.

transmitted in manuscript notes and commonplace books as well as in print.⁴ In addition to these variations on the original trio of texts, Johnston describes the appearance in early printed Chaucer editions of other ‘memorial inscriptions that may or may not include the Latin epitaph’—lines from John Skelton’s *Philip Sparrow*, William Camden’s *Britannia*, from Tiberius, Horace, Virgil, and Cicero, from Dryden’s *Fables*, and untraced English poetic verses in praise of Chaucer and of his purported birthplace in Woodstock, Oxfordshire.⁵

This note reports on the existence of another brief text to be considered in the body of epitaphic verses on Chaucer. This text has been copied by a contemporary hand into Durham, Palace Green Library, Bamburgh Select.8, a copy of the c. 1550 Thynne edition of Chaucer’s *Workes*, in a blank space between Lydgate’s *Floure of Curtesy* and Chaucer’s *Pity*.⁶ Like Johnston’s untraced English verses, the poem features some of the commonplaces associated with the poet in the period.⁷ In its presentation of *English* verses as ‘Chausers Epitaphe’, however, it is unique amongst all previously reported memorial verses on the poet.

Chausers Epitaphe

The Prince of poyetes who,
in vearse did late excell.
Renounned Chauser here doth lye,
the Muses loued him well.
Apollo taught him all his skill,
his corse lyes here in graue.
His fame for aye ye erth retaines,
His soule the heauens haue.

⁴ Joseph A. Dane, ‘Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?: Prolegomena’. *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lvii (1994), 112; Joseph A. Dane and Alexandra Gillespie, ‘Back at Chaucer’s Tomb--Inscriptions in Two Early Copies of Chaucer’s *Workes*’. *Studies in Bibliography*, lii (1999), 95-6; Alison Wiggins, ‘What Did Renaissance Readers Write in Their Printed Copies of Chaucer?’, *The Library*, ix (2008), 20; Hope Johnston, ‘Readers’ Memorials in Early Editions of Chaucer’. *Studies in Bibliography*, lix (2015), 50.

⁵ Johnston, ‘Readers’ Memorials’, 57.

⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The workes of Geffray Chaucer: newly printed* (London, c. 1550 [STC 5071], sig. 3B.i, recto.

⁷ Johnston, ‘Readers’ Memorials’, 46-56.

