

Benjamin Stone, Dead Poet (c. 1612)

In the previous issue we encountered Richard Zouche (1590-1661), a seventeenth-century New College lawyer and poet, who was to become in his maturity the most significant civil lawyer of his day. We met him as the writer of 'Upon the Burning of a School', a well-written skit in the *bellum grammaticale* or 'grammar-wars' tradition. Zouche did not write (or at least circulate) many poems, but he did venture into print in 1613 with *The Dove, or Passages of Cosmography by Richard Zouche Civillian, of New Colledge in Oxford*, a descriptive poem on world geography based on the classical precedent of Dionysius Periegetes. This little octavo is nonetheless something of a literary statement, for Zouche not only identified himself and his college in his title, but also obtained liminary verse for this maiden publication from his friends Thomas Lake, John Harris, Richard Yong, Nicholas Stoughton, and Charles Herbert. Most of these men were New College fellows, and significant ones too: Thomas Lake was son of Sir Thomas Lake, royal secretary, and nephew to his brother Arthur Lake, the Warden of the college; Harris was destined to become the Regius Professor of Greek, Warden of Winchester, and the biographer of Warden Lake himself; and Herbert was related to the prominent literary family of that name. The whole production Zouche dedicated to his powerful cousin, Edward, Lord Zouche, Warden of the Cinque Ports, and his future patron. It was probably about this time, too, that Zouche wrote a rather wonderful but now almost completely forgotten play, *The Sophister*, an allegorical romp featuring personifications from logic (characters include 'Fallacy', 'Ambiguity', 'Definition', 'Division', 'Opposition' and the like). So just as his poem celebrates the combustion of grammar, so his play enjoys warfare in logic.

Zouche is relatively rare among New College poets of the early-modern period in managing to rise above the epigram or the occasional poem. Indeed, Wykehamists were so devoted to occasional poetry that it may well be that the comparative lack of poetic quality in the college was precisely a consequence of such workaday quantity, as young fellows relaxed too easily into the shallow pond of the epigram, and never took courage to brave deeper waters.

And so it is that the rest of Zouche's literary output, too, is occasional in nature. Nevertheless, several of his poems appear commonly enough in the collections of the time such that Zouche may be said to have achieved minor eminence as an Oxford poet. One poem that I keep encountering is an epitaph on a fellow collegian, one Benjamin Stone, who appears to have died suddenly in college while still a comparatively young man. This Stone was from Chardstock in Dorset, and matriculated (as a 'plebeian') at New College in 1607, when he was already 20, which was rather old by contemporary undergraduate standards. (As the number of fellows was restricted to seventy, he took up the place vacated by Richard Haydocke, the 'Sleeping Preacher' whom we have encountered in these notes before.) Stone duly received his B.A. at the end of his fourth academic year, on 2 May 1609, but he seems to have died very shortly thereafter; Sewell says in 1612.¹

This might seem rather sad, and perhaps it was. Nevertheless, the poetic norms of the time, at least for the academic scribblers circulating epigrams, favoured black humour in the face of what was after all was a common distress, and distressingly common: premature death in the colleges. The dominant device of academic literary wit was the pun, and such wit was often clunkingly unsubtle. When, for instance, a young fellow of Christ Church who rejoiced in the surname 'Prick' died prematurely, we can readily guess how his passing was marked by the local poetasters. Stone was no different, but what is of note is that Stone was himself a

¹ Information from Warden Sewell's Register in the college archives; Foster in the *Alumni Oxonienses* gives slightly different figures.

poet of sorts, and one whose death seems to have prompted a brief fad for epigrams on his demise. One poetic miscellany in the Bodleian – MS Malone 19; we have also encountered this (probably New College) manuscript before – records several of the poems by and on Stone, including one by Zouche. This text is significant, because it is only here that the epitaph is explicitly credited to Zouche, despite the fact that the poem itself seems to have been fairly common. Here is Zouche’s tribute to his dead comrade (I have modernised spelling and punctuation):

To the memory of Ben. Stone. N. Coll.

Here, worthy of a better chest,
A precious stone enclosed doth rest,
Whom nature had so rarely wrought,
That Pallas it admired, and thought
No greater riches, than to wear
Still such a jewel at her ear.
But sickness did it from her wring,
And placed it in Libitna’s ring.
Thence hanging nature’s work anew
Death’s pale image on it drew.
Pity that pain had not been saved
This stone to good to be engraved. R. Zouch.

It must be said that, to Zouche’s credit, the conceit of stony Stone in this poem rises above mere pun. First, Stone’s grave is contemplated, but under the paradox that a ‘chest’ (reminiscent of a fleshly chest or breast) here encloses a stone, rather than the other way around. The stone, or jewel, was prized by Pallas, that is Athene, goddess of wisdom, but then removed from her ear to the finger-ring of Libitina, goddess of funerals. The jewel next becomes a pendant, with sickness now ‘hanging’ out Stone and carving on him a new image, that of Death. But Stone, the poem concludes, was once again paradoxically too good a stone to be engraved, in the double sense of ‘sculpted’ and also ‘put in a grave’. In the manner of his famous contemporary John Donne, Zouche lets his metaphor run and develop, but the result is confident, and, rather unusually for such poetry, does not collapse into intentional or unintentional comedy. Zouche is not interested in outlandish vocabulary or in irregular syntax, but his command of structure is sure. Poems of this genre and type are often called ‘lapidary’, but this is quite literally so of Zouche’s epitaph: it is about a *lapis* or stone.

