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Abstract

In early modern England, theatrical performance was charged with undermining sincerity, while epitaphic writing was praised as upholding it. Given that epitaphs and plays were perceived to occupy contrasting positions with respect to the contemporary discourse surrounding sincerity, it is striking how often epitaphs are invoked in the dramas of the period: the preeminently “sincere” genre within the preeminently “insincere” genre. I suggest that the epitaphic genre provided dramatists with an unexpected vehicle for exploring the limits of sincerity; the repeated convergence of the two genres provides a kind of mutual critique.

Keywords

epitaphs, drama, renaissance, England, sincerity

Donald Davie once contentiously claimed that sincerity, as a category of poetic evaluation, was irrelevant for “nearly all the poetry that we want to remember written in England between 1550 and 1780” (62).¹ Yet we ought to recall that the word ‘sincerity’ itself “enters the English language in the sixteenth century” (van Alphen and Bal 2). The early modern era’s problematic ideal of sincerity can be better appreciated by the semantic field to which it was *contrasted*. That is, sincerity was posed as the antithesis to hypocrisy, “flattering and fauning,” or “*deceitfull*” speech, as a 1649 sermon by Nicholas Lockyer asserts (5, 9).² The constitutive tension between sincerity and dissimulation is confirmed by a series of early modern dictionaries that gloss “sincere” as “without dissimulation,” or “no dissembler.”³ This antagonism even gets personified in Robert Wilson’s *The Three Ladies of London* (1584), in which Sincerity, when introduced to Dissimulation (upon Simplicity’s suggestion that he serve as a petitioner for him), responds vehemently: “Dissimulation, out vpon him, he shall be no spokeman for me” (1.543).

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The lexicon of feigning, disguise, and dissimulation was used to criticize both the stage and the court (and, often conflated with these two, women). Such criticism depends upon the dichotomy between internal feelings and external expression, a gap that can only be overcome by a rigorous alignment between both parts. Thus when discussing “*Simplicity*” (which “sounds the same with sincerity, and therefore coupled together here . . . as *Synonymas*, *contemini*, words of the same signification”), Lockyer holds that “this terme is opposed to double mindednesse . . . and signifies an unity and identity between the heart and tongue; what the tongue sayes, the heart really intends” (8, 7).

Nowhere was the disjunction between the heart (“the ultimate locus of interiority” [Mazzio 63]) and the tongue perceived to be presented in such an overt, even defiant manner as on the stage. Theatrical performance itself was taken to be the *exemplary* problem within a more general analysis of insincerity; the fact that critiques of courtiership and ecclesiastical rituals often reverted to the vocabulary of the theatre confirms its centrality within this debate. As Lionell Trilling posited, “it is surely no accident that the idea of sincerity, of the own self and the difficulty in knowing and showing it, should have arisen to vex men’s minds in the epoch that saw the sudden efflorescence of the theatre” (10). Plays of the period were themselves preoccupied with scenes that questioned the ability to discern sincerity in performance. The stage Machiavel became the “master figure” of Elizabethan drama, as Wyndam Lewis put it, and even “Shakespeare’s virtuous characters” frequently “exploited the false presentation of self” (cited in Trilling 13). There was an element of drama in the period that well nigh *invited* the charges of insincerity, in that it obsessively returned to this constitutive theme.⁴ It should not be surprising, then, that the “Puritan attack on the stage” (as well as “the Puritan attack on the liturgy”) “drew strength from the belief in a total sincerity” (Barish 95). This belief derives from a medieval ideal of “*concordia* (harmony or agreement). . . between self and one’s words and deeds,” a concept later developed by Calvin and Luther to make a connection between affections and speech (Martin 1329). And it is precisely this connection that is used to mount the challenge of insincerity against the stage, most succinctly stated by Stephen Gosson as a principle subverted by the theatre: “every man must show him selfe outwardly to be such as in deed he is. . . To declare our selves by wordes or by gestures to be otherwise than we are, is an act executed where it should not, therefore a *lye*” (emphasis added; 177). Henri Peyre has gone so far as to disallow the possibility that drama could even be *insincere*: “The question of sincerity is of course hardly relevant for a great deal of literature; it does not apply to the drama”—whereas English Renaissance “LYRICISM” has sincerity in all caps, as it were (17).

