

JOHN OWEN (JOHANNES AUDOENUS) 9.53

Owen's latest editors (Martyn in print and Sutton on-line) agree on the text:¹

Mortis et Macelli Apologia

Mors nisi mactaret iuvenes laniique iuencos,
Omnia stultorum plena boumque forent.

Thomas Harvey's 1677 translation (*apud* Sutton) is good, though line 2 could be more literal:

Apology of Death, and the Shambles

If Death no Youths, Butchers no Bullocks kill'd,
The World with Fools and Calves would soon be fill'd.

Though clear enough, the epigram does not seem to be up to Owen's usual level of wit. *Mors* is too general, *iuvenes* and *stultorum* too specific: **1.** Death comes to bullocks as well as youths, so the second subject is a subset of the first, while the objects are very different. **2.** When the victims are human, death kills mostly the old, and (in Owen's day) the very young, of both sexes, so the limitation to *iuvenes* is awkward. **3.** Death also kills the wise as well as the foolish, so *stultorum* is again pointlessly specific.

I suggest that Owen wrote *Martis* in the title, *Mars* in the first line. Once either had been blurred or misread by the tiniest of errors, a scribe or typesetter – or even Owen himself preparing his manuscript for publication with less attention than he had given to composing it – would have been as likely to pick the wrong one as the right one in fixing the obvious mismatch.

My conjecture makes much better sense of the three dubious words. War, personified as Mars, is now a particular form of death, very like butchering cattle, and *Mars* and *lanii* make a well-matched pair of personal or personified agents. As for their patients, Mars kills mostly young men, *iuvenes*, where most other forms of death were, and are, less discriminating. For *stultorum*, young men who go off to war voluntarily in peace-time, going out of their way to face death, may well be thought fools by a peaceful schoolmaster and his educated readers.²

¹ J. R. C. Martyn, *Ioannis Audoeni Epigrammatum*, Vol. II, Leiden 1978; Dana F. Sutton, *The 'Epigrammata' of John Owen*, The Philological Museum (<http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/owen/>), 1999.

² If I am not mistaken, there was no military conscription or ongoing war in England or Wales when Owen wrote this epigram (Books VIII-X were published in 1613), so men who hungered for violence, glory, or plunder would have had to go to the continent to fight, while the rest were free to stay home.