

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER. *Making Sense of the Dedication*

by Ramon Jiménez

The purpose and meaning of the 12 lines of text on the Dedication page of the 1609 Quarto of the *Sonnets* of William Shakespeare have been the subject of intense scholarly interest for more than two centuries.¹ Although Thomas Thorpe's authorship of the Dedication has been agreed upon by nearly all scholars, the identity of the individuals referred to in the text, and the meaning of certain words and phrases, have provoked repeated speculation and controversy. And, beginning in the late 1990s, several Oxfordian scholars have disputed the authorship of Thorpe, and asserted that the 144 letters in the text contain a hidden message revealing the names of the *Sonnets*' author and the young man to whom he addressed the great majority of them. The Dedication was printed in the following form (figure 1):

In my view, the meaning of this text has been misinterpreted, and the typography and layout

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.
THESE.INSVING.SONNETS.
M^r.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.
PROMISED.
BY.
OVR.EVERLIVING.POET.
WISHETH.
THE.WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTVRER.IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.

have been over-interpreted. In this essay I will provide the evidence and make the following arguments:

- The Dedication was composed by the publisher, Thomas Thorpe.
- There is no secret message or code in the Dedication, nor any significance in its shape or typography.
- The Dedication is a straightforward, if awkward, expression of good wishes to William Hall, a fellow stationer, and the supplier of the *Sonnets*' manuscript. A reasonable rewording of it is "On the occasion of this publishing venture, I wish Mr. W. H., the sole provider of the manuscript of these sonnets, all happiness and that eternity promised by our immortal poet."²
- Edward de Vere was not involved with the Dedication in any way.

These conclusions are not new. They were advanced more than 100 years ago and have since been repeated by both Stratfordian and revisionist scholars.

The Author of the Dedication

On the available evidence, the author of the dedication must be Thomas Thorpe. The occasion of the dedication, its extravagant style, its typographical features, Thorpe's relationship to the addressee, and even his use of his initials to sign it, all comport with his previous practices.

Thorpe's other dedications were similar in style to the one he wrote for the *Sonnets*. His first, of Marlowe's translation of the first book of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (1600), was also to a fellow stationer, his "kind and true friend" Edward Blount. His opening line: "Blount: I purpose to be blunt with you" is an example of the "dedicatory name play" he often indulged in (Mandel 839). Because this translation was registered to another stationer, its legality was questioned by W. W. Greg in 1944 (172–3).

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Of Thorpe's eight surviving prefaces and dedications, only one, published in 1616, was without "punning and elaborate conceits" (Foster 47). Puns are scattered throughout his "florid and extravagant" dedication of John Healey's translation of Epictetus' *Manual* (*Epictetus and Cebes*), which he published in 1610 (Rostenberg 68). Also in 1610, Thorpe dedicated, and George Eld printed, John Healey's translation of St. Augustine's *City of God* to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, "in his characteristic witty and punning style" (Kathman, "Thorpe"). Katherine Duncan-Jones called the dedication "florid and somewhat obscure" ("Unauthorized" 163).

Thorpe published one dedication before the 1609 Quarto, and three afterward, signing them with his initials, using one or two letters—Th. Th., Th. Th., T. Th.—just as he used T. T. on both the title page and the dedication page of the *Sonnets*.

All his dedications were attached to works by authors who were dead—Marlowe, St. Augustine and Epictetus (twice), as was the author of the *Sonnets*.

In 1616, Thorpe and Eld partnered again to republish Healey's translation of Epictetus' *Manual*. In his dedication, this time to William Herbert, Thorpe used the identical phrase, "*these ensuing*," that he had used in the *Sonnets*' Dedication, although spelling it slightly differently. Sidney Lee described both of Thorpe's dedications of the Healey translations as "fantastic and bombastic in style to the bounds of incoherence" ("Thorpe").

It is also noteworthy that in the dedications to Herbert, Thorpe referred to him as "The Honorablest Patron Of Muses And Good Mindes, Lord William, Earl Of Penbroke [*sic*] (1610); and "The Right Honorable William, Earle of Pembroke" (1616).

Although many scholars maintain that Thorpe was addressing Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, or William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke in the *Sonnets*' Dedication, his failure to use their titles "is fatal to the pretension that any lord, whether by right or courtesy, was intended" (Lee, *Shakespeare* 687).

Similar dedications of earlier sonnet sequences by Barnabe Barnes, Henry Constable, and others had been made by the publisher, rather than the poet (Kathman, "Thorpe").

What's more, in his publication of Jonson's *Sejanus* in 1605, Thorpe printed a Senatorial proclamation in Act V in the same style that he printed the *Sonnets* Dedication, that is, "after the manner of a Roman inscription, capitalized, and with a stop after each word" (Duncan-Jones, "Unauthorized" 157).

Although most of Thorpe's books were legitimate printings of authorized works by well-known authors, such as Jonson, Chapman, Marston and

Nashe, he was not above publishing manuscripts that came to him in less legitimate ways. In 1611, apparently with the connivance of Ben Jonson, Thorpe published *The Odcombian Banquet*, a collection of complimentary and humorous verses and other preliminary matter by several dozen authors, that had already appeared in Thomas Coryate's *Coryats (sic) Crudities*, published earlier in the year. According to Duncan-Jones, Thorpe's publication of *The Odcombian Banquet* was "unauthorized," and "seems to be a deliberate piece of mischief." She described him as "something of a prankster" ("Unauthorized" 155, 163).³

Indeed, it was common for publishers and printers to use their initials on title pages and dedications. One obvious example is the second Quarto of *Hamlet*—"I.R." (James Roberts) for "N.L." (Nicholas Ling).⁴ Thorpe's use of his initials to sign the *Sonnets*' Dedication was a common practice "when the dedicatee was a private and undistinguished friend of the dedicator" (Lee, *Sonnets* 34, n. 2).

Thorpe's dedications to Blount and Hall were a departure from the customary dedication, which was generally directed to a nobleman, monarch, or other person of distinction.