In a period in which “sincerity” is an emerging evaluative category, theatrical performance (indeed performance itself) is charged with undermining this category. Yet at the same historical moment, epitaphic writing is praised as the upholder of sincerity. In the English Renaissance, epitaphs are associated *with* sincerity, moreso than any other type of speech.⁵ While sincerity stands as a comparatively recent evaluative category for lyric poetry in general, it was nonetheless tied quite closely

to the epitaphic form in the Tudor and Stuart periods, to the extent that epitaphs are presumed to “manifest the *sinceritie* of our loues, in erecting monuments ouer them dead, which might preserue their memory, and confirme our affections in their deaths” (Brathwait sig. D5v.). The most frequent fault for which epitaphs are criticized is the tendency to excessive praise—in other words, something akin to hypocrisy and flattery, which (as already shown) were essentially the opposite of sincerity. The goal of sincerity even worked its way into compositional rules, as with the anonymous Elizabethan antiquary who required that epitaphs “must not be verse,” which was taken to be too affected, “but a kind of metricall prose, seeming so by the strange transposition of the words” (“Of the Antiquity” 238).⁶ This principle is at work in Matthew Prior’s epitaph “For my own Monument,” wherein he humbly notes that although “This Verse” was “little polish’d,” it was nonetheless “mighty *sincere*” (emphasis added; “For His Own Epitaph,” 1:410). True grief, in the words of Izak Walton praising an elegy by Sir Henry Wotton, was presumed to be “too hearty to be dissembled” (135).

Wordsworth would later translate, in effect, what he took to be the insincere effusions of poetic epitaphs (with especial disdain reserved for Pope) into more “sincere” prose, as well as praise Weever for doing the same in response to the Sidney epitaph from du Bellay.⁷ Indeed, in Wordsworth’s “Essays on Epitaphs,” “sincerity” comes to represent an overarching ideal that has been held by some scholars to be the guiding principle for much of his other writing (e.g. Perkins). At many points in the Essays, particularly the second, he invokes sincerity; the following paragraph serves as the fulcrum of the series, standing approximately in the center:

These suggestions may be further useful to establish a *criterion of sincerity*, by which a writer may be judged; and this is of high import. For, when a man is treating an interesting subject, or one which he ought not to treat at all unless he be interested, no faults have such a killing power as those which prove that he is not in earnest, that he is *acting a part*, has leisure for affectation, and feels that without it he could do nothing. This is one of the most odious of faults; because it shocks the moral sense, and is worse in a sepulchral inscription, precisely in the same degree as that mode of composition calls for *sincerity more urgently than any other*. And indeed where the internal evidence proves that the writer was moved, in other words where *this charm of sincerity lurks in the language of a tombstone and secretly pervades it*, there are no errors in style or manner for which it will not be, in some degree, a recompense; but without habits of reflection a test of this *inward simplicity* cannot be come at; and as I have said, I am now writing with a hope to assist the well-disposed to attain it. (emphases added; 108)

Even the examples that he selects revert to the rhetoric of sincerity, as in Gray’s “Epitaph on Mrs. Clark,” which describes the body of the deceased as being a home for “love sincere.” (The “Epitaph” in Gray’s “Elegy” also praises the

deceased as “sincere,” as do, for that matter, more than a half-dozen of Alexander Pope’s epitaphs.⁸) Wordsworth inaugurated with this essay not only a principle for himself but for subsequent poets and critics, the effects of which are still experienced today, both in affirmation and rejection.⁹ Yet even within his aria for epitaphic sincerity he manages to align insincerity with performance—“he is acting a part.”¹⁰ Wordsworth fully articulates a principle that was already nascent in the early modern period. Even the humorous inversion of epitaphic sincerity (e.g. the unending punning on “lies,” the tempting rhyme “laugh/epitaph,” the proverbial “he lies like an epitaph”)¹¹ depends upon the conventional association with an unfeigned utterance.

Here, then, are two genres considered to stand at roughly opposite ends of a continuum of perceived sincerity. Given that epitaphs and plays are perceived to occupy contrasting positions with respect to the contemporary discourse surrounding sincerity, it is striking how often epitaphs are invoked in the dramas of the period: the preeminently “sincere” genre within the preeminently “insincere” genre. There are over one hundred early modern plays in which a character reads, encounters, composes, imagines, or otherwise alludes to an epitaph on stage. This can range from mere reference to the word “epitaph,” to formulaic phrases (“here lies” and “*hic jacet*”), to full citation of funerary poetry. I suggest that the epitaphic genre provided dramatists with an unexpected vehicle for exploring the limits of sincerity; the repeated convergence of the two genres provides a kind of mutual critique.

Much Renaissance revenge tragedy can fairly be characterized as “An theater of mortality,” to borrow a phrase from the title of a 1704 epitaph collection (Monteith). The expectation might be that these epitaphic instances would serve as a turn to finality within a play, the closure at the end of the piece. Certainly this would appear to be the case in the final scene of Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1602x05), where Herod concludes his lengthy lamentation of Mariam’s murder with a proleptic vision of his own burial:

happy day
 When thou at once shalt die and find a grave;
 A stone upon the vault someone shall lay,
 Which monument shall an inscription have,
 And these shall be the words it shall contain:
 Here Herod lies, that hath his Mariam slain. (253–58)¹²

Herod then exits, and the remaining few lines are presented by the Chorus in a kind of epilogue. Yet this speech has more in common with the turn to a conclusive epitaph within an *elegy*, than it is representative of how epitaphs function within dramas. It is another version of the Herod and Mariam story, transposed by Philip Massinger across the Mediterranean to Milan, in there is an almost satirical apocope of this impulse to epitaphic closure:

to terms with the resolution that epitaphic conclusion demands. This reading suggests that we hear “here” throughout these dramas as echoing the epitaphic “here,” arising from a mutual anxiety that non-present bodies become fixed.