This tight control over pun is also evident in Zouche’s epigram on the civil law, a short poem spoken in his play *The Sophister* by a character called ‘Invention’, possibly a symbol for (and a character acted by?) the playwright himself:

Our Civil Law doth seem a royal thing,
It hath more titles than the Spanish king,
But yet the Common Law quite puts it down,
In getting, like the Pope, so many a crown.

This is a clever little epigram, with a political sting, because the great argument at the time between the two major legal systems of England was whether the civil law or the common law was more accommodating to monarchical power.² Zouche suggests that although the

² For an excellent study, see Brian P. Levack, *The Civil Lawyers in England, 1603-1641* (Oxford: OUP, 1973).

civil law (his profession) has many titles (the pun is on the ‘titles’ or headings of Justinian’s *Institutes*, the standard textbook for Roman Law; and on aristocratic titles, notoriously heaped up by high-ranking Spaniards), it does not gain as many ‘crowns’ as the Common Law, in the double sense of crowns as cash, and as monarchs. The issue had become so sensitive that in the 1610 Parliament, James VI & I, a monarch otherwise keen to emphasise his absolute power, had thought it expedient to suppress a mere dictionary written by a civil lawyer which had enraged Parliament by seemingly allowing the king powers too absolute to be stomached by the commons.³ Zouche’s epigram proved popular and had a significant life of its own beyond Zouche’s (probably uncirculated) play. It was printed separately shortly after the play was published, and survives in many manuscript versions.⁴

Benjamin Stone prompted more poems, not as deft as that of Zouche. Next to Zouche’s poem in MS Malone 19, for instance, is a less accomplished, anonymous number:

On Ben. Stone his death.

I muse what sickness struck him dead,
Some think the impostume in his head,
Some this, some that, and some another,
But on my conscience t’was the mother,
But that’s a woman’s pain; the rather
I think he died of the father.

Mother and father joined in one
Caused the ruin of the son.

There may well be a reason why Stone was associated with dying of the ‘father’ (the ‘mother’ was a contemporary term for suffocation or hysteria), but if so it is no longer obvious, and the pun – if there is in fact any joke here beyond the re-sexing of the sickness to suit a male – is lost.

Stone may have provoked such poems because, as I noted, he was himself a poet. There survives a poem of his on the death of a Christ Church butler named Owen; and particularly popular, it seems, were his verses on the death of Samburne or Samborne, Sheriff of Oxford. Then there is a common poem variously titled as ‘In Ben: Stone’, ‘On Mr Stone’, ‘Upon himself’, ‘Epitaph’, ‘Epitaph on himself’, etc., and it would therefore seem that this poem was written not by but on Stone:

Lo, here I lie stretched out, both hands and feet,
My bed my grave, my shirt my winding sheet.
None need to carve a tombstone out for me,
A tombstone I unto myself will be.⁵

A genuine Stone poem is on the local Vale of White Horse, and although it is not top-notch stuff, it is an interesting piece of local colour, looking from within, but at least beyond, the

³ For a very brief summary of the affair, see the article on John Cowell in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁴ It appeared in *Wits Recreations* (London, 1640), sg. I4v, unattributed, then repeated in a further *Wits Recreations* (London, 1641), sg. H3v, and in *Recreation for ingenious head-peece* (London, 1645), sg. G7v. It also appears, with some variants, in at least six manuscript collections: e.g. Bodleian, MSS Don. d. 58, fol. 37v, Douce f. 5, fol. 16v, Tanner 465, fol. 96v; Folger, MS V.a.345, p. 25; Rosenbach Museum and Library, MS 239/27, p. 185; Yale, MS b. 200, p. 140 (information from the Folger Union First Line Index of English Poetry (<http://firstlines.folger.edu>)).

⁵ Text from MS Malone 19, p. 60, modernised.

university walls. It is written in a comic style, and one that, thankfully for the poet at least, is supposed to sound rather silly, with its mixed registers and comic rhymes. Once more, I modernise the text:⁶

Ben. Stone on the White Horse whence the Vale is named.