It should be noted that this practice of unauthorized publication of an author's work, especially that of poets, was common in the Early Modern era. Manuscripts of the poetry of Philip Sidney, Thomas Watson, Samuel Daniel and Henry Constable, as well as works by Thomas Nashe, Robert Southwell and John Earle, were obtained surreptitiously by rogue stationers, and published without their permission (Lee, *Shakespeare* 157, n. 1). Five of Shakespeare's poems, four sonnets, and a song, and others by other writers, but ascribed to Shakespeare, were published by William Jaggard in three editions of *The Passionate Pilgrim* (two in 1599, one in 1612), all "pirated" publications (Prince xxi–xxiii).

This array of facts confirms that the Dedication of the *Sonnets* was consistent with the style and method that Thorpe used in his other dedications, and, in at least one case, with the same purpose. Thorpe's authorship has been the nearly unanimous opinion of scholars of the Dedication for the last 300 years, including Oxfordian scholars. But, beginning about 20 years ago, other authors have been proposed.

Brenda James and William Rubinstein, who asserted more than a decade ago that the real Shakespeare was Sir Henry Neville, also attributed the *Sonnets*' Dedication to him on the grounds that the phrase *the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth* refers to "the granting of a royal charter, three days after the official registration of the [*Sonnets*], to the second London Virginia Company." Neville was a member of, and major participant in, the Company, as

was Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, and investors in it “were repeatedly described in its royal charter as ‘adventurers’” (183–7). Neither of these claims about Neville have any support among Shakespeare scholars or editors.⁵

In an article in *The Elizabethan Review* in 1997, Dr. John Rollett introduced the idea that Oxford himself, that is, Edward de Vere, wrote the *Sonnets*’ Dedication and concealed in it his name and the names “Henry” and “Wriothesley,” to identify Mr. W. H. and the Fair Youth. Nina Green, Sturrock and Erickson, and others have supported that claim.⁶

The Role of Edward de Vere

The first question that arises about this claim is why Oxford would write a dedication to be attached to an unpublished manuscript of his *Sonnets*. Other than the dedications of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* in 1593 and 1594, there is no evidence that he had any interest or role in the publication of his plays or poems, except for publishing eight of them in *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* in 1576. The dedications of the two narrative poems were radically different in language, tone and sentiment from the *Sonnets* Dedication. In the *Sonnets*, he referred to the endurance and permanence of his “rhyme,” but aside from circulating some of them among his friends, there is no evidence that he wanted them published, either during his lifetime or after his death.

If he wished his sonnets to be published after his death and attributed to him, why would he compose an opaque dedication, and conceal his and his dedicatee’s identities in a hidden message? He had already, in his two previous dedications, revealed his heartfelt, if not abject, devotion to Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, the person alleged to be *the onlie begetter* by most scholars of the Dedication. The two previous dedications appeared over the name “William Shakespeare,” so Wriothesley’s name had already been associated with the name on the *Sonnets*’ title page.

Assuming he would write such a dedication, it is conceivable that he would address it to the person or persons who were the subjects of his sonnets. But if this were the case, why would he refer to *the onlie begetter* when his sonnets were addressed to two, or perhaps three, different people? Why would he address this *onlie begetter* as *M^r*, an honorific entirely inappropriate, even insulting, to an earl? Those claiming Oxford’s authorship explain this as correct, since Wriothesley, upon his imprisonment in February 1601, was stripped of his earldom. For Oxford to address him as *M^r* seems unnecessarily punctilious, especially since King James freed him and restored his title in 1603. And why, after Wriothesley’s earldom was restored, wouldn’t Oxford correct the text at some time during the following year?

Moreover, if Oxford were so involved in the typography of the Dedication, why would he have allowed his nom-de-plume, “Shakespeare,” which he had revealed more than 15 years earlier, to be printed as SHAKES-SPEARES on the *Sonnets* title page? As two of the most scrupulous Shakespeare scholars, Sidney Lee and E. K. Chambers, have asserted, Shakespeare had nothing to do with the *Sonnets* publication. “The book is a comparatively short one, consisting of forty leaves and 2,156 lines of verse. Yet there are probably on an average five defects per page or one in every ten lines (Lee, *Sonnets* 41).⁷

Why would Oxford wish *that eternitie* to the *begetter* when he had already promised eternity, that is, immortality, to that person in several sonnets? Whom had he in mind in the phrase *our ever-living poet*? The only poet visible in the Dedication is the author of the *Sonnets* themselves. It would be peculiar for de Vere, as that author, to refer to himself in that way. And finally, why would he refer to himself as *the well-wishing adventurer*? The only known connections between de Vere and an “adventure” were his investments between 1578 and 1582 in several expeditions in search of gold and new trade routes to the Far East. The only evidence that might suggest that he wrote the Dedication is his use of “beget” and “begetter” in the sense of “obtain” in several of his plays. But this fact is too trivial to associate him with the Dedication. Although there may be a reasonable answer to one or two of these questions, the collective improbability of these actions by Oxford outweighs any evidence that he had any role in the Dedication.

The Disputed Words and Phrases in the Dedication

The meaning and interpretation of several words and phrases in the Dedication are the keys in determining who wrote it, to whom it was addressed, and what message the writer intended to convey.

The obvious recipient of the Dedication, *the onlie begetter*, was first described as the procurer or supplier of the *Sonnets* manuscript by George Chalmers in 1799 (52). In 1817, Nathan Drake agreed, describing *the onlie begetter* as the procurer or obtainer of the *Sonnets*’ manuscript, and identified him as Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton (2:58ff.)

Another leading candidate for *the onlie begetter* is William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, who was first proposed by James Boaden in 1832, and whom he also identified as the inspirer of the *Sonnets* (57–8).⁸

A third candidate for *the onlie begetter* is William Hall, an obscure stationer active in London between 1598 and 1614, who was first proposed as the procurer of the *Sonnets*’ manuscript by Sidney Lee in 1898. Both Lee and, later, B. R. Ward asserted that Hall, a resident of Hackney, obtained the manuscript and provided it to Thorpe (Lee, *Shakespeare* 672–85).