W. Hall.

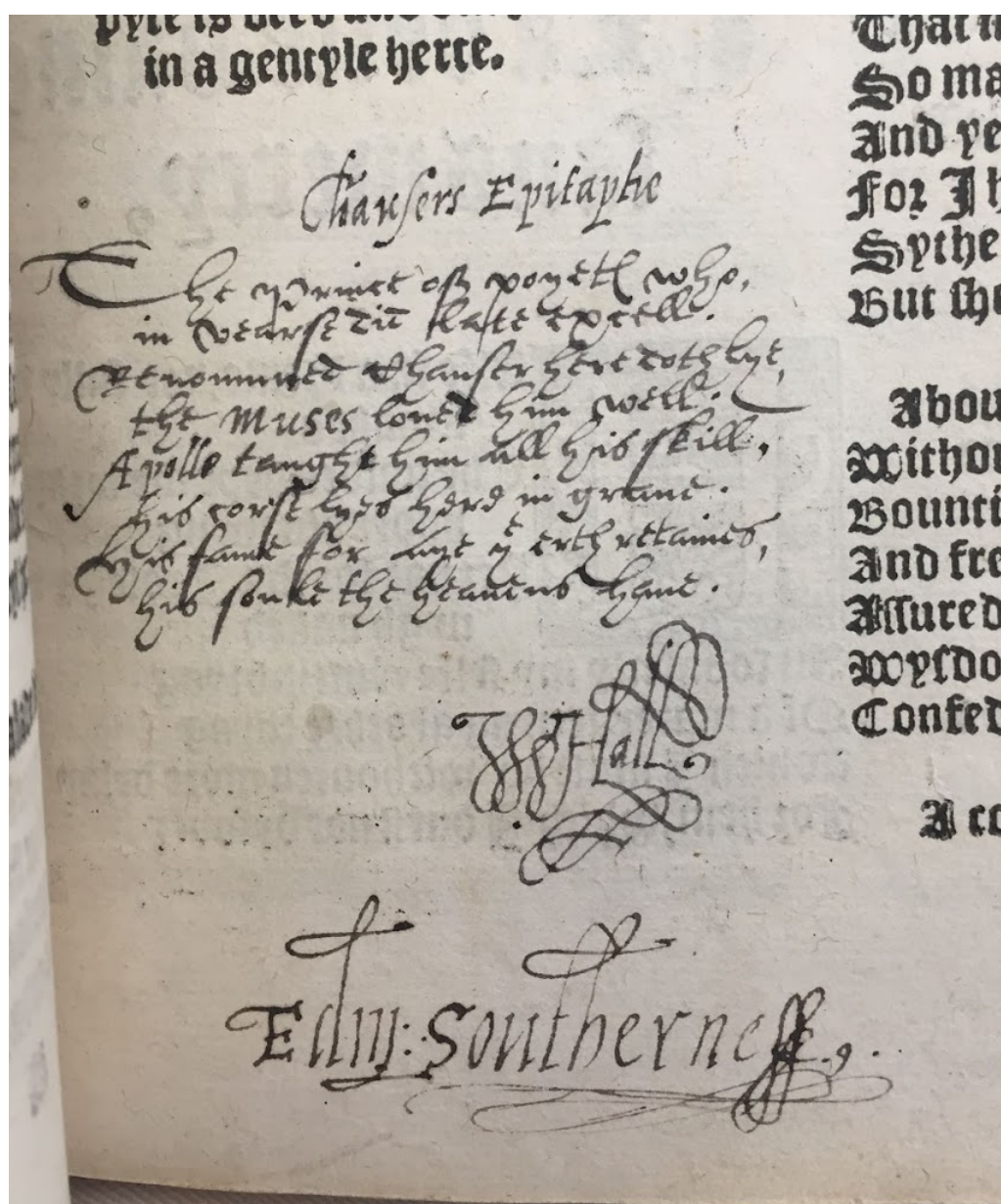


Figure 1: Durham, Palace Green Library, Bamburgh Select.8, Thynne's edition of Chaucer's *Workes* (c. 1550), sig. 3B.i, recto. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of Lord Crewe's Charity and of Durham University Library and Collections.

Underneath the elaborately flourished signature of the unknown 'W. Hall.', and closer to the bottom of the page, is another proper name, 'Edm. Southerne', also ornately written in what appears to be the same hand. The first two lines are written in iambic trimeter while the remaining eight lines alternate iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. This metrical

arrangement, together with the rhyme scheme that follows the *abcb defe* pattern, was associated with ballads in Elizabethan England.⁸

While encomiastic poems on Chaucer are relatively common in the sixteenth century, the lines in *Bamburgh Select*.8 are the only such English verses to claim the status of an epitaph.⁹ The verses are all the more atypical in light of the evidence amassed in the studies by Dane and Gillespie, Wiggins, Sanders, and Johnston, all of which present *Latin* texts that circulated as Chaucerian epitaphs in print and in manuscript. Although there is a great degree of variance amongst them, all of the Chaucer epitaphs previously reported belong to the broad textual tradition of the trio of texts previously described.

To designate a text as an ‘epitaph’ in the early modern period could be a rhetorical or figurative statement, as well as a literal one: not only a claim anchored to a particular *locus*, but an unmoored text that itself ‘becomes a literary curiosity in circulation’.¹⁰ The verses in *Bamburgh Select*.8 are not, and perhaps never were, physically proximate to Chaucer’s ‘corse’ (line 6), yet their insistence upon the deictic ‘here’ (lines 3, 6) is a hallmark of the epitaphic genre. In this way, the poet’s body ‘here’ is counterpoised by his mythic and celestial activities elsewhere—with the Muses, Apollo, and in ‘the heauens’ (line 8). Like the fixity invoked by

⁸ On ballad metre, see Diane Dugaw, ‘Ballad Meter, Hymn Meter’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 2012), 119–20. On its status as ‘the most common of verse forms’, see Neil Rhodes, *Common: The Development of Literary Culture in Sixteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2018), 175–6; for its association with Englishness, see Lucy Munro, *Archaic Style in English Literature, 1590–1674* (Cambridge, 2013), 109–37.

