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Joe R. Christopher

(emeritus) Tarleton State University, Stephenville, TX

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## A Note on Charles Williams's Phillida

### Abstract

Considers sources for William's representation of Phyllis Jones in *The Masques of Amen House* under the name of Phillida.

### Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles—Characters—Phillida; Williams, Charles—Relation to Phyllis Jones; Williams, Charles. *The Masques of Amen House*; Jones, Phyllis—Relations with Charles Williams

## A Note on Charles Williams's Phillida

Joe R. Christopher

As is generally known from Alice Mary Hadfield's *Charles Williams: An Exploration of his Life and Work* (Chs. 4-5), Charles Williams had an intense but "never fully sexual" office romance with Phyllis Jones, the librarian at Amen House (Bosky 14). This was when they both were working for the Oxford University Press and Amen House held its London headquarters. He used various pseudonyms for her in the poems he wrote for her, mainly Celia but also Circassia (Williams 128) and Phillida. The latter is the name of the character she played in "The Masque of the Manuscript" and "The Masque of Perusal," which Williams wrote, celebrating that London office of the Press—and presumably she would have played in the third masque, "The Masque of the Termination of Copyright," had it been produced. (The name *Phyllida* was first used of Jones in "An Urbanity" [Williams 115-151], summer 1926, before the first masque, produced on 28 April 1927 [Hadfield 58, 62].)

Obviously, Phillida comes from Phyllis, but why did Williams decide simply to use a classical version of her name when he completely changed for the masques the names of others at Amen House: Dorinda for Helen Peacock, Alexis for Gerard Hopkins (the nephew of the poet), and Colin for Frederick Page? A possible answer to this question may reveal an interesting insight into the poet's complex personality.

Bernadette Lynn Bosky raises the question in a different way in her introduction to *The Masques of Amen House*; she points out that the name Phyllis itself appears in pastorals written by Theocritus, Vergil, and Spenser. Actually, she cites E. K.'s note to Spenser's "Februarie," ll. 63-66 (lines which mention that Cuddie has won Phyllis's love with the gift of a belt); E. K. says that Phyllis is a common name "in Theocritus, Virgile, and Mantuane" (Bosky 23; Spenser 426). I have not checked Baptista Mantuan's eclogues, since he was an Italian Renaissance poet and not, I think, an influence on Williams, and a skimming of Theocritus's thirty idylls (some by him, some, according to scholars, just attributed to him) has not turned up a Phyllis. (A later check of the index to *The Greek Bucolic Poets* in the Loeb Classical Library confirmed this lack.) But she certainly appears in Vergil's *Eclogues*. Her name appears in

four of them: nos. 3, 5, 7, and 10. (On the basis of the third, one can reach a conclusion that she is a slave of Iollas and the desired or perhaps actual mistress of both Damoetas and Menalcas; whether Vergil intended the same woman throughout his four eclogues is uncertain.) Bosky, at any rate, indicates that *Phyllis* has been used in pastoral poetry and implicitly asks why Williams was not satisfied to use Phyllis Jones's own name. But Bosky concludes, "To include her in the poet's imaginative life, Williams chose a less common version of her name" (23).

True, but the situation is a little more complex than that. In Vergil's "*Ecloga Tertia*," in a discussion between Menalcas and Damoetas (without Iollas being present), Damoetas says, "Send Phyllis to me; it is my birthday, Iollas." Menalcas, in his capping reply, says, "I love Phyllis most of all" (Virgil 43, 45). What is interesting is the Latin: "*Phyllida mitte mihi: meus est natalis, Iolla*" (l. 76) and "*Phyllida amo ante alias*" (l. 78a). If one thinks of Latin declensions, that form *Phyllida* seems very odd. But the name *Phyllis* is Greek (possibly meaning "the leafy one"), and Vergil is using the Greek accusative of *Phyllis* (with the standard Latin spelling of a *y* for the *u*). Any student of Latin, working through the *Eclogues*, would remember the sudden appearance of a Greek form, one should think.

