

To the Editor,

by Ramon Jiménez

It is unfortunate that in his heated response to my interpretation of the *Sonnets* Dedication, in which he has used my name more than one hundred times, John Shahan has produced a rather personal attack on my methods and findings, instead of simply presenting his contrary evidence. It seems that he is more intent on disproving my conclusions than on proving his own. In several places in his lengthy catalog of my “Errors, Omissions and Other Fallacies,” he complains that I have not “proven” my claims or conclusions. But I think it’s safe to say that in the several hundred years since its publication no one has “proven” anything about the *Sonnets* Dedication—“...a dank pit in which speculation wallows and founders,” in the words of Colin Burrow (98).

Instead, what is necessary is a consideration of each piece of evidence relating to each question, and a decision as to what is more likely—what constitutes a preponderance of evidence about each particular claim. This is the customary way that conclusions are reached in cases, especially literary ones, where proof cannot be obtained. In the case of the Dedication, claims that contradict the *prima facie* facts about its author, appearance, meaning and intent must consist of sufficient evidence to overcome them. It is on this score that theories about the Dedication that assert a different author than Thomas Thorpe, a secret meaning in its appearance, and a hidden message in its wording fail to supply a preponderance of evidence.

That the author of the Dedication was Thomas Thorpe was unquestioned for four hundred years, and remains so, except for the claims of a few Oxfordians. There is clear documentation that Thorpe registered the *Sonnets* for publication. His name appears on the title page as their publisher, and on the next page the Dedication appears over his initials. As I pointed out in my *Oxfordian* article, "Similar dedications of earlier sonnet sequences by Barnabe Barnes, Henry Constable, and others had been made by the publisher, rather than the poet" (170).

The claim that Thorpe signed his name on other dedications as Thom. Thorpe, Th. Th. and T. Th., but that on the *Sonnets* Dedication page he used T. T., and that this "raises questions," is mere quibbling.

Furthermore, as detailed in my article, the similarity in the style and wording of the *Sonnets* Dedication to those on Thorpe's other dedications has been noted by numerous scholars (168–9). And all of his dedications were attached to works by authors who were dead, as was Oxford in 1609.

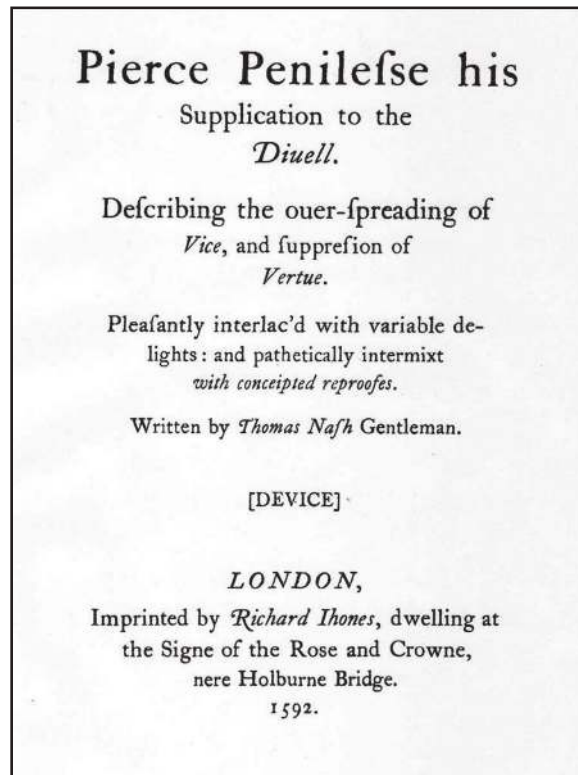
Also, Thorpe had, as well, on at least one previous occasion, thanked another stationer for providing him with a manuscript. As I wrote, there is evidence that he was not above publishing manuscripts that came to him in less than legitimate ways. Nor was the printer of the *Sonnets*, George Eld, above the same practice. According to one scholar, Eld's twenty-year career as a printer and bookseller "had the usual ups and downs: in 1606 and 1610 the Stationers' Company fined him for printing ballads without licence...in 1619 he was fined again for violating Jackson's copyright to *Mad Men of Gottam*..." (Frost 260).

This is just a brief summary of the facts that support Thomas Thorpe's composition of the *Sonnets* Dedication. The evidence that Oxford wrote it, as claimed by some, is negligible, and is manifestly outweighed by these facts.