The last important candidate for *the onlie begetter* is Sir William Harvey or Hervey, who, in 1598, became the third husband of Mary Wriothesley, Countess of Southampton and mother of Henry Wriothesley. In 1867, Gerald Massey suggested that he was the procurer of the *Sonnets* manuscript, having inherited the Southampton papers on his wife's death in 1607. This view was supported by C. C. Stopes in 1922 (343–4), and in 1965 by A. L. Rowse (x–xii), both of whom associated Thorpe's wish of *all happinesse* to Sir William because of his remarriage, in 1608, to a younger woman.⁹

There are, perhaps, ten other candidates for the role of *begetter*. His identity depends on what the author of the Dedication meant by his use of the word *begetter*—inspirer, procurer, or the *Sonnets'* author. There are numerous scholars on all three sides of this question.

The noun *begetter* is an obvious derivative of the verb *beget*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is a “word inherited from Germanic” and “cognate with or formed similarly to Old Saxon *bigetan* to seize, Old High German *bigezzan* to obtain, get hold of, attain, Gothic *bi-gitan* to find...the Germanic base of BE- *prefix* + the Germanic base of GET *v.*” The prefix *be* has the effect of intensifying the verb to which it is attached, such as in the words *besiege*, *bedeck*, *beguile*, *beloved*, *begrudge*, etc.

In the words of Sidney Lee:

‘Beget’ came into being as an intensive form of ‘get’, and was mainly employed in Anglo-Saxon and Mediaeval English in the sense of ‘obtain’. It acquired the specialized signification of ‘breed’ at a slightly later stage of development, and until the end of the seventeenth century it bore concurrently the alternative meanings of ‘procure’ (or ‘obtain’) and ‘breed’ (or ‘produce’). Seventeenth century literature and lexicography recognized these two senses of the word and no other (*Sonnets* 38, n.1).

Lee cited a contemporary example of the use of *beget* to denote “procure” or “obtain” in Jonson's dedication of *Sejanus*: “[this play] hath *begot itself* (i.e. procured for itself or obtained) a greater favour than he (i.e. Sejanus) lost, the love of good men.” The play was published by Thomas Thorpe in 1605. Lee cited a half dozen other examples of identical usage (*Sonnets* 38–9).

The *OED* supplies two definitions of “begetter”:

1. The agent that originates, produces, or occasions something; a creator or originator.
2. A person who begets a child; a procreator; a parent.

We may discard definition 2 as inappropriate in this context. The *OED* cites Thorpe's phrase in the Dedication as an example under definition 1. But the multiple synonyms listed include all three meanings, that is, someone who "obtains" something, someone who "occasions" something, and someone who "creates" something. Considered by itself, the word could be defined by any of these three alternatives. In the context of the Dedication, however, the correct meaning will be the one that agrees with the definitions of the other words in the Dedication to result in a coherent message. These other definitions will determine which is the correct one for *begetter*. The most reasonable meaning of the word is that of an originator or producer. These could be the creator of the *Sonnets* or the person who produced or provided the manuscript. Neither of these meanings suggests an inspirer or animator who is the subject of a poem. And it would be extremely unusual, if not bizarre, for a book of poems to be dedicated to its author.

Nevertheless, scholars, from the earliest commentators to the most recent, have been deeply divided between "procurer" and "inspirer." In support of his interpretation, Lee cited the views of Edmond Malone, George Steevens and James Boswell the Younger (*Sonnets* 38–9). Others of the same opinion include Knight, Collier, Hazlitt, and Halliwell-Phillipps (Rollins 2:166–9). More recently, C. C. Stopes (344), C. W. Barrell (50–1), A. L. Rowse (xi), Ruth L. Miller (Looney 2:234), Eva Turner Clark (449–50), Alden Brooks (141), Mark Anderson (365) and Brian Vickers (8) have agreed with Lee's definition of *begetter*.

However, most modern scholars of the *Sonnets*, such as Katherine Duncan-Jones (*Sonnets* 108), G. B. Evans (115–6) and Ingram and Redpath (3–4) consider the *begetter* the inspirer of the *Sonnets*. These two contradictory interpretations of the phrase, as provider or inspirer, have persisted to the present day.

The phrase *our ever-living poet* can mean no one other than the author of the *Sonnets*, a person either dead, or immortal in the sense that he will never be forgotten. In John Benson's edition of the *Sonnets* (1640), Leonard Digges praised "never-dying" Shakespeare (Chambers 2:232).

Of the five meanings of *adventurer* supplied in the *OED*, the most appropriate in this context is:

1. A person who undertakes or invests in a commercial adventure or enterprise; one who ventures capital in some project, esp. trade or settlement; a speculator. With capital initial: a member of an association of such people established by royal charter or some other authority.

The *OED* cites the use of the word in Thorpe's Dedication as an example under this meaning.

There are several other examples of stationers using the word in connection with their publications.¹⁰

But, again, as with *begetter*, the multiple synonyms listed allow different interpretations. The correct one will be the one that fits most appropriately into the meaning of the entire Dedication. The adjective *well-wishing* identifies the *adventurer* as the person, that is, the author of the Dedication, wishing *Mr W. H. all happiness*.

The *OED* supplies several meanings for the verb phrase *to set forth* (set, v.1. Phrasal Verbs 2). None is appropriate in the context of the Dedication except no. 5—“To publish (a literary work).” This is clearly the meaning intended in the Dedication, that is, Thomas Thorpe, the *adventurer* is publishing a literary work. Sidney Lee supplied several examples of identical usage (*Sonnets* 37, n.1).

Thus, 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 publishing a literary work, the result is the sentence proposed above:

On the occasion of this publishing venture, I wish Mr. W. H., the sole provider of the manuscript of these sonnets, all happiness and that eternity promised by our immortal poet.

Only by adopting these particular meanings does the entire Dedication not only make sense, but also accurately describe the circumstances of the publication by Thomas Thorpe of a book of *Sonnets*, after he was provided the manuscript by William Hall.

