

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Identifying ‘Mr Pett’: A Forgotten Early Modern Playwright

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On May 17, 1600, Philip Henslowe lent Admiral’s Men actor Robert Shaw six pounds as full payment for the two authors of the (now lost) play *Strange News Out of Poland*. The authors were the established professional William Haughton and the otherwise unknown ‘m^r pett’.¹ The identity of Pett has remained an enigma. F. G. Fleay suggested that Henslowe meant to write ‘Chett’, for ‘Chettle’.² W. W. Greg, however, noted that Henslowe never abbreviated Henry Chettle’s name unless he was pressed for space (which he is not in the *Poland* entry) and he never appended the honorific of ‘mr’ to his name.³ The name Pett is fairly common and belongs to an extended family best known for its involvement in early modern England’s maritime industries. At least one earlier Pett – John Pett, a gentleman of Kent – wrote a pamphlet for publication: his 1583 *The great circle of Easter* is a collection of charts, calendars, and Latin verses meant to aid readers in working out when, in a given year, different movable feast days would fall. Nothing else about John Pett is known, but his work hardly qualifies him for the ranks of poet; indeed, he claims in his preface to readers that he has borrowed the verses in his pamphlet from other sources and that he himself suffers from ‘vnskilfulnes in Poetry’.⁴ Greg and more recent historians who have examined Henslowe’s papers have neglected to notice that circumstantial evidence does exist for three candidates for the mysterious ‘Mr Pett’, namely, three brothers from the famous shipbuilding family.

¹ R. A. Foakes (ed.), *Henslowe’s Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 134.

² F. G. Fleay, *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama 1559-1642*, 2 vols (London: Reeves and Turner, 1891), I, p. 273.

³ W. W. Greg (ed.), *Henslowe’s Diary*, 2 vols (London: A. H. Bullen, 1908), II, p. 213.

⁴ John Pett, *The great Circle of Easter* (London: Thomas Butter, 1583), sig. [a7v].

The first, and least likely, candidate is Phineas Pett (1570-1647), son of Master Shipwright of Deptford, Peter Pett. Phineas was Peter's eldest son from his second marriage. The details of his life and family are documented in his manuscript diary (British Library Harley MS 6279). Phineas came to the profession of shipbuilder reluctantly; he seems to have been intended for either the church or law. Only at his father's death did he turn to the family trade and in the winter of 1595-6 he agreed to be an ordinary workman for his older brother Joseph. While in Joseph's hire, he spent money on clothing 'in very good fashion,' he wrote, 'always endeavouring to keep company with men of good rank, far better than myself'.⁵ In February 1598 he rented a fine house at Limehouse for £11 per year and furnished it 'to some charge'.⁶ These expenditures compounded with other problems to shrink Phineas's cash flow: just before this time, his brother Joseph and stepfather Thomas Nunn, minister of Weston (who would, not long after, murder Phineas's sister, Abigail, for not adequately cleaning his riding cloak) embezzled a substantial portion of his father's inheritance. Work was Phineas's only option. He found occasional appointments rectifying disordered accounts of various maritime agents, but little income came of it. At times, the work only stirred up resentment against him: in 1599, for example, Treasurer of the Navy, Fulke Greville – who disliked him because he was friends with the Surveyor, John Trevor – withheld twenty pounds due him for work on the Navy's behalf.

These times were difficult for Phineas: 'From midsummer, all the ensuing year [1598], till Christmas I lay still and idle without any manner of employment or comings in but what my servants got with working now and then abroad, which was very little and hardly able to buy me food'.⁷ Perhaps, in desperate need of income, Phineas picked up his pen and, as someone with an interest in and experience of overseas travel and as an acquaintance of the Lord Admiral, agreed to write for the Admiral's Men a sensational new play about news abroad. On June 25, 1600, Phineas received a commission from the Lord Admiral to take over as shipwright at Chatham. Since he moved to the town only two days later, this may explain his sudden disappearance from Henslowe's records. Lacking any evidence that Phineas ever wrote poetry or plays, however, or ever even displayed any interest in doing so, he is quite likely not the playwright Henslowe refers to in his diary. Indeed, there is some reason to believe that Phineas viewed playmaking as a generally disreputable practice (see below).

⁵ W. G. Perrin (ed.), *The Diary of Phineas Pett* (Navy Records Society, 1918), p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 10.

The second candidate for Henslowe's Pett – and the one preferred by Fleay and A. C. Baugh⁸ – is Phineas's brother, Peter of Wapping (d. 1631?), the second son of their father's first marriage. While both Fleay and Baugh take it for granted that Peter of Wapping is Henslowe's 'm^r pett', it is important to note that there are some objections to such a conclusion.

