

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*

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 –

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

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.

To see thee neatly kept and well maintained.

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,