The People in the Dedication

The best evidence is that *the onlie begetter*—*Mr. W. H.*— is William Hall, a fellow stationer who appears to have had access to manuscripts left by de Vere at his death. The phrase *Mr. W. H. ALL* is an obvious visual pun that should be read as “Mr. W. Hall,” a reading first proposed in 1867 by Ebenezer Forsyth (24). He went no further than that, being unable to locate a W. Hall among the relatives and friends of William Shakspeare of Stratford.

But in 1898, in his biography of Shakespeare, Sidney Lee proposed that the stationer William Hall was *Mr. W. H.* on the following grounds:

On at least one previous occasion, Hall had acquired a manuscript by a deceased author, and arranged its publication. In 1606, he obtained the manuscript of *A Foure-Fould Meditation*, a collection of poems by Philip Howard, 13th Earl of Arundel, and several other Catholic

writers. Howard had been attainted and imprisoned in 1589 and died in 1595. On the title page, the work was falsely attributed to “R. S. *the author of St. Peters complaint*.” Because of the popularity of the Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell, it was common for printers at the time to attach his name to devotional works by other writers (Southwell v; Pollen and Macmahon 326–7).

In a lengthy dedication, Hall extolled “these meditations,” and how they had come to him: “Long have they lien hidden in obscuritie, and haply had never seene the light, had not a meere accident conveyed them to my hands.”¹¹ Hall then signed the dedication of Eld’s edition of Howard’s poems with the initials “W. H.” In a Bibliographical Note to a reprint of this edition in 1895, the editor, Charles Edmonds, wrote, “I have always presumed this ‘W. H.’ to be the same ‘W. H.’ who gave Shakespeare’s Sonnets to the world...” (Southwell viii). As Alden Brooks wrote in 1943, “it is most unlikely that there should have been about the year 1609 two persons with the initials W. H. both engaged in procuring poems for the publishing trade” (141). *A Foure-Fould Meditation* was printed in 1606 by George Eld, the printer of the *Sonnets* three years later.

In 1608, Hall was granted permission to publish a manuscript by Justin, the Christian martyr, which he did the next year (Arber 3:396). With this publication, his name appeared on a title page for the first time, representing “the earliest credential of his independence. It entitled him to the prefix ‘Mr.’ in all social relations” (Lee, *Shakespeare* 683 n.1). By 1612, Hall had set up his own printing business, and in that year printed *The Araignment of John Selman* (*sic*), an account of the execution of a pickpocket. On the title page appears the phrase “Printed by W. H.”¹²

These facts confirm that William Hall used the initials “W. H.” both before the *Sonnets* were printed (on a dedication) and afterward (on a title page), and that it was not unusual for him to acquire a manuscript of a deceased author.

Pursuing the case in 1922, Col. B. R. Ward was able to place William Hall in the parish of Hackney in 1608, and to associate the passing of the *Sonnets* manuscript from him to Thomas Thorpe with the dissolution of Oxford’s household in Hackney, and his widow’s sale of Brooke House in 1609 (18–21).

To this end, Ward found the christening of a Margaret Gryffyn recorded in a register at St. Saviour’s Southwark in 1592 (Looney 2:219). Further, in the Hackney Parish Registers, Ward found an entry recording the marriage of a William Hall and Margery Gryffyn in August 1608 (Looney 2:220). More than one scholar has noticed that Thorpe’s wish of *all happiness* might well be an appropriate sentiment to extend to a newly married man (Stopes 344; Anderson 365).

Additional evidence for William Hall's presence in the parish of Hackney appeared in three articles by Col. Ward, published in the *Hackney Spectator* in August and September 1924.

In the Feet of Fines for Hackney, a transaction was recorded in 1600 “between James Knowles and John Costerdyne, plaintiffs, and William Hall and Elizabeth his wife and William Watkinson defendant of 5 acres of meadow...in Hackney 41 pounds” (Looney 2:219). The supposition here is that Hall's wife, Elizabeth, died sometime before 1608. Although it is not certain that the William Hall and Margaret or Margery Gryffyn mentioned in these documents are those now under scrutiny, the possibility that they are the same people requires that this evidence be included in the discussion.

Additional evidence that William Hall may have had access to manuscripts left by Edward de Vere at his death lies in Hall's relationship with Anthony Munday, playwright, translator, and a known associate of de Vere.

First, William Hall and Anthony Munday were both apprenticed to the printer John Alde in the late 1570s (Turner 5, 14, 26; McKerrow 121). Munday's first surviving publication, *The Mirrour of Mutabilitie*, was printed by John Alde in 1579. After Munday's effusive dedication to the Earl of Oxford, there follow several verses commending the author, including one from William Hall “in commendation of his kinsman Anthony Munday,” and signed with the initials “W. H.” (Munday 19).

Munday had been associated with Oxford since his teenage years and had dedicated a novel and half-a-dozen translations to him during the 1580s and 1590s. Moreover, Munday was also involved with Oxford/Shakespeare in the composition and revision of *Sir Thomas More*, a play dated as early as 1593 and as late as 1608 (Jowett 424–43). Even later, in 1619, in his dedication of *Primaleon* to the 18th Earl, Henry de Vere, Munday was still lavish in his praise of “that most noble Earl your father of famous and desertful memory” (B. M. Ward 200–202).¹³

A manuscript of *Troilus and Cressida*, certainly composed before 1603, apparently became available in 1609, and was printed by the *Sonnets* printer, George Eld. A second state of this printing contained a “publisher's advertisement” that referred to “the grand possessors' wills” [intentions] and the “scape it [the play] hath made” (Bevington 120–2).

These facts support the claim by Sidney Lee that *the onlie begetter* was William Hall¹⁴, and the subsequent claim by Col. Ward that William Hall likely had access to a manuscript of Oxford's *Sonnets*, and perhaps other manuscripts, around the year 1609 through his “kinsman,” Anthony Munday.

Because of the prefix *M'* 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.¹⁵ (Pembroke was a member of the Privy Council at the time.) As mentioned above, Henry Wriothesley’s title had been restored in 1603, long before the *Sonnets* were printed. In addition, Thomas Thorpe, in 1610 and 1616, dedicated publications to William Herbert, addressing him in both instances as Earl of Pembroke.