Peter of Wapping took over the family yard at Wapping upon his father's death in 1589 and, through his work, mingled closely with courtiers, becoming acquaintances with the Lord Admiral Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham, whom he joined at court at Richmond.⁹ This man was the author of the 1599 allegorical panegyric on Elizabeth, *Time's Journey* (dedicated to Nottingham), as well as the sonnet 'All Creatures praise God'.¹⁰ Shipbuilding was a reputable profession; writing for money, however, was not. Given Peter of Wapping's successful career as a shipbuilder by 1600, it seems unlikely that he would have considered writing for the commercial stage as a profession, which – as explained further below – is what 'm^r pett' was probably attempting when he co-wrote with Haughton. Indeed, in the first stanza of *Time's Journey*, Peter of Wapping dismisses his interest in writing as a distraction from his true profession: 'Amidst some graver studies taking pause', he notes, 'I left a while to trace Philosophie, / To please my selfe with harmlesse Poetrie'.¹¹ In his second stanza, he makes plain his lack of further interest in poetry, dismissing writing as a waste of time and insisting that 'With harmlesse Poetrie, not otherwise, / Lascivious writing doth not please my vaine'.¹² In his poem 'All Creatures Praise God' he chastises poets, whose 'tongues...leau their duty, / And loue to talk of nothing but of beauty'.¹³ While these dismissals of interest might be interpreted as the typical trope of amateur writers' affecting disdain for paid writing, it bears noting that none of the playwrights who received payment from Henslowe in exchange for writing for one of the companies he supported was anything but a professional or a novice attempting to

⁸ Fleay, I, p. 273 and Albert Croll Baugh (ed.), *William Haughton's Englishmen for My Money*, PhD dissertation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1917), pp. 77-8.

⁹ Perrin, p. xlix.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter Pett, *Times iourney seeke his Daughter Truth* (London: Humphrey Lownes, 1599), sig. [A4r].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Peter Pett, 'All Creatures Praise God' in Edward Farr (ed.), *Select Poetry, Chiefly Devotional, of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1845), II, p. 386.

professionalize. Perhaps Pett was the one exception to this absence of amateurs from Henslowe's accounts; perhaps Peter of Wapping's connections with Charles Howard led to his co-writing a play for Howard's troupe, the Lord Admiral's Men. If we take only the evidence present in Henslowe's records, however, he did not pay amateurs for plays. Indeed, it was apparently a regular practice for new playwrights in the Henslowe-financed troupes to be paired with experienced professionals – such as Haughton – as a way of training them to enter the industry.¹⁴ It is difficult to imagine a proudly amateur poet entering – or wanting to enter – Henslowe's bullpen if doing so meant progressing towards status as a professional, commercial writer.

Details about the third candidate are less abundant because the only record of him is his brief appearance in Phineas's diary. The man is Phineas's youngest brother, Peter Pett (d. 1600), known in some accounts as 'Peter the Younger' to distinguish him from Peter of Wapping. In early 1597, after the death of Peter and Phineas's mother, Nunn placed Peter the Younger in the employ of a gentleman in Suffolk, teaching his children. When Nunn died in November 1599, Phineas moved his brother to the home of Dr John Hone (Advocate of Doctors' Commons in 1589 and Master in Chancery in 1596), where, as one of the doctor's clerks, 'he might have lived well if he would have stayed with him'.¹⁵ Hone lived in the ecclesiastical 'Court of Arches' at St Mary-le-Bow, placing Peter the Younger in a fashionable part of the city. Around this time, their elder brother Joseph cut off his siblings; coupled with Nunn's past embezzlement of their inheritance, this left all the other brothers, including Peter the Younger, with few means.

In the spring of 1600, evidently no longer wishing, or perhaps welcome, to continue his clerical work, Peter the Younger switched careers and residences. The results were, as Phineas recorded, fatal: 'The 16th day of June in this year [1600] my youngest brother Peter, having, against all the consent of his friends and without their knowledge, forsaken his worshipful master Doctor Hone's service and betaken himself to disordered courses, sickened at London at the sign of the Dolphin in Water Lane, and the 21st day after deceased of the small pox...'¹⁶

¹⁴ Neil Carson, *A Companion to Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 60-2.

¹⁵ Perrin, p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

What were the ‘disordered courses’ in which Peter engaged? No evidence survives to answer this question. Given the dim view more conservative citizens, like Phineas, had of the theater, one possibility is that Peter the Younger had fallen in with playmakers. Later, in 1613, Phineas disapprovingly referred to a troupe of ‘maskers’ as ‘very unruly’, and these were ‘gentlemen of the inns’ under the leadership of Sir Francis Bacon;¹⁷ one can only guess from this attitude what Phineas’s view of public players may have been. Given his financial state, perhaps Peter used his learned background as a teacher – a profession from which many professional playwrights emerged – and joined up with Haughton in an attempt to make a career as a dramatist. Phineas notes that he had no knowledge of his brother’s illness prior to his death, suggesting that he had cut his family out of the loop – perhaps because he knew Phineas would disapprove of his new life.¹⁸ Finally, Peter’s sudden death from smallpox on June 21 would, of course, account for his sudden disappearance from Henslowe’s records after his one appearance on May 17.

It seems unlikely that Phineas Pett was the ‘m^r pett’ who collaborated with Haughton on the Admiral’s Men play *Strange News Out of Poland* in the late spring of 1600. A stronger case can be made, however, for his younger brother Peter of Wapping or for his youngest brother, Peter the Younger. Whether Henslowe’s Pett was any of these three men or perhaps another, unrecorded Pett is not – indeed, given the scanty extant evidence, cannot be – completely certain. Nonetheless, the confluence of details about the lives of the Pett brothers with the timing of the entries in Henslowe’s diary, taken in conjunction the lack of similar positive evidence for any other known Petts living in London in 1600, makes it more than probable that Phineas Pett, Peter Pett of Wapping, or Peter Pett the Younger was, for at least a few months, writing for one of the city’s leading troupes of players.

¹⁷ Quoted in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923 [1961 rpt]), III, p. 234.

¹⁸ Perrin, p. 16.