Fittingly, Hieronimo vows to defer Horatio’s burial (“I’ll not entomb them till I have revenged” [54]), and even presents his resolve as a kind of defiance of the proverbial resting in peace: “Therefore will I rest me in unrest” (3.13.29). If full epitaphic resolution were offered at the first sight of Horatio’s body (body identified, death explained, murderers forgiven) there would be no revenge plot. In an attempt to be sole “author and actor in this tragedy” (4.4.147), Hieronimo finally “Shows his dead son” after his revenge has been fulfilled. In this last scene he reverts to the basic “here lies” formula, where the demonstrative qualities of the epitaph overlap with the evidentiary statements of juridical speech:

See here my show, look on this spectacle.
 Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end;
 Here lay my heart, and here my heart was slain;
 Here lay my treasure, here my treasure lost;
 Here lay my bliss, and here my bliss bereft;
 But hope, heart, treasure, joy, and bliss,
 All fled, failed, died, yea, all decayed with this. (4.4.89–95)¹⁶

In effect, Hieronimo wants to *be* the epitaph for his son. This attempt to “end my play” and thus have the last word (“Urge no more words: I have no more to say”) is notoriously frustrated, as Hieronimo is prevented from hanging himself and forced “to inform the king of these events” once again; then he proceeds to bite out his tongue and finally stab the Duke and himself (150–51; 157). Revengers such as Hieronimo are as much failed epitaphographers as they are, in Sacks’s words, “elegists *manqués*.”

Indeed, what Sacks describes as the “static, emblematic” or “statuary quality” of a revenge tragedy such as *Titus Andronicus* (1594) more closely resembles the poetics of the epitaph than that of the elegy (65, 80). For instance, what he terms “Aaron’s programmatic reversal of any work of mourning” (399n12) (and thus a failed elegiac response) is none other than a perverse funeral inscription, of which Aaron boasts in a confession worthy of *The Jew of Malta*’s Ithamore:

Oft have I digg’d up dead men from their graves,
 And set them upright at their dear friends’ door
 Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,
 And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
 Have with my knife carvèd in Roman letters
 ‘Let not your sorrow die though I am dead.’ (5.1.135–40)

The conflation of identificatory text and corpse is sometimes envisioned in early modern drama as a way of letting the body speak without any mediation.

In *Cymbeline*, Belarius explicitly contrasts such self-expressive immediacy (“this story / The world may read in me. My body’s mark’d”) with the deception of the court, typified by “sland’rous epitaph”s (3.2.55–56, 52).¹⁷ The apparent self-evidence of this kind of corporeal epitaph is, however, undercut by Aaron’s intervention. Bodily inscriptions can be as cruelly manipulated as lapidary ones. As was the case throughout *The Spanish Tragedy*, the first scene in *Titus Andronicus*, notoriously difficult to stage, depicts successive attempts to come to terms with what exactly it means to have a body “here.”

In a speech reminiscent of Hieronimo’s final demonstration, Titus blesses two of his own sons, the most recent to be placed in the Andronicus family tomb:

In peace and honour rest you here, my sons,
 Rome’s readiest champions, repose you here in rest,
 Secure from worldly chances and mishaps.
 Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells,
 Here grow no damnèd drugs, here are no storms,
 No noise, but silence and eternal sleep.
 In peace and honour rest you here, my sons. (1.1.150–56)

Immediately following this somewhat repetitive ceremony, Lavinia picks up on the rhetoric of ‘rest’ing in ‘peace’ ‘here’ by proclaiming “In peace and honour live Lord Titus long” (157). But while tragic characters may “rest in peace,” they rarely *live* in it. Lavinia’s attempt to convert epitaphic language into epideictic speech falls short of its mark and proleptically sentences her father under the sign of death. Later in this same scene, Titus recasts his initial epitaphic attempt in a negative inversion, preventing the burial of his son Mutius, whom he murdered for refusing to let him pass:

Traitors, away, he rests not in this tomb.
 This monument five hundred years hath stood
 Which I have sumptuously re-edified.
 Here none but soldiers and Rome’s servitors
 Repose in fame, none basely slain in brawls.
 Bury him where you can; he comes not here. (346–51)

Eventually Titus concedes, albeit with the dark stipulation “bury him, and bury me the next” (383).