Although the initials of Sir William Harvey or Hervey are in the right order; and although he was appropriately addressed as “Mr.”; and although he inherited his wife’s “goods and chattels, household stuff and estate” in 1607 (Stopes 335), it is extremely unlikely that he would have found the *Sonnets* manuscript among his deceased wife’s papers and delivered it to Thomas Thorpe. Nor is it likely that, had Henry Wriothesley possessed the manuscript, he would have left it in his mother’s household.

The Message in the Dedication

It should be pointed out, first, that the words and phrases in the *Sonnets* Dedication were not unusual at the time. In the words of Donald Foster, “The same basic sentence, with varying incidentals, appears in hundreds of Renaissance book dedications, most frequently as an epigraph to a longer ‘epistle dedicatory,’ as in another of Thorpe’s publications, *The Preachers Travels*, by John Cartwright” (figure 2):

TO THE VERTVOVS AND
Worthy Knight, Sir THOMAS HVNT,
one of his Maiesties lustices of the
Peace and Quorum in the Countie of
Surrey, I. C wisheth all ter-
restriall and celestiaall happinesse.

(A2r)¹⁶

The message alleged by Dr. John Rollett to be hidden in the *Sonnets* Dedication consists of the two names “Henry” and “Wriothesley.” The first question that arises about such a message, hidden or not, is why it was necessary in this publication of the *Sonnets*. Wriothesley had already been associated in the most intimate way with Shakespeare in the dedications of *Venus and*

Adonis and *Lucrece* years earlier. Moreover, if Thomas Thorpe found it necessary to connect Wriothesley with the *Sonnets*, why didn't he simply do so, rather than conceal his name in such a way that it remained hidden for hundreds of years?

Because of the Dedication's "unusual appearance, peculiar syntax, and obscure meaning," as well as the questions about it raised by various scholars, Rollett surmised that it contained a cipher (97). From the numerous types of ciphers possible, he chose to seek the message in a "transpositional cipher," that is, a cipher that rearranges the letters in the plain text. Rollet produced the following rearrangement of the text in what he called a "perfect rectangular array" of 8 rows of 18 letters in which the name WR IOTH ESLEY could be made out in three unattached sequences, reading vertically downward, upward and down again in columns 2, 11, and 10 (figure 3):

T	O	T	H	E	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T	T	E	R
O	F	T	H	E	S	E	I	N	S	V	I	N	G	S	O	N	N
E	T	S	M	r	W	H	A	L	L	H	A	P	P	I	N	E	S
S	E	A	N	D	T	H	A	T	E	T	E	R	N	I	T	I	E
P	R	O	M	I	S	E	D	B	Y	O	V	R	E	V	E	R	L
I	V	I	N	G	P	O	E	T	W	I	S	H	E	T	H	T	H
E	W	E	L	L	W	I	S	H	I	N	G	A	D	V	E	N	T
V	R	E	R	I	N	S	E	T	T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H

"Support for the correctness of this decipherment," Rollett continued, "comes from the perfect array with 9 rows of 16 letters," which, reading downward diagonally from the second row spells HENRY (figure 4).

T	O	T	H	E	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T	T	E	R
E	R	O	F	T	H	E	S	E	I	N	S	V	I	N	G	S	O
S	O	N	N	E	T	S	M	r	W	H	A	L	L	H	A	P	P
P	P	I	N	E	S	S	E	A	N	D	T	H	A	T	E	T	E
T	E	R	N	I	T	I	E	P	R	O	M	I	S	E	D	B	Y
B	Y	O	V	R	E	V	E	R	L	I	V	I	N	G	P	O	E
O	E	T	W	I	S	H	E	T	H	T	H	E	W	E	L	L	W
L	W	I	S	H	I	N	G	A	D	V	E	N	T	V	R	E	R
E	R	I	N	S	E	T	T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H		

“In an array with 15 letters in each row (the last being incomplete),” Rollett continued, “the name can be read out vertically in the 7th column” (figure 5):

T	O	T	H	E	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T
T	E	R	O	F	T	H	E	S	E	I	N	S	V	I
N	G	S	O	N	N	E	T	S	M	r	W	H	A	L
L	H	A	P	P	I	N	E	S	S	E	A	N	D	T
H	A	T	E	T	E	R	N	I	T	I	E	P	R	O
M	I	S	E	D	B	Y	O	V	R	E	V	E	R	L
I	V	I	N	G	P	O	E	T	W	I	S	H	E	T
H	T	H	E	W	E	L	L	W	I	S	H	I	N	G
A	D	V	E	N	T	V	R	E	R	I	N	S	E	T
T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H						

From these three arrays, or grids, Rollett concluded that “It is a reasonable deduction (though perhaps not an inescapable one) that the full name ‘Henry Wriothesley’ was deliberately concealed in the Dedication, in order to record for posterity his identity as ‘Mr. W. H’”. He also concluded that Henry Wriothesley was indeed “the young man to whom many of the sonnets were addressed...” (98).

It will be noticed, first, that the last grid shown is five letters short of symmetrical, and that if it were symmetrical, or “perfect” as Rollett describes the other two, the name HENRY would not line up vertically. This illustrates a feature of all three grids—they are arbitrary. The number of possible grids, symmetrical or not, in a message of 144 letters is over 70. The decoder would, therefore, have to try out dozens of possible grids to locate the hidden message.

Another such “perfect” grid would produce, in the same disjointed fashion as in the WR IOTH ESLEY grid, both spellings, HA RV EY and HE RV EY, of the name of another candidate for Mr. W. H. (figure 6):

T	O	T	<u>H</u>	<u>E</u>	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T	T	E	R
O	F	T	H	E	S	E	I	N	S	U	I	N	G	S	O	N	N
E	T	S	M	r	W	H	A	L	L	<u>H</u>	<u>A</u>	P	P	I	N	E	S
S	E	A	N	D	T	H	A	T	<u>E</u>	T	E	R	N	I	T	I	E
P	R	O	M	I	S	E	D	B	Y	O	U	R	E	V	E	R	L
I	V	I	N	G	P	O	E	T	W	I	S	H	E	T	H	T	H
E	W	E	L	L	W	I	S	H	I	N	G	A	D	V	E	N	T
U	R	E	R	I	N	S	E	T	T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H

In either spelling, Sir William’s initials are in the right order.