As for the claim that the layout of the Dedication page reveals a 6-2-4 pattern or "key" that contains the same number of letters as in the name Edward de Vere, *prima facie* facts make this also extremely unlikely. For one thing, as I previously wrote, the proposer of the meaning of this "key," John Rollett, later abandoned his claim on the grounds that "...a three-element key such as 6-2-4 is far too ingenious or sophisticated for the Elizabethan or Jacobean period" (186). This, of course, does not invalidate the claim, but it

is a piece of evidence that must be considered. Furthermore, despite claims to the contrary, similar arrangements of upright and inverted triangles, and other geometric figures, were commonplace on title and dedication pages of the period. Besides those I've already published (184–6), the title page of Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Penilesse* is another example, consisting of the same three inverted triangles, in this case comprising 180 letters:

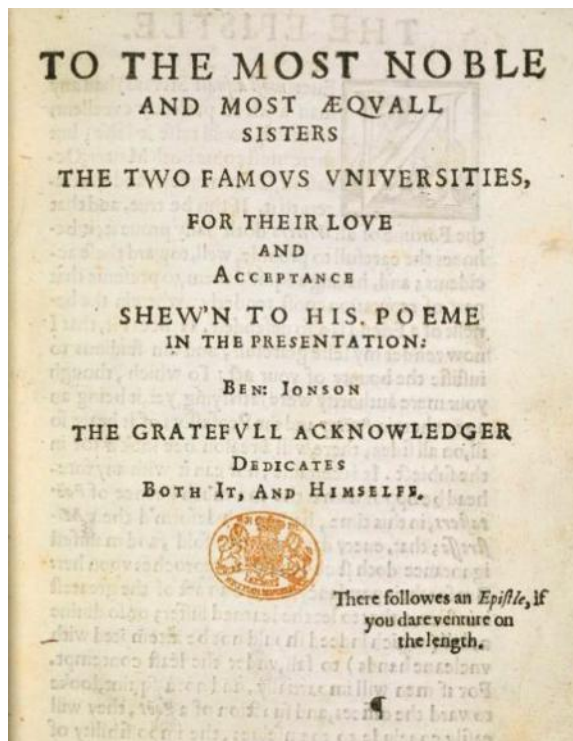
Title page of Pierce Penilesse, by Thomas Nashe, and printed by Richard Jones.



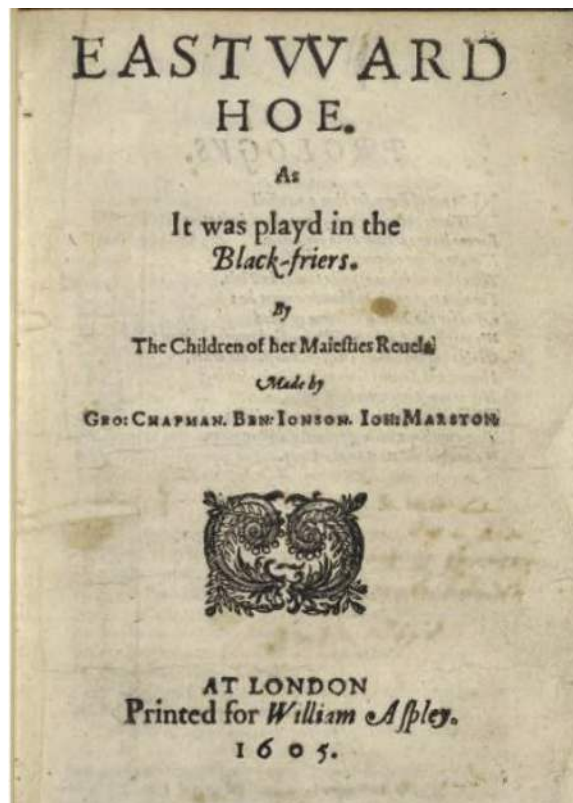
Further consideration of the layout of the Dedication page leads me to think that it was the printer, George Eld, or his compositors who designed it. In the ordinary sequence of events, the holder of the manuscript, the publisher, would hand it to the printer, whose compositors, under his direction, would then set up the title page with his particular headpiece at the top, and record the date and his name and location at the bottom of the page. It is reasonable to suppose that they would do the same for the dedication page. This is consistent with an analysis by MacDonald P. Jackson of the printing of the *Sonnets* quarto. He concluded that at least two compositors were responsible for setting up the nine sheets that made up the sixty-five pages of the quarto. Moreover, the triangular patterns on many of George Eld's quarto dedication