Thus between his first ceremonial interment and this second (offered by Lucius as a temporary stay: “There lie thy bones, sweet Mutius, with thy friends’, / Till we with trophies do adorn thy tomb” [384–85]) Titus is presented twice with statements anticipating his own end. While it is a critical commonplace to note that revenge tragedies are preoccupied with the need to create an adequate response to the deceased, it is rarely observed that one particular manner in which inadequacies are addressed is through epitaphs not presented in full sincerity. Titus is not dead,

yet he and his daughter both make epitaphic statements about him; Mutius is only reluctantly allowed into the Andronicus family tomb, with a makeshift, oral epitaph; and even the honorably deceased sons are buried with an epitaphic speech whose insistent redundancy conveys a sense of ill-completed closure.¹⁸

As Thomas Dekker expounds in the invocation to *Newes from Graues-end*, the “Tragick Maid” is one of “Funeralls, and Epitaphes” (sig. C3r). While this article has until now been eliciting the workings of this “Maid” through *allusions* to epitaphs in tragedies, they play an even more overt role in demonstrating performative insincerity in Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy* (1607x11). “Sincerity” itself is addressed on more general terms through the derision of a certain strain of supposed Puritan jargon embodied by Languebeau Snuff, Lord Belforest’s chaplain. Languebeau speaks sanctimoniously throughout the drama, yet the insistence on his “plainness and truth” (typical cognates for sincerity), declared four times within the space of sixty lines (1.2.144, 155–56, 160–61, 202), is coupled with his self-serving alliance with D’Amville and concomitant betrayal of his vows to Charlemont. After D’Amville’s bribe, Languebeau confesses the evanescence of his vows in an aside: “Charlemont! Thy gratuity and my promises were both but words, and both, like words, shall vanish into air” (1.2.209–11). Little surprise, then, that he subsequently counsels Castebella “in sincerity” that Charlemont’s love is “frivolous and vain” (1.4.41–42). Languebeau’s claims of sincerity (no one else even mentions the word in the play)¹⁹ are most deeply undercut in the last act, when he confesses that even his role as a chaplain has been acted: “I am no scholar, my lord. To speak the sincere truth I am Snuff the tallow chandler” (5.2.57–58).

Languebeau exits the stage following a somewhat comical trial (“Thus the Snuff is put out” [5.2.69]). D’Amville’s character, however, exhibits a more insidious form of insincerity in his willingness to frame, feign, or otherwise arrange the death of others. This begins with the false report of Charlemont’s death (given by his accomplice Borachio), continues with a scheme to kill his brother (and Charlemont’s father) Montferrers under the guise of an accident, and culminates in the funeral of both that constitutes the center of the play, the beginning of Act 3. The ceremony has been preceded and is accompanied by D’Amville’s performed mourning (“O might that fire revive the ashes of / This phoenix!” [3.1.35–36]), yet it focuses on the presentation of “their epitaphs” (13). There are two kinds of insincerity presented here: the first being merely false sentiment (in that D’Amville obviously cares not for his brother, having schemed his murder), the second *compounding* false sentiment with more overt deception (in that Charlemont still lives). Here D’Amville reads the tombs in a public act of deception:

There place their arms and here their epitaphs,
And may these lines survive the last of graves.

Reads the epitaph of Montferrers.

Here lie the ashes of that earth and fire

Whose heat and fruit did feed and warm the poor:
 And they (as if they would in sighs expire
 And into tears dissolve) his death deplore.
 He did that good freely; for goodness' sake,
 Unforced; for gen'rousness he held so dear

That he feared none but him that did him make
 And yet he served him more for love than fear.
 So's life provided that, though he did die
 A sudden death, yet died not suddenly.

Reads the epitaph of Charlemont.

His body lies interred within this mould,
 Who died a young man, yet departed old,
 And in all strength of youth that man can have,
 Was ready still to drop into his grave.
 For aged in virtue with a youthful eye
 He welcomed it, being still prepared to die;
 And living so, though young deprived of breath,
 He did not suffer an untimely death.
 But we may say of his brave, blessed decease:
 He died in war and yet he died in peace. (13–34)

D'Amville then concludes his pseudo-lamentations with a dark apostrophe to the absent Charlemont: "come now when t'wou't, / I've buried under these two marble stones / Thy living hopes and thy dead father's bones" (50–52).²⁰

As if on command, Charlemont arrives to read "the fatal monument of my / Dead father" and to find "What's here? In memory of Charlemont?" (65–67). While he assures his love Castabella that "I am not dead" (72), D'Amville's premature epitaph does end up becoming something akin to Charlemont's death sentence—"Here I met my grave" (131)—for he turns into a kind of motionless ghost, a revenger without action who never attacks D'Amville, "the suspected author of those wrongs" (143). Even the language with which Sebastian describes him after his incarceration attributes a certain epitaphic quality to his cousin: "Charlemont lies in prison" (3.2.65–66) and "Thou liest here" (3.3.48). Charlemont's later meditation among the tombs in Act 4 meanders through a proto-Romantic melancholia, with a notable insistence on "here" [4.3.3–20]. The play draws upon the resources of the sincere epitaph in order to undo them.