In the same grid, yet another name, HERBERT can be pieced out (figure 7):



Sir William Herbert, whose initials are also in the right order, is another candidate for Mr. W. H.

Another feature of Rollett's three grids is that the letter "r," which was printed in superscript in the Quarto, is given the same weight as the other letters, another arbitrary decision to be made by the decoder. If the writer intended the "r" to be included in the grid, and given the same weight as the other letters, why wouldn't he simply print it as a capital, or leave it out entirely? An "MR" would have left no doubt. As it happens, including the "r" in the grid is essential to obtaining the names "Henry" and "Wriothesley." Eliminating it removes each name from its respective grid (figure 8):



In his article, Rollett repeatedly cited the "criteria for assessing whether a solution of a supposed cipher is genuine or not" that appeared in *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined* by William and Elizebeth Friedman:

- "the key to the cipher should be given unambiguously, either in the text or in some other way, and not contrived to fit in with preconceived ideas;"

- “the decoded message should make good sense, and have been sufficiently important to have been worth concealing;”
- “the message should have been hidden where it had a high probability of being found.”

As to the first criterion, Rollett writes, “With regard to the cipher keys, these are factors of 144, the number of letters in the text...” Presumably, by “factors” Rollett is referring to the number of columns and rows used in his grids. It is true that in two of his three grids the number of columns and rows are “factors,” that is, exact divisors of 144. But, as pointed out above, there are scores of differently-shaped grids, more than a dozen of which are symmetrical or “perfect.” How is it unambiguous that one or another should be used? One such “perfect” grid produces “Harvey,” “Hervey” and “Herbert,” three entirely different solutions. And how is it unambiguous that the “key” to the hidden message requires a repositioning of the letters of the plain text into grids?

As to the second criterion, the two names, “Henry” and “Wriothesley” make “good sense” with respect to *Mr W. H.* only if it occurs to the decoder to reverse their initial letters and discard the inappropriate title. As to the names being “sufficiently important to have been worth concealing,” it is simply not credible, as pointed out above, that Thomas Thorpe found it necessary to hide Wriothesley’s name when it had already been intimately and publicly associated with Shakespeare’s.

As to the third criterion, Rollett simply states that it is “clearly fulfilled,” that is, it was “hidden where it had a high probability of being found” (99). The fact that no one, until nearly 400 years after the *Sonnets* were published, found this alleged solution, belies this claim.

Another criterion advanced by the Friedmans, one that Rollett failed to mention, is that “if any element of the key is such that it demands a decision by the decipherer which is based on subjective considerations..., then it will be difficult for the decipherer to get an incontestable answer” (214–5). As described above, each of the steps that the decipherer must take in Rollett’s process requires a decision—that is, what type of cipher to use, which grid to use, how many grids to use, which names found in the grids to use (Henry, Harvey, etc.), and which person or persons in the Dedication have been identified—the *onlie begetter*, *Mr W. H.*, the *well-wishing adventurer* or *our ever-living poet*. In each of these instances, the decipherer must make the correct decision to arrive at the solution that Rollett proposes. In the words of the Friedmans, “the method allows so much room for choice on the part of the ‘decipherer’ that he can produce any answer he likes. The method, in other words, carries its own refutation with it” (74).

Rollett further claimed that the likelihood that the names he found in the grids occurred by accident was one in several billion (109). But considering that different names, “Harvey,” “Hervey” and “Herbert,” each relevant to the question, also appeared in a grid renders this calculation meaningless.

It is striking that the one name that appears unmistakably in all the grids is *WHALL*.

The Appearance of the Dedication

Rollett suspected that the arrangement of the words of the Dedication, in three inverted triangles, contained a clue to “concealed information.” He reasoned that the full-stops or periods after each word suggested that *counting* them would reveal the clue. After trying several methods of counting, and finding nothing promising, he noticed that the number of lines in each triangle produced a set of three numbers—6, 2 and 4. He continued: “Counting through the Dedication, using these numbers as the key, we obtain the following sequence of words: “THESE . SONNETS . ALL . BY . EVER . . .” From this, he concluded that “these words appear to point to an author other than Shakespeare” (108).

It is obvious that this series of actions requires at least four different decisions by the decoder as to how to proceed. More than that, it requires that only the first two syllables of the compound word *ever-living* be used to obtain the sequence, even though there is no period after *ever*. From this point, it was an easy step to find the name Edward de Vere among the multiple candidates for the authorship of the Shakespeare canon, and to conclude that the layout of the Dedication contained a statement that it was he who had composed the sonnets, and that therefore he was Shakespeare.

On the face of it, it is hard to believe that any reader could find his way through this tortuous process, making four or five correct decisions as to which way to proceed, and arrive at the revelatory phrase. It is hard to imagine Thomas Thorpe, or anyone else, constructing this unstable assemblage of letters that contained both a plain and a hidden message. Did he start with three names and try to write a dedication around them? Or did he start with a dedication and try to conceal three names in its text? No one, in the centuries since the *Sonnets* were printed, nor anyone in the nearly 80 years since the revelation that Edward de Vere wrote them, detected any hint of his name in the Dedication until Rollett did so in 1997.

Despite Rollett's claims to the contrary, the appearance of the Dedication is not unusual. Inverted triangles and capital letters were common in many title pages and dedications of the period, such as those in figures 9–16. They were also prominent in publications by Thomas Thorpe and those printed by George Eld both before and after they collaborated on the *Sonnets* in 1609. At least two scholars have commented on their similarity to the *Sonnets* Dedication. On Jonson's dedication of *Volpone*, printed by Eld for Thorpe in 1607 (fig. 9), Katherine Duncan-Jones wrote: "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*" ("Unauthorized" 159).