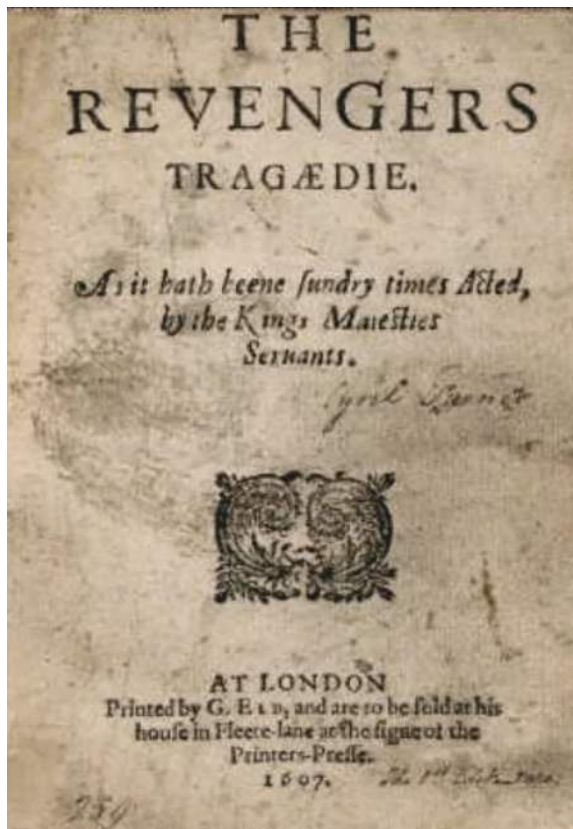
and title pages, *Volpone* (1607) and *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), for instance, are similar to those on the *Sonnets* Dedication page, and in the case of *Eastward Ho* (1605) and *Northward Ho* (1607) nearly identical.

Ben Jonson's dedication of Volpone, printed by George Eld for Thomas Thorpe in 1607.



Title page of Eastward Ho, by Chapman, Marston and Jonson, and printed by George Eld in 1605.





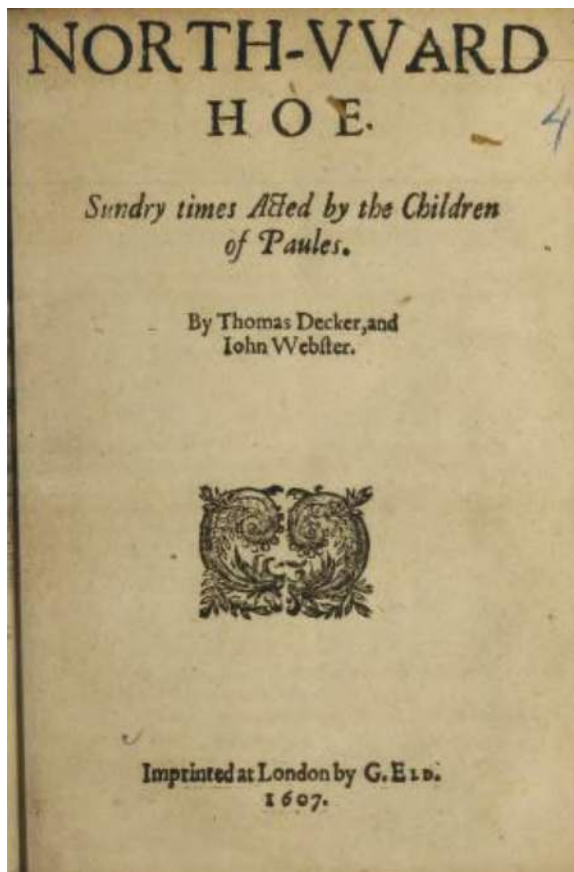
“This elaborate capitalized dedication, set out like a lapidary inscription, but in English, is perhaps worth quoting in full for its visual and syntactical resemblance to that of the *Sonnets*.”

Katherine Duncan-Jones, “Unauthorized” 159.

Title page of The Revenger's Tragedy, attributed to Cyril Tourneur and printed by George Eld in 1607.

These four title pages were all printed by George Eld in the four years just prior to his printing of the *Sonnets* Dedication, and they all contain patterns of multiple inverted triangles, similar to those on the *Sonnets* Dedication page. Therefore, the claim that the triangular arrangement of the Dedication's words was deliberately constructed to present a 6-2-4 clue to the name Edward de Vere becomes extremely unlikely. The printer and the compositors would have been paid for their one-time work, and thus had no stake in the profits from the Quarto's publication. Nor is it likely that they would have any other interest in revealing the name of the *Sonnets*' author, even if they knew it.