Mount, mount my muse, climb, climb, with all thy force
Upon the back of this renowned horse,
And let some poet, of no mean degree,
Come hold the stirrup to my poetry.
Struggle, ye knaves, that first shall tie the girts,⁷
Some sparkling dirt may light upon your skirts;
This were enough had any wit to know it
To make a roguish ostler turn a poet.
Tie fast my spur, and neatify⁸ my boot,
For why? My muse doth scorn to go on foot.
What though I fall? 'Tis fortunate to venture,
I know I cannot fall below the centre,
And if on earth there be no horse to fling us
Yet thither will our nature strive to bring us.⁹
O much admired palfrey, noble steed,¹⁰
Yea, let it run to thee, my life I give,
A man shall die to make a horse to live,
For all the country by the true relation
Gives thee a meritorious commendation.
What precious influence dost thou impart
To fructify the land wherein thou art?
That store of fruit which out of it is sent
Proceedeth only from thy excrement.
Then, O brave horse, what shall I think of thee
If thy hard reverence so precious be?
Such crops of corn are highly worth the reaping,
And such white horses well are worth the keeping.
For evermore be thou as highly graced
On that high hill, as thou art placed;
All passengers to thee beholding are,
In showing them which way they are to fare.
Thou showest the way, and wither they should go
Would God each country-numkin would do so.
We are directed better by thy sight
They any clownish lobkin keep out right.
No other horses though they go at will
Help us so much as thou, by standing still.
'Tis not for naught the country is constrained

⁶ MS Malone 19, pp. 59-60, modernised.

⁷ I.e. saddle-girths.

⁸ I.e. to make clean or neat; to put in good order; OED notes its currency from c. 1580-c.1680, so Stone did not coin this obsolete word.

⁹ Stone plays on the Aristotelian notion that all things seek the centre of the universe.

¹⁰ There is evidently a line missing after this verse in this copy.

To see thee neatly kept and well maintained.
 And honest Arnold will not take in snuff
 To be a rubber to thy filthy hoof.
 Were his wife Joan but half as white as thou
 He sure would give an ox, a horse, a cow.
 That hill's thy stable, and that dale beneath
 The manger into which thy nostrils breathe.
 Then tell me who (I ask but as a stranger)
 Can buy this horse, this stable, or his manger.

Stone's most popular poem, the one on Samburne the Sheriff, employs the same comic mode, but this time there is clearly a specific occasion in mind, when the students ate and drank the sheriff out of pocket at some public occasion:

Ben. Stone on Samburne, Sheriff of Oxford¹¹

Fie, scholars, fie! Have you such thirsty souls
 To swill, quaff, and carouse, in Samburne's bowls?
 Tell me, mad youngsters, what, do you believe
 It cost good Samburne nothing to be shreive?
 To spend so many beefs, so many wethers,
 Maintain so many caps, so many feathers?

Again, is malt so cheap, this pinching year
 That you should make such havoc of his beer?
 I hear you are so many that you make¹²
 Most of his men turn tapsters for your sake.
 And when that he even at the bench doth sit,
 You snatch the meat off from his borrowed spit.

You keep such hurly-burly that it passes
 Ingurgitating sometime whole half-glasses.
 And some of you forsooth are grown so fine
 Or else so hearty as to call for wine.
 As if the sheriff had put such men in trust,
 As durst to draw more wine than needs they must.

In faith, in faith, it is not well, my masters,
 Nor fit that you should be the sheriff's tasters.
 It were enough be ye such gourmandisers,
 To make the shreifs henceforth turn arrant misers,
 Or to remove the assize (to Oxon's foul disgrace)
 To Henley upon Thames, or some such worthy place.¹³

¹¹ I give the text more or less as it stands in Malone 19 (fol. 62r-v), but with the odd reading silently taken from MS Malone 21, or placed for comparison in a footnote.

¹² Malone 19 reads: 'I hear there are so many of you that you make', which is hypermetric; I substitute instead the better line from Malone 21.

¹³ Both lines here are hexameter; Malone 19 would prefer: 'Remove the 'size from Oxon (foul disgrace!) / To Henley on the Thames, or some such place.'

He never had complained had it but been
A pretty firkin, or a kilderkin.
But when a barrel is daily drunk out
My masters, then 'tis time to look about,¹⁴
 Is this a lie, trow ye? I tell you no,
 My Lord High Chancellor is informed so.

And, O, what, would not all the bread in town,
Suffice to drive the sheriff's liquor down?
That he in hampers it from home must bring?
O most prodigious, O most monstrous thing!
 Upon so many loaves of homemade bread,
 How long might he and his two men hath fed?

He would, no doubt, the poor should have been fed,
With the sweet morsels of his broken bread.
But when that they, poor souls, for bread did call,
Answer was made, the scholars ate up all.
 When they of broken beer did crave a cup,
 Answer was made, the scholars drank it up.

And this I know not how they change the name:
Cut did the deed, but Long-tail bears the blame.¹⁵
But sure our Oxon shreif is grown so wise
As to reprieve his beer, till next assize.
 Alas! 'twas not so strong, 'twas not so heady
 The jury sat, and found it dead already.¹⁶

It would seem too that Stone on Samburne was famous enough to prompt posthumous imitation, for the very next poem in Malone 19 is on Sir Francis Stonor, another sheriff of Oxfordshire, dated 1622, and it begins 'Stone, rise again, and leave out Samburne's sin / For Stonor's sake, & cast a stone at him.'¹⁷ Clearly the students had not quite tired of this most tiring of puns.

William Poole
Fellow Librarian

¹⁴ The order of this couplet is inverted, with some changes, in Malone 21.

¹⁵ At this point in Malone 21 the poem concludes, and the remaining lines as recorded here are headed as a fresh poem, 'On the same.'

¹⁶ MS Malone 19, pp. 62-3.

¹⁷ MS Malone 19, p. 63.