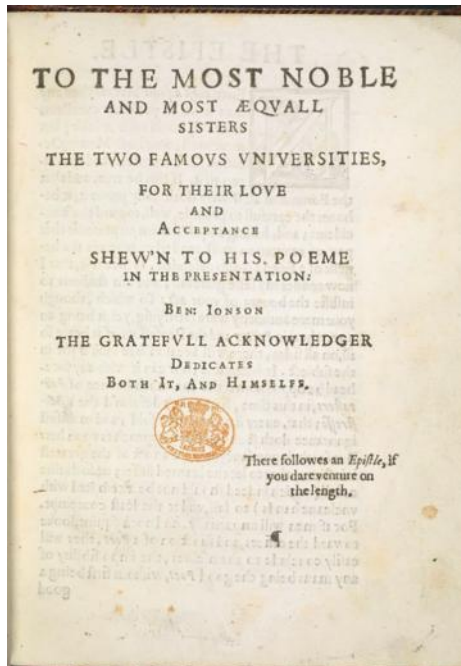


Figure 9: Ben Jonson's dedication of *Volpone*, printed by George Eld for Thomas Thorpe in 1607.

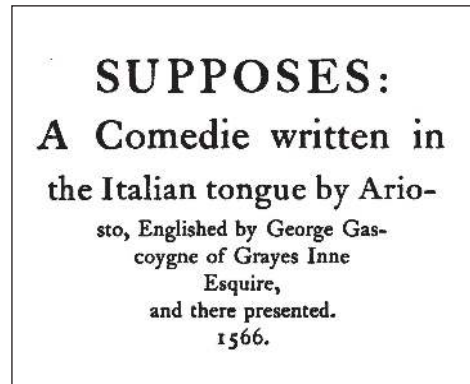


Figure 10: *Supposes* title page.

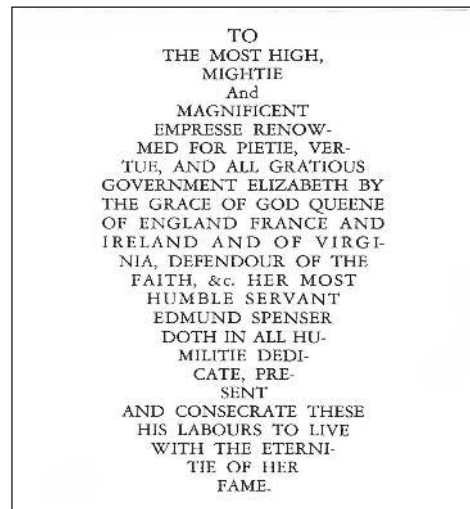


Figure 11: Dedication page of *Spenser's Fairie Queene*. 1596.

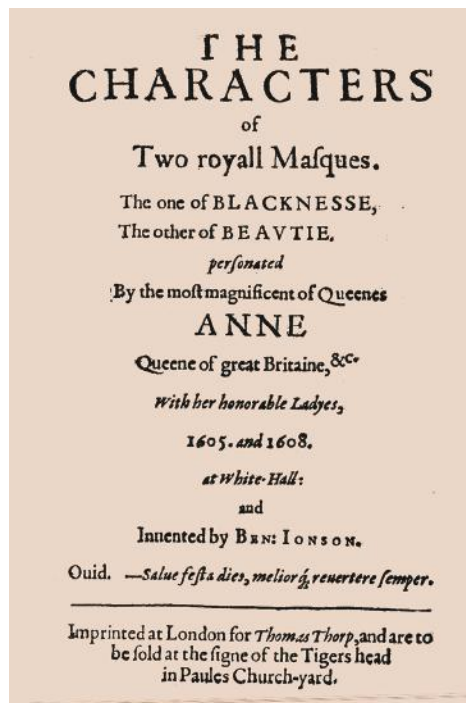


Figure 12: Title page of one of Thomas Thorpe's earlier publications.

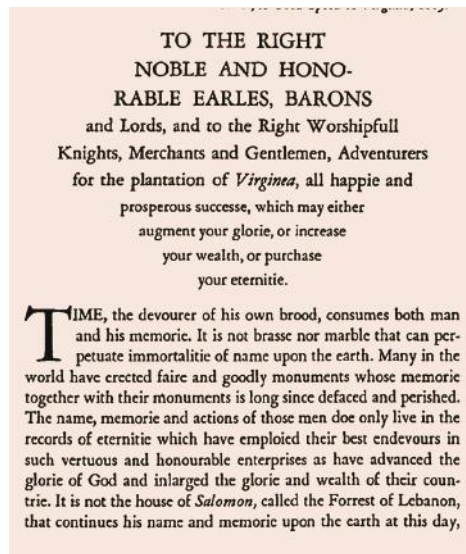


Figure 14: Dedication of A Good Speed to Virginia by R. G. 1609.

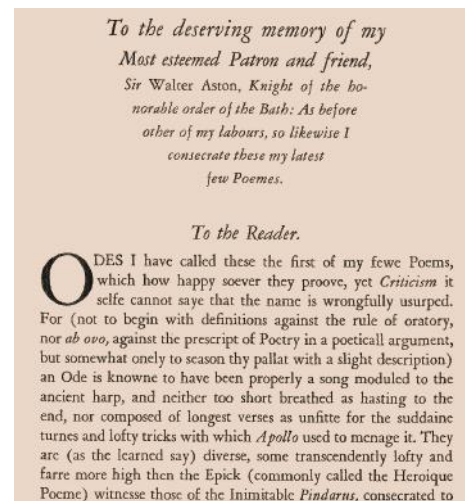


Figure 13: Dedication page of Michael Drayton's Poems, Lyrick and Pastorall 1606.

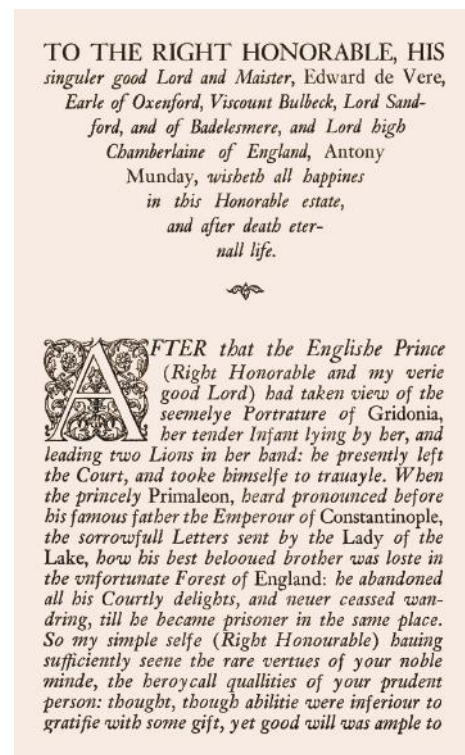


Figure 15: First page of Anthony Munday's Dedication of Zelauto to Edward de Vere. 1580.