The conventional lover's wish to "lie" together with the beloved is similarly realized in a macabre version that literalizes epitaphic tropes: "Come, lie down to rest; These are the pillows [skulls] whereon men sleep best" (188–89). This enactment of the lie/lie pun reaches an almost parodic excess in the final scenes of *Romeo and Juliet* (1594x96), where the misidentification of Juliet as dead

(Capulet: “There she lies” [4.3.63]) produces the accumulation of actual deaths. In effect, the action erupts from the comedic, romantic impulse that it desires (to lie together) into a perverse enactment of that impulse:²¹ “Here lies the County slain; / And Romeo dead; and Juliet, dead before, / Warm and new kill’d” (5.3.194–96)—itself a summation of a whole sequence of epitaphic statements—Paris: “lay me with Juliet” (73); Romeo: “here lies Juliet” (85); “Death, lie thou there” (87); “Tybalt, liest thou there” (97); “Here, here will I remain / With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here / Will I set up my everlasting rest” (108–10); Friar Laurence: “Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead, / and Paris, too” (155–56); Chief Watchman: “Here lies the County slain, / And Juliet bleeding, warm, and newly dead, / Who here hath lain two days burièd” (173–75); “We see the ground whereon these woes do lie” (188).

This is a mode of *hyper*-sincerity, characteristic of the erotic lyric, which over-achieves its mark. But Shakespeare more typically uses epitaphs as devices within a plot of reconciliation and sometimes even resurrection, “Blending the miraculous recovery from death with a penitential experience of loss” (Fothergill 173). In this respect, the epitaph onstage has a “*dislocated function*,” as Frances Teague terms it:

Properties do not operate in performance as they do in a nontheatrical context—they mean differently. . . . the property has a function, but it is not the same function as it has offstage (though it may imitate that ordinary function). The ordinary function of the object does not disappear; an object has the same connotation that it has offstage, for example. (17–18)

Offstage, an epitaph is a tombstone inscription presumed to be sincere; onstage, it becomes a kind of plot device (even if only a mere *word*) that propels action through insincerity, and even accentuates the supposed ‘insincerity’ of performance itself.

The final scene (5.4) of Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611x13) provides a skeletal outline of the basic progression upon which Shakespeare elaborates. Two coffins are carried onstage on a hearse, “with Epitaphes pin’d on’t” (s.d.; 1018 in Taylor’s edition). Shortly thereafter, Moll and Touchwood Jr. rise, to delight and celebration. The drama incorporates a serious literary form (even in a visual reference and physical property) in order to play with expectations regarding theatrical sincerity. Shakespeare expands upon this model, usually with a man (Claudio, Leontes, Pericles) discovering that a beloved woman identified as dead through an insincere epitaph (Hero, Hermione, Perdita) still lives. The dynamic here is founded on the concept that the man must express sincere regret for an insincerely represented epitaph, whether the “sad invention” enjoined by Leonato (*Much Ado About Nothing* 5.1.267), a sign of “Our shame perpetual” anticipated by Leontes (*The Winter’s Tale* 3.2.236), or the “glittering golden characters” that Dionyza composes (*Pericles* 17.45).

Shakespeare seems to have struck upon an effective way in which to subsume epitaphic sincerity within the larger frame of dramatic performance, vaguely

evoking some of the theological mystery of resurrection and divine presence. While there were sincere epitaphs on deceased theatrical characters prior to Shakespeare, or anticipatory moments of epitaphic retrospection (most notably in Tamburlaine's assertion that he and Zenocrate "will have one Epitaph / Writ in as many several languages / As I have conquered kingdoms with my sword" [*Part ii*, 2.4.134–36]), this kind of "insincere" epitaph, which fully realizes the dramatic potential of the incorporated genre, was not presented onstage in England until *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598). Shakespeare thereby appears to have established a comedic *convention*. In the tragedies, the reconciliation arrives too belatedly for the woman's survival. The epitaph that typically succeeds in its failure—that is, it succeeds to reform the man in its failure to mark a truly dead woman—fails in its success instead: "My mistress here lies murdered in her bed" (*Othello* 5.2.192). The bitter sincerity of this identification is taken up, as it were, by Othello, who begins to refer to himself in near-epitaphic terms, what Joel Fineman called an "evacuating clarification"²²: "That's he that was Othello. Here I am" (5.2.290).

