

Miserrimus

There's a rather unusual gravestone tucked away inside the cloisters of Worcester Cathedral, close to the south-west door. On it is just one word, which, even in a genre that demands concision, is terse, to say the least. The word is "Miserrimus", which translated into English means "most wretched of men". (If you're paying by the word, Latin is always the best value.)

It's worth adding that, despite having only one word to carve, the stone-cutter got the spelling wrong, leaving out one of the two "r"s. Only when the stone was re-cut in the 19th Century was it corrected.

But in a building which boasts many a grand tomb, including those of a King of England and a Prince of Wales, Miserrimus cuts a humble and self-effacing figure. Yet this most minimal of epitaphs has generated more than its fair share of words in comment. No less a literary giant than William Wordsworth mused upon its hidden meaning in a sonnet, published in an annual literary anthology called *The Keepsake* in 1828. Wordsworth's poem opens:

"Miserrimus !" and neither name nor date,
Prayer, text, or symbol, graven upon the stone;
Naught but that word assigned to the unknown...

Two more sonneteers – Edwin Lees and Henry Martin – piled in with their own interpretations of the inscription over the following four years, the latter publishing his work in Birmingham.

The editor of *The Keepsake*, Frederic Mansel Reynolds, was equally disinclined to let sleeping dogs lie. With a blank canvass to work on, Reynolds constructed a 200-page historical novel, set in the reign of Charles II, about the anonymous tenant of the grave.

In Reynolds' fevered and gothic imagination, Miserrimus becomes a malevolent sociopath, intent on murder and godless debauchery. "The hand of the fiend was on me at my birth," Reynolds begins. "Even in extreme infancy I exhibited the utmost violence of character." Given that the occupant of the grave was unknown, Reynolds had no compunction about darkening his reputation.

But there was soon to be egg on a number of literary faces. Having been outed by three poets and a novelist, there was bound to be someone out there who knew exactly who Miserrimus was.

A year after Reynolds' novel came out, so did the truth, in an article in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. And once he had revealed the true identity of Miserrimus, the contributor went on to rebuke Reynolds for his "posthumous libel on an innocent and helpless person, whose story is widely different from that here inflicted on his memory."

This did not stop the novelist issuing a second edition in 1833, but now prefaced by a chastened disclaimer.

Who, then, was Miserrimus ? He was Rev. Thomas Morris, the 17th-century vicar of Claines in Worcestershire and a minor canon at the cathedral.

Having graduated, probably from King's College, Cambridge, Morris entered the Church, and found himself a Worcestershire parish, and a minor office within the cathedral, to provide his living. However, the upward momentum of Morris's career came to a sudden halt in 1683, with what is called the Glorious Revolution.

In that year the Catholic King James II fled to France and the Protestant William of Orange was invited to take his place. All clergy, along with officialdom in general, were required by law to swear allegiance to the new King, and this Thomas Morris could not do. Nor, indeed, could the then Dean of Worcester, and a number of bishops.

In their eyes, kingship came as a hereditary right, direct from God, not by Parliamentary whim. And in the city which had remained so fiercely loyal to James II's royal father, even after his defeat and imprisonment, we would expect no less. Having refused to sign, Morris was stripped both of his post as a canon and of his parish at Claines.

So the no longer Rev. Thomas Morris found himself out on his ear, a "non-juror" in official parlance, a conscientious objector in more modern terms. He remained in Worcester, though, supported by funds from like-minded Jacobites, and continued to attend services at the cathedral. As to exactly how poor he was, it is not easy to say. Nor is it easy to prove that Morris was "kindly and gentle", as some later writers claim.

What he undoubtedly was was bitter, and arguably self-pitying too, as the inscription upon his gravestone suggests.

Morris's miserable existence, if such it was, came to its conclusion in 1748, more than half a century after his ejection from the Established Church. He was carried to his grave in the cloisters by six maidens, clothed in white, and bearing, it is said, a device of Morris's own construction. My guess is that this would have been some Jacobite symbol, one last calculated snub to England's constitutional settlement. The simple grave slab immediately below the steps into the cathedral vividly demonstrated Morris's exclusion from the Church. He was, as it were, destined to be an outsider for ever, and a challenge to all who passed that way.

But even the grandest of defiant gestures are destined to fade over time, and by the 1830s Miserrimus had become an empty vessel into which romantic poets and gothic novelists might pour their world-weary and melancholic sentiments.

"Stranger, tread softly", pleaded Wordsworth. And those who seek out this quiet and lonely corner of the cathedral cloisters perhaps still do so.