George Eld's title page of *Troilus and Cressida* (figure 16), which he printed just months after printing the *Sonnets*, drew the following comment from Johann Gregory: "To a certain extent, the symmetrical prose at the bottom of the title page, so alike to the shape of the dedication to the *Sonnets*, might in part be a signature printing style of George Eld; several of his other title pages include the use of text centered symmetrically, although other printers did this too" (192).

The only distinctive feature of the Dedication, the period after each word, is hardly indicative of "concealed information." It is simply "a printer's convention used in imitation of lapidary inscriptions and monumental brasses.... The lapidary format, though cryptlike, is anything but cryptic" (Foster 43).

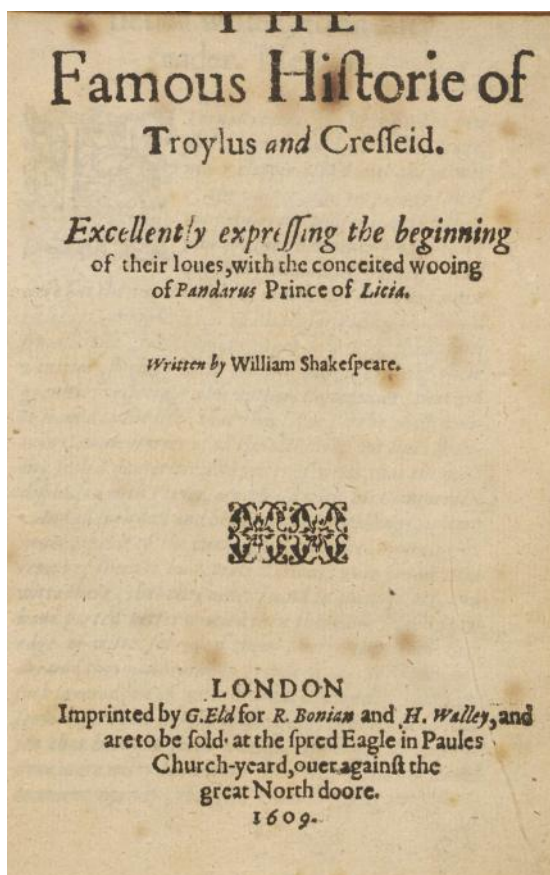


Figure 16: Title Page of *Troilus and Cressida*, printed by George Eld. 1609. STC 22332, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Furthermore, to whom was Thorpe communicating this hidden message? And from whom was he concealing it? If he wanted to tell the ordinary reader that de Vere was Shakespeare, he picked a devilish way to do it. If he wanted to give one or more specific people the same message, why didn't just tell them, rather than conceal it in an elaborate puzzle in a printed work? The simplest answer is that he had neither intention in mind, but merely wanted, in his usual clever and jocular way, to thank William Hall for the manuscript, and extend to him his wishes for happiness.

In 2004, in an unusual act of intellectual honesty, Rollett wrote that the fact that the phrase he found lacked a verb "cast doubt on the validity of the proposed solution." He conceded that "a three-element key such as 6-2-4 is far too ingenious or sophisticated for the Elizabethan or Jacobean period."¹⁷

In the same year, Rollett abandoned Oxford as the genuine Shakespeare, and then, a few years before his untimely death in 2015, proposed William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby, as the author of the canon.

The explanation of the Dedication that John Rollett proposed is burdened with too many arbitrary decisions and too little evidence. A message of thanks and good wishes to a friend from Thomas Thorpe is the most parsimonious explanation. It is the simplest, the most sensible, and the one supported by the facts.

Endnotes

1. The name William Shakespeare was the pseudonym of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.
2. Sidney Lee reworded it as follows: “The well-wishing adventurer in setting forth [*i.e.* the publisher] T[homas] T[horpe] wisheth Mr. W. H., the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets, all happiness and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet” (*Shakespeare* 673). Lee’s brackets.
3. Thorpe’s piracy of *Coryats Crudities* is unusual because he reprinted only the preliminary material from the book, but none of the text. The epigraph that he attached to the book—*Asinus portans mysteria*—“donkey carrying a secret,” is typical of his drollery. The name *Odcombian* derives from the village of Odcombe in Somerset, the birthplace of Thomas Coryate.
4. Additional examples can be found in Lee’s biography (678) and in Hazlitt at 231–3, 269–70, 288.
5. See a review of their book *The Truth Will Out* in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*. 41:4, Fall 2005. 24–7.
6. “It’s Oxford/Shakespeare’s style to a ‘T’—the mindset, the complex sentence structure, the puns and jests, the turns of phrase, etc. etc.” Nina Green: Phaeton posting Jan. 24, 1999.
7. “there are sufficient misprints...to make it clear that the volume cannot have been ‘overseen’...by Shakespeare” (Chambers 1:559).
8. Boaden acknowledged that one B. Heywood Bright had proposed this solution to him in 1819.
9. John Dover Wilson also favored him (163–4).
10. “The stationer Thomas Walkley in 1622, in his preface to the Second Quarto of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster*, wrote that he ‘had *adventured* to issue a revised edition knowing how many *well-wishers* it had abroad’. Another ‘stationer’, Richard Hawkins, who published on his own account the third edition of the same play in 1628, described himself in the preliminary page as ‘acting the *merchant adventurer’s* part’” (Lee, *Sonnets* 37).

11. A fuller description of this matter can be seen in Lee, *Shakespeare* 682.
12. The title page of the British Museum copy can be seen at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1896-1230-96.
13. Oxfordian biographer Mark Anderson suggested that