As for the notion that Oxford himself had anything to do with the 6-2-4 pattern on the Dedication page that allegedly hints at his name, or with the actual wording of the Dedication, as various Oxfordians have claimed or speculated, the great majority of scholars of the *Sonnets* agree that the author had nothing to do with their printing. Two of the most scrupulous of them, Sidney Lee (41) and E. K. Chambers (1:559), have asserted that Shakespeare had nothing to do with the *Sonnets* publication. In addition, Jackson's revelation of numerous errors and textual anomalies in the *Sonnets*' text has convinced editors that the quarto was set up “from some kind of non-authorial



Title page of Northward Ho, by Dekker and Webster, and printed by George Eld in 1607.

transcript" (Evans 280), thus supporting the view that the *Sonnets*' publication was unsanctioned by the author. "The weight of such evidence, then, makes it next to impossible to suppose that Shakespeare himself had any in-house connection with the printing of Q" (Evans 279). Most editors and scholars believe this to be the case, Dubrow (208–9), Burrow (99–100) and Marotti (155), for example. As W. H. Auden wrote: "Of one thing I am certain: Shakespeare must have been horrified when they were published" (105).

The rationale for defining the words and phrases in the Dedication as I did is fully explained in my article (172–5). Only by adopting the meanings of *begetter* as provider of the *Sonnets* manuscript, of *our ever-living poet* as the author of the *Sonnets*, of *the well-wishing adventurer* as Thomas Thorpe, and of *setting forth* as his publication of a literary work, does the entire message make sense. There is no evidence that Thomas Thorpe intended to direct his Dedication to Henry Wriothesley, and no reason that he would do so, since the Earl, to the extent that he was involved at all, had already been proffered

“all happiness and that eternitie” in several sonnets by their author. Any attempt by Thorpe to name or compliment him in a convoluted cryptogram would be entirely unknown and useless, except for an unlikely decoder of the alleged message.

Furthermore, there is good evidence in my article for my identification of stationer William Hall as “*Mr. W. H.*”

- Thomas Thorpe had, at least once before, dedicated a work to a fellow stationer, rather than the customary wealthy patron or aristocrat (168).
- William Hall had, on two occasions before the *Sonnets* publication, used his initials, “*W. H.*”, on a published work (175–6).
- William Hall had a conduit to Oxford, and possibly to a manuscript of the *Sonnets*, in that he had a thirty-year association with his cousin Anthony Munday, a playwright and translator who had been associated with Oxford since his teenage (176–7).
- The phrase “*Mr. W. H. ALL*” is an obvious visual pun, and is consistent with puns and humor employed by Thorpe in previous and subsequent dedications, as pointed out by several scholars (168–70).
- William Hall or W. Hall was identified as “*Mr. W. H.*” more than 150 years ago, a claim that has been echoed since then by several scholars, both Stratfordian and Oxfordian (175–6).

In fact, there is good evidence that contradicts the claim that “*Mr. W. H.*” is intended to refer to Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. On the face of it, W and H are not his initials, unless one decides for a yet obscure reason that they need to be reversed. Moreover, because of the prefix *Mr* attached to the initials *W. H.*, neither the Earl of Southampton nor the Earl of Pembroke can be *the onlie begetter*. At the time, the use of such a designation for an earl was strictly forbidden. The government was “always active in protecting the dignity of peers,” and an offense of this type would have constituted defamation (178). The claim that the prefix *Mr* was appropriate for the Earl of Southampton because he was for a period of months stripped of his title, condemned to death, ill and in prison several years before the *Sonnets* were published is nothing short of absurd.

The claim that the 144 letters of the Dedication, when rearranged in two differently-shaped grids, reveal words that identify the Fair Youth, the only begetter or anyone else is also highly unlikely for several reasons. As I

pointed out previously (186), there is no apparent reason for anyone who had a hand in the creation of the Dedication to attempt to report this information, even if they were privy to it. Even if Henry Wriothesley were the Fair Youth, or the only begetter, or both, a deeply personal relationship between him and the well-known author William Shakespeare had already been revealed, more than a decade earlier, in the dedications of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* printed over that author's name.