⁹ The elegiac verses on Chaucer that John Lydgate had written in his *Fall of Princes* would subsequently be labelled an ‘ancient Epitaph’ in Sir John Mennes’ *Recreation for Ingenious Head-peece* (London, 1650 [Wing M1714]), sig. O.iv. The verses had appeared in Speght’s editions and were widely known to be by Lydgate. In Mennes’ collection, they function as ‘an’ epitaphic poem rather than a literal epitaph believed to be from Chaucer’s tomb.

¹⁰ Paul Anthony Vita, ‘The Epitaph in Victorian England’, Ph.D. Columbia University (1998), 65, qtd. in Scott Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs Beyond the Tomb* (New York, 2008), 56. On the generic slipperiness of the early modern epitaph, see Newstok, *Quoting Death*, 33–58.

‘here’, the epitaphic conceit of the dead having been split into multiple parts is particular to the form.¹¹ The text titled ‘Chausers Epitaph’ in *Bamburgh Select*.8 thus differs in several respects from other memorial verses on Chaucer. Chief among these are its emphasis on the deictic ‘here’ and its conceit of the division of the dead, both prevailing epitaphic tropes. This new English text confirms Chaucer’s attractiveness as an object of memorialization in the period. Moreover, the existence of verses that could purport to be a Chaucer epitaph around the late sixteenth century, when the Latin verses on the new tomb were still legible enough, reveals the pervasiveness of the mythos that developed around Chaucer the man and his works in the early modern period.

It now remains to shed some light on the signature beneath the verses—‘Edm. Southerne’. This might well be the ‘Edmund Southerne Gent.’ who is identified as the author of *A treatise concerning the right vse and ordering of bees* (1593).¹² The motto ‘Better late than neuer’ also appears printed below his name on that book’s title page (sig. A.i). A clue that the annotator of *Bamburgh Select*.8 may be the same man who authored a beekeeping manual is provided by the dedicatory epistle to Southerne’s treatise. Enjoining his dedicatee, Margaret Astley, to protect the work from detractors, he hopes, ‘*that you will, in my behalfe, against such barking curs, remember, (this saying of Chaucer) Let them speake what they will, but trust well this: a wicked tongue will euer say amisse* (sig. A.ii).’ The lines are not Chaucer’s, in fact, but from the lyric poem ‘Wicked Tongue’, now generally attributed to John Lydgate. Stow’s edition of 1561 attributed ‘Wicked Tongue’ to Lydgate: ‘A balade of good counseile translated out of Latin verses in to Englishe, by dan Ihon lidgat cleped the monke of Buri.’¹³ But the attribution

¹¹ Newstok, *Quoting Death*, 50-1.

¹² STC 22942.

¹³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The workes of Geffrey Chaucer, newlie printed, with diuers addicions, whiche were neuer in print before* (London, 1561 [STC 5075]), sig. 3P.i.

is more muddled in Thynne's editions, where the poem has no title and is followed by an explicit that appears to assign the poem to Chaucer:

Et sic est finis.

Thus endeth the workes of
Geffray Chaucer.¹⁴

Southerne's attribution of the proverbial saying to Chaucer rather than to Lydgate suggests that he was quoting from one of Thynne's editions, rather than the later volume edited by Stow. That Bamburg Select.8 is a copy of the c. 1550 Thynne edition provides reasonable evidence that the 'Edm. Southerne' who signed his name and inscribed 'Chausers Epitaphe' in that copy was the beekeeping enthusiast of the same name.

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¹⁴ Chaucer (c. 1550), sig. 3Q.v^v.