That Shakespeare himself did not seem particularly inspired by the composition of his own doggerel epitaph has long frustrated readers, who have sometimes turned to cryptography (along with conspiracy theory) in order to abate their disappointment. Such disappointment arises from the apparently shallow sincerity of the epitaph's limited charge of preventing his bones from being moved to the charnel house; readers yearn for a more profound sincerity, a 'deeper' meaning that would somehow be satisfied by a penetrating analysis of the two couplets:

GOOD FRENDE FOR IESVS SAKE FORBEARE,
TO DIGG THE DVST ENCLOSED HEARE:
BLESE BE YE MAN YT SPARES THES STONES,
AND CVSRT BE HE YT MOVES MY BONES.²³

Yet this epitaph has succeeded twice over—not only has it managed to locate the body (his grave is purportedly yet to be opened), its lack of bombast could be said to have indirectly inspired the more formal commemorative verses of William Basse, Ben Jonson, and John Milton, all of which involve epitaphic gestures in their attempts to out-do one another. If, as has been argued, it is the case that Shakespeare came up with a new way of deploying epitaphic insincerity, this text ought to be taken as a cannily appropriate *denial* of the supposedly bathetic last words desired from Shakespeare's 'voice.'

Shakespeare's works, while dramatizing epitaphs, clearly display a notable indifference, if not distrust, of their presumed sincerity. With the exception of the closing Threnos of *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (which verges on sentimentalism: "Beauty, truth, and rarity, / Grace in all simplicity, / Here enclosed in cinders lie"), one would be hard-pressed to find an instance of an epitaph that is *simply* sincere; indeed, Shakespeare establishes another dramatic convention in the repeated

theatrical defiance of epitaphic memorialization:

- “Thy ignominy sleep with thee in the grave / But not remembered in thy epitaph” (*Henry IV, part i* 5.3.99–100)
- “our grave, / Like Turkish mute, shall have a tongueless mouth, / Not worshipped with a waxen epitaph” (*Henry V* 1.2.231–33)
- “After your death you were better to have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live”²⁴ (*Hamlet* 2.2.504–6)
- “lives not in his epitaph, / As in your royal speech” (*All’s Well That Ends Well* 1.1.50–51)
- “fame and honour. . . / . . . hath as oft a sland’rous epitaph / As record of fair act” (*Cymbeline* 3.3.51–53)
- “Men’s evil manners live in brass, their virtues / We write in water”²⁵ (*All is True* 4.2.44–45)
- “ill old men, unwept . . . their epitaphs, the people’s curses” (*The Two Noble Kinsmen* 2.2.109–10)
- even the execrable “extemporal epitaph on the death of the deer” delivered by Holofernes (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 4.2.46–47)

Shakespeare’s subversion of epitaphic sincerity is most pronounced in *Timon of Athens* (1606x08), a rare play in which a major character dies offstage without a witness.²⁶ The doubling of Timon’s reported epitaph is usually attributed to sloppiness on Shakespeare’s part (one editorial hypothesis suggests that he copied them both from Plutarch and Callimachus, with the intention to omit one later).²⁷ Within the context of the play, this doubling serves to undercut further those who would seek the consolation of the tomb. Timon’s intention, stated as early as 4.3, was to make an epitaph “That death in [through] me at others’ lives may laugh” (373). When Alcibiades reads the epitaph(s), they mutually frustrate one another in their contradictory attempts at anonymity and self-proclamation:

Here lies a wretched corpse,
Of wretched soul bereft.
Seek not my name. A plague consume
You wicked caitiffs left:
Here lie I Timon, who alive,
All living men did hate.
Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass
And stay not here thy gait. (5.5.72–78)

There is sincerity here, but it is sincere vituperation, with a sincere *inversion* of the epitaph’s “standard appeal for delay” (Walsh 81).

Such disdain must be weighed alongside the fact that Shakespeare likely referred to or directly presented epitaphs onstage more *frequently* than any other early modern English playwright. Ben Jonson, whom one might expect to include

more epitaphs in his plays, having self-consciously written so many outside of the theater, refers to them only three times (in *The Case is Altered*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and *The Staple of Newes*)—slightly less frequently than Shakespeare is purported to have written epitaphs offstage.²⁸ The apocryphal story of their collaborative, extempore epitaph on Jonson helps serve to contrast their respective approaches:

Master Ben Jonson and master William Shakespeare being merry at a tavern, Master Jonson having begun this for his epitaph:

Here lies Ben Jonson
That was once one,

he gives it to Master Shakespeare to make up who presently writes:

Who while he lived was a slow thing,
And now, being dead, is nothing.²⁹

This is Jonson, the neo-classicist picking up “that graue forme” yet once more, sparring with Shakespeare, who insists that fame, at least in the world of art, will be overcome by “nothing.”