At this point, a pause over these classical pronunciations. The *y* in Latin stands for a *u* as in the German *über*. Presumably the *y* for the Greek *u* was well known in the English Renaissance because the spellings of *Phyllis* and *Phillida* in poems to be considered below show poets deliberately indicating they mean *phil*-, not *phul*-. That is, they are avoiding a *y* in *Phyllis* and *Phyllida* because that would be a signal of the latter sound. An extreme conjecture: it may have been the existence of the English word *fool* that caused the *i* to be substituted for the Latin spelling with *y*. Who could write romantic poems about a young woman named *Fool-is*? (I have no idea how Spenser pronounced the *Phyllis* in *The Shepheardes Calendar*. Probably he used the *y* spelling because it was traditional, coming from Vergil, and let his readers manage her name how they would. But when Cuddie says, "wouldest thou pype of *Phyllis* prayse" ["Februarie," 63], if the *u* pronunciation is being used, then there may be a pun on "fullest praise.")

So much for historical linguistics; now for poetry. Bosky cites an authority on English names to indicate that the name *Phillida* was popular in the seventeenth century, and she says that the form appears in pastoral poetry

(Bosky 23). She does not give an example, but a number exist. The earliest I know of is the anonymous "Harpalus' complaint of Phillida's love bestowed on Corin, who loved her not, and denied him that loved her," which was printed in Richard Tottel's *The Book of Songs and Sonnets*, an anthology of 1557 (often called "Tottel's Miscellany"). (For obscure reasons, the sheep, which at one point graze on a hill, are just referred to as "beasts." Perhaps the poet has in mind a mixed flock of sheep and goats—but it seems odd not to be explicit. Harpalus and Corin are just called herdsmen.) A later example: Nicholas Breton published "Phillida and Coridon" and "Song of Phillida and Coridon" in *England's Helicon*, 1600; three years earlier, in *The Arbor of Amorous Devices*, he published "A pastoral of Phillis and Coridon." He considered the names *Phillida* and *Phyllis* interchangeable, for in the "Song of Phillida and Coridon" he uses Phillida four times and Phillis eight times for the same person. (In this "Song" Phillida seems to be a wealthy landowner and Coridon the swain who works for her; she is not the typical shepherdess.)

However, the appearance of *Phillida* that I think is the most important is the one in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for Williams, from his many references, is known to have immersed himself in Shakespeare's plays. Bosky finds allusions both to this play and to *The Tempest* in Williams's three masques (21). Thus, even though Williams may have known the above pastoral poems or others like them, Shakespeare is more likely to have been the significant influence. *Phillida*'s name occurs once in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the first meeting of Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of fairies, they exchange charges of falsity in love. These lines appear:

Oberon	Am I not thy lord?
Titania	Then I must be thy lady; but I know When thou has stol'n away from fairyland And in the shape of Corin sat all day, Playing on pipes of corn, and versing love To amorous Phillida. (2.1.63-68)

One notices that Shakespeare puts *Phillida* as the object of a preposition—not quite a direct object, as the Greek requires for *Phullida*, but at least not a nominative. The Greek dative singular (of the feminine type three noun) is *Phullidi*, so Shakespeare is not being linguistically accurate. Of course, Ben Jonson claimed Shakespeare had "small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*" (l. 31), so this

is no surprise. If Shakespeare were a school teacher for a few years (as an old tradition and some modern biographers suggest [cf. Honan Ch. 5, Holden 53-62]), then he might have known Vergil's *Phyllida*—but, if so, he did not follow its *y* spelling.