The claim that the arrangement of the words of the Dedication suggests a cryptogram or some secret message also rests on shaky grounds. Those making such a claim have produced no other example from the period of word order on a title page or dedication that suggested a cryptogram or secret message. Nor is there any evidence that Thomas Thorpe had ever previously created such a thing.

It beggars belief that Thomas Thorpe would have worded his Dedication in such a way that if the 144 letters were reassembled in a particular grid, the name HENRY would appear, when read diagonally and backwards. In the first place, even if it were correct that Henry Wriothesley were the addressee of some of the sonnets, a claim that has yet to be proven, how would Thorpe have known this? If he assumed it because Wriothesley had been the addressee of an adoring dedication published previously over the name William Shakespeare, as seems logical, then he knew nothing more than anyone else, and had no need to communicate this knowledge in a hidden message. Even if he had certain knowledge of the *Sonnets'* addressee, and wanted it known to the public, and thus cause more people to buy his Quarto, why would he conceal this secret so ingeniously that no one would unravel it for nearly 400 years? Moreover, from whom was he concealing this information and, more important, to whom was he revealing it?

Furthermore, the rearrangement of the letters of the Dedication into various grids is an entirely arbitrary step that no reader was likely to take unless he had prior knowledge that doing so would reveal some hidden message. As pointed out above, the arrangement of the words of the Dedication in three inverted triangles was neither unique nor unusual. Although the periods between the words are distinctive, they merely add gravity and importance to the dedicatory message. In no way can they be construed as an indication that a hidden message will be revealed by rearranging the letters in one or more grids. Even if one suspected that the Dedication contained a secret message, and then discovered that rearranging the Dedication's letters in a grid would reveal it, one would then have to decide the precise grid shape to assemble out of dozens of possibilities.

Construction of such a grid or matrix cipher is a difficult and time-consuming process, as described by Oxfordian David Moffat in an article in a recent *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*:

The most difficult step in preparing a matrix cipher is interpolating the text into the matrix after setting up the message. There are two kinds of difficulty. One is to produce a meaningful text that fits the context in which it will be found. The other is to find a way to tell the intended recipient(s) that the text is indeed a cipher, and to subtly convey the size of the intended matrix (32).

In the solutions proposed by John Rollett, John Shahan and others, the encoder would have to create two different matrices in order to reveal the two names in the message. And in the first one, the name HENRY can only be read diagonally and backwards, unless an unsymmetrical matrix is created. The second name WRIOTHESEY can be found only in an unsymmetrical grid, and then only in three unconnected sequences, reading vertically downward, upward and downward again in three different columns. These are shown on pp. 179–80 in my article.

Moffat continues:

First and foremost, since cipher construction begins with a coherent message only, we can expect to obtain a coherent message when we decipher it. That is, there is no reason to expect unnecessarily broken words, incomplete words, or words with wrong or extra letters.

Any claimed decipherment with those faults is suspect. Second, since the next step in the construction was to select a matrix that will fit the message nicely, a decipherment in which the rows are different lengths, or in which the rows are not aligned from top to bottom, is also suspect.

Third, we should be able to enter the text straight into the chosen matrix from left to right and top to bottom. Otherwise, the solution is suspect.

Finally, messages are answers to questions. We cannot legitimately make up the questions ourselves, then expect to find answers to them.

Thus, the alleged secret message, the two names, is *suspect* on three different counts—one is a broken word; one occurs in a grid in which the rows are different lengths; and neither name reads from left to right or top to bottom. It is reasonable to conclude that a claim containing three fatal faults cannot

be considered legitimate. Because of these defects in the alleged message, anyone attempting to decode it would have significant difficulty. As Moffat remarks in another article:

These [Rollett's] solutions would be astounding, if it were not for a few interesting questions that the solver must first answer: How were the dimensions of the matrices chosen? How does the method predict that the pieces of the names would appear where they do appear? The dots between the words in the dedication certainly appear to be significant; why are they not included in the matrix? Why is the superscript R in Mr treated the same as other letters? (*Shakespeare Matters* 19)

The answers to these questions have not been provided by the proposers of the cryptogram cipher. These questions, and these facts, make it extremely unlikely that the secret message scenario is the correct one.

A longstanding principle commonly used in questions of this sort says that "the weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness." The evidence for this extraordinary claim does not rise to its level of strangeness and is, in fact, negligible. And the preponderance of evidence is against it, as well.

Ramon Jiménez

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