Shakespeare’s fundamental dramaturgical insight with regard to the epitaph exposes this genre’s own essentially *staged* qualities—the pose of sincerity, the use of *prosopopeia*, the conventional ways in which epitaphs are set up (rhetorically and physically)—onstage.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs Beyond the Tomb* (Palgrave, 2009), which was completed under the auspices of the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at Yale University Library’s Special Collections.
2. A fanciful etymology suggests that ‘sincere’ came from *sine* + *cera*, that is, “without wax,” supposedly referring to a mendacious practice of stone carvers covering cracks in classical lettering with wax. Hence “sincere” stones would be those “without wax.” While this appears to be an unsubstantiated folk etymology, it provides a fortuitous connection between sincerity and inscriptions as explored in this article (Ferry 247–48).
3. The former is more common (e.g. Thomas Thomas, Florio, Bullokar, and Cawdrey); for the latter, see Minsheu. As Brian Cummings quips, “Sincerity is, if you like, not pure. It quickly comes to mean the absence of pretence. . . . Is sincerity the opposite of dissimulation, or only a particularly successful form of it?” (97).
4. Matthew Smith, exploring *Henry V*, takes seriously the Prologue’s confession that actors are “cyphers,” or hypocrites (402–03).
5. With the possible exception of prayer; see Targoff for the historical emergence of prayer as a sincere performance in sixteenth-century England. Brady notes that poets who composed elegies, a contiguous genre related to the dead, “were incredibly sensitive to

- the charge of insincerity,” so much so that “[d]enouncing other elegists’ insincerity and venality was an elegiac commonplace throughout the seventeenth century” (25, 30).
6. See Peyre: “Functionalism in art and architecture has often been equated with an art freed from any fake, any deceitful superfluity of ornaments, a ‘sincere’ art” (7). For an updating of Trilling and Peyre, see Rutten.
 7. Wordsworth calls Weever’s prose lament a “simple effusion of the moment” in place of an “extravagance” (111).
 8. See Pope’s epitaphs on Mr. Rowe, General Henry Whithers, Robert Digby, John Lord Caryll, John Hewet and Sarah Drew, James Craggs, and Sir William Trumbull.
 9. Ball traces this line. Victorian infatuation with this term led to a critical reaction, best exemplified by René Wellek and Austin Warren in their *Theory of Literature* (1949), in a notably irritable passage: “As for sincerity in a poem: the term seems almost meaningless. A sincere expression of what? Of the supposed emotional state out of which it came? Or of the state in which the poem was written? Or a sincere expression of the poem, i.e. the linguistic construct shaping in the author’s mind as he writes? Surely it will have to be the last: the poem is a sincere expression of the poem” (208). James Fitzmaurice observes that such a rejection results from the identification of sincerity with *intention*, which makes it “occupy a controversial position in current critical discussion” (127).
 10. Oscar Wilde makes this alignment with evident approbation: “Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 208). Wilde is often supposed to have said “all bad poetry is sincere” (see Kambourov), yet it seems the statement has been modified from “All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling” (*The Artist as Critic* 398). For more on Wildean insincerity, see Choi.
 11. “He is a greater liar than an epitaph” was an Italian proverb cited by James Howell in his 1660 *Lexicon Tetraglotton*; on this topic, see Guthke, “Lying Like an Epitaph?”
 12. This moment of belated regret, characteristic of tragedies in which a man kills his lover, is also presented in inscriptive form by John Frankford in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (although in this case Anne Frankford’s death self-inflicted through her refusal to eat or drink):

therefore on her grave
 I will bestow this funeral epitaph,
 Which on her marble tomb shall be engraved.
 In golden letters shall these words be filled:
 Here lies she whom her husband’s kindness killed. (136–40)

13. Austin’s deliberate exclusion of theatre in his discussion of performativity has been frequently commented upon. Here is the full quotation, which appears early (Lecture II) in *How to Do Things With Words*: “a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etioliations* of language. And this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances” (22).