Rather than thinking of the Vergilian Greek, Shakespeare probably is borrowing *Phillida* with an *i* from the poem in *Songs and Sonnets* or some similar work. Although proof of Shakespeare's knowledge of a very popular book of poetry is almost unnecessary, it can be noted that he has a character, Slender, refer to *Songs and Sonnets* in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* [1.1.165-66]. In the anonymous poem, as the lengthy title states, Phillida was in love with Corin but not he with her; if this was his source, Shakespeare has used the two names but reversed their basic love relationship. Of course, one may complicate this further: since in the poem Phillida *is* in love with Corin (she makes garlands for him, ll. 13-16), she may be considered to some degree "amorous"—as is Shakespeare's Phillida. Shakespeare's shepherdess is at least receptive enough to listen to her Corin, so the contrast between the two works is not perfect: Phillida in the poem is not interested in listening to Harpalus (ll. 21-24).

To return to spelling briefly: as noted, Shakespeare uses the Anglicized spelling of *Phillida* with an *i*, as Williams does in his masques. That Williams does not shift the name to *Phyllida* (in a modern pronunciation of *y* as *i*) in order to be closer to Phyllis Jones's spelling of her name implies he has a source he does not care to alter. This is not a very strong argument, but it at least is another hint that his source was Shakespeare.

If I am correct in thinking that this Shakespearean passage was in Williams's mind when he used Phillida for Phyllis Jones (and the similarity of *Phillida* to *Phyllis* should have caught his eye or ear), then there were two reasons for its appeal, beyond its echo of his beloved's name. First, the passage is pastoral, and, as Bosky has said, Williams is using pastoral names and images in his three masques (22-25). Corin, a shepherd (or herdsman) as in *Songs and Sonnets*, plays on pipes, a typical shepherd's activity in pastorals, wooing Phillida with love poems, also a typical activity. Possibly Corin is a shortening of Corydon, who appears in both Theocritus and Vergil. Thus, much as Phyllis was, Phillida becomes a pastoral name—in Vergil as *Phyllida* (if Williams knew the *Eclogues* in the original Latin), in the anonymous poem about Harpalus, Corin, and Phillida, and in Shakespeare (and slightly after Shakespeare in Breton). Shakespeare's description of Phillida as "amorous" may have been an additional

reason for this passage to appeal to Williams. Phyllis Jones at first responded to Williams's attention, e.g., by attending his evening lectures (Hadfield 59, 65-66, 74), and a certain amount of amorousness appears in his poems to her (not in the few reprinted in David Bratman's edition of the masques, but see Fredrick and McBride's mention of a poem about her breasts and another imagining her bathing [34]); a controlled degree of amorousness in reply was no doubt hoped for.

So far it has been assumed that the use of *Phyllida* is tied to Williams's love for Phyllis Jones. Before I mention another suggestion for the appeal of the Shakespearean passage to Williams, let me make a different point. Anyone wanting to argue against my assumption of the interrelationships of the name and the love should note that *Phyllida* was first used in 1926 in "An Urbanity," while Hadfield cannot trace Williams's passion before "early in 1927"—however, she does speak of it then breaking "through his secrecy" (61). Obviously, if a person is keeping something a secret, then there will be no evidence (yet) to support a point. I assume (and the next point is based on this hypothesis) that Williams had begun to feel his love for Jones when he wrote the light verse about the vacations of the Press staff in the summer of 1926 and when he first borrowed *Phyllida* for her—but there is no hard and fast evidence for his love then.

Therefore: a larger context exists in Shakespeare's play than just that of a pastoral sketch. The speaker is a wife, Titania, accusing her husband, Oberon (under the guise of Corin), of being false to his marriage vows, in wooing another—one Phyllida. What was Williams doing, other than wooing, under the name of Tityrus (in "An Urbanity" and in the second and third masques), a woman not his wife—one Celia, one Circassia, one Phyllida? In choosing in "An Urbanity" and all three masques to follow Shakespeare (if I am right in that assumption), Williams is choosing a name for his love that is not only nearly her own, is not only properly pastoral, but is one which, by allusion, condemns him for being unfaithful to his marriage oath. The doubled attitude toward his love seems typical of Charles Williams. Therefore, Williams's choice of *Phyllida* to mask (and masque) Phyllis Jones is not a naïve classicizing of her name.

#### Note

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