

cites lost plays, plays that were never performed on stage, and many plays that were all but forgotten in subsequent years. Although any play can be said to respond to the pressures of its time—social, political, and cultural, as well as literary and theatrical—a successful play not only articulates and affects the concerns of its audience; it also conditions their responses. A play successful in a subsequent period articulates and affects the concerns of *that* audience. The satiric distortions in *Epicoene* expressed anxieties and aspirations that Jonson shared with his audience; they also helped to construct a gender ideology that has not yet lost its power.

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¹ As Leonard Tennenhouse has recently pointed out (in *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, New York: Methuen, 1986), "Shakespeare was not alone in abandoning romantic comedy after 1602 . . . none of his fellow dramatists took up the form again either . . ." (3). Tennenhouse argues, in fact, that an excessive preoccupation with "generic categories automatically detaches the work from history": "So long as discussion of the plays remains within the conventional literary genres. . . . [o]ne cannot explain why certain forms were abandoned, why others were taken up, or why a genre might turn against itself and openly renounce a logic that was one and the same as its form during an earlier period of time" (5, 4).

² As Shapiro himself has pointed out (in *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays*, New York: Columbia UP, 1977), *Epicoene* typifies the satiric city comedies of its time, in which an attractive young gallant, who "has a moral if not a legal claim to . . . land or money," must obtain it from a "miserly father-figure" (56–57).

"Our Ever-Living Poet"

To the Editor:

Donald W. Foster's "Master W. H., R.I.P." (102 [1987]: 42–54) was a delight to read. I hope that his inspired research and thinking will indeed lay the W. H. brouhaha to rest forever. For if the notion of proof has any meaning at all in the arts, Foster has demonstrated that Thorpe's readers—readers who had no incentive to go searching after bizarre usages of common words—*must* have understood "begetter" in this particular context as "author" and, what is equally important, that Thorpe *must* have known, as he dashed off the dedication, that his readers would so understand it. Ineluctably, therefore, W. H. has to be a typographical error.

My guess is that Foster will find less enthusiasm with respect to his second hypothesis, to wit that "our ever-living poet" is God. If the wording had been "*the* ever-living poet," his case would have acquired some solidity. But, unlike "our Lord" or "our Saviour," "our poet" is

simply too familiar in this context, and the whole conceit too strained. In this instance, I believe that the thrifter hypothesis remains the one, rejected by Foster, naming the poet as Shakespeare himself. "The sonnets," Foster writes, "strictly speaking, promise 'eternity' to no one. We find, admittedly, the conventional boast that poets may confer a kind of immortality, but not everlastingly" (48). I don't know what this second sentence means, but the point here is that Tom Thorpe was not a professor of literature dependent for survival on "strictly speaking" analysis but a literary businessman. To him and to most of his readers (and to most of us), the sonnets seem to do a great deal of promising in the "eternity" line. Hence there is no strain whatsoever in interpreting Thorpe's convoluted compliment as "I wish you the same eternity you promise others in your sonnets" or "May you in fact enjoy the eternity (of fame) you have promised yourself in the poems." Whatever Shakespeare's popularity may have been in 1609, the compliment, or puff, of "ever-living" seems like a credible move by a publisher.

Of course, the identity of this "ever-living poet" is a far less interesting problem than that of W. H., and Foster's solution of the more interesting of the two problems calls for a resounding bravo.

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To the Editor:

Donald Foster is right in stating that the "begetter" in the epigraph to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* must be the author. He is also right in saying that it doesn't make much sense to wish the author the eternity promised by himself. Therefore "our ever-living poet" may refer to God. The epigraph makes the best sense if one assumes that in 1609 the author was deceased (as was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford). Then the "only" preceding "begetter" does assure the reader that the work is authentic, as Humphrey Moseley does more lengthily in his prefatory note to William Cartwright's posthumous *Comedies, Tragedies, with Other Poems*. Since, as Foster also points out, in the Renaissance "ever-living" was never used about a living person, if "ever-living poet" does refer to a man, he certainly cannot be the Stratfordian. Also, since in the dedications that Foster cites, the dedicatee is not the author, there is certainly something fishy about dedicating a work "to" the begetter if he is alive, but it is not so peculiar if he is not. Most of the dedications Foster cites also refer to happiness *in this world* and eternity in the next. Of course Thorpe or W. H. or whoever wrote the epigraph couldn't guarantee that, so he rather loosely wished the poet heaven and eternity in suggestive terms, as appropriate for a deceased poet.

As more and more evidence of earlier work by Shakespeare emerges (the hyphen definitely indicates a pseudo-