14. Stein was writing of a return to the site of her childhood home in Oakland—"there is no there there" (298).
15. For instance, the observation that "revengers are, in a sense, elegists *manqués*," or calling "Isabella's rampage . . . a literal *enactment* of the elegiac verbal curse against nature" (Sacks 65, 70).
16. This "gutter" (to borrow Helen Vendler's term) down the center of a poem was useful for a comparison between past and present states, and thus particularly effective for meditations on mortality. The most familiar Elizabethan example is Chidioc Tichborne's elegy (1586) (e.g. "And now I live, and now my life is done"); a medial split quite similar to that of Kyd's is also found in Thomas Watson's Sonnet 39 from *Tears of Fancy* (198).
17. Two other examples of corporeal inscriptions, both from plays by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, include Arethusa in *Philaster* (1608x10), who wishes to die Actaeon-like "pursued by cruel hounds, / And have my story written in my wounds!" (3.2.172–73); and Aspatia in *The Maid's Tragedy* (1608x11), who requests that her ladies "Write on my brow my fortune" as part of her funeral rites (2.1.106).
18. The successful epitaphic moments in the play are those deceptive ones that appear in the third scene of the second act, where Aaron decides "To bury so much gold under a tree," instructing it to "repose, sweet gold, for their unrest" (2, 8). Resting for the unrest of others succeeds, as the gold soon serves as a device to impugn Quintus and Marcus falsely for their supposed murder of Bassianus. "My gracious lord, *here* is the bag of gold," Aaron informs Saturninus, who has just responded to Tamora's disingenuous question "Where is thy brother Bassianus?" with "Poor Bassianus *here lies* murdered" (emphases added; 280, 261, 263). The "fatal writ," a conspiratorial letter counterfeited by Tamora and Aaron that reveals a purported plot against Bassianus, is effectually the "complot of this timeless tragedy" against the brothers Andronicus (264–65).
19. Languabeau also uses this avowal when confirming D'Amville's apprehension of him in the graveyard: D'AMVILLE: "Thou look'st like Snuff, dost not?" LANGUEBEAU: "Yes, in sincerity, my lord." (4.3.249–51).
20. D'Amville has been preoccupied with buildings and burials throughout the play; he consistently envisions a line of descendants as the "foundation" of his posterity, as when he laments the death and sickness of his sons Sebastian and Rousard (5.1.80–86). This, in turn, recalls his previous vow to use the stone that brained Montferrers in a perverse memorial: "Upon this ground I'll build my manor house / And this shall be the chiefest corner-stone" (2.4.104–5).
21. Whittier makes a similar argument with respect to "the sonnet form" in the play, which, "even when exhausted, will generate dramatic event" (28); he also refers to the attention paid by Rosalie Colie to the "unmetaphoring" of Petrarchan language in the play (143–45).
22. Fineman's analysis depends largely upon the psychoanalytic observation that it is only after Othello is effectively dead ("inflated with his loss of self") that he can at last identify himself—a paradoxical non-coincidence of identity (148–49).
23. I follow the rubbing and transcription of B. Roland Lewis (529), who defends the epitaph as Shakespearean, and not anonymous doggerel (530). Alfred Corn gives a perceptive formal reading of the quatrain.
24. *Hamlet*, as has often been noted, is a play deeply preoccupied with improperly performed memorial rituals; among many essays, see Holleran.

25. The phrase is proverbial; Tilley cites Erasmus' *Adagia* and Lyly's *Euphues* as precedents (708); Beaumont and Fletcher used it in *Philaster* (1608x10) in a curse against the King (5.3.83–93), which is credited with inspiring Keats's "Here lies one whose name was writ in water" (Macksey 853).
26. See Foreman: "One might almost say that Timon's death doesn't happen, because what happens in the world of drama is what is done and said onstage, and the death of Timon is not even narrated by 'offstage' witnesses. His grave and epitaph are found, and that is all" (66). Steiner characterizes this play as the only Shakespeare drama "uncompromisingly tragic," in part on account of Timon's defiant epitaph (12).
27. The *Norton Shakespeare* edition quietly removes any reference to the first inscription which the illiterate soldier implausibly reads (lines in italics were omitted):

Sold. By all description this should be the place.
 Who's here? Speak, ho. No answer? What is this?
Timon is dead, who hath outstretch'd his span:
Some beast read this; there does not live a man.
 Dead, sure, and this his grave. What's on this tomb
 I cannot read. The character I'll take with wax.
 Our Captain hath in every figure skill,
 An aged interpreter, though young in days. (5.4.1–6)

The multiple, contradictory, and supposedly semi-illegible (by a semi-illiterate soldier) epitaphs produce somewhat contorted attempts at clarification by critics; see the especially inventive note by Thatcher, which claims that the first ("Timon is dead") was written by someone (Flavius?) who actually buried Timon; Darcy proceeds along deconstructive lines in service of a far more subtle reading about the misanthropic thrust of the play.

28. The *Norton Shakespeare* prints the Stanley tomb verses, epitaphs on himself, Elias James, and two on John Combe, as well as the interchange with Ben Jonson (2006–7). See also Adams's survey of "Shakespeare as a Writer of Epitaphs." While Adams claims he will "first... examine the epitaphs embodied in his plays," he regrettably only mentions that written for Marina in *Pericles* (4.4).
29. *Norton* gives the provenance of this anecdote as: "Bodleian MS Ashmole 38 181 (c. 1650), a transcript, probably in the hand of Nicholas Burgh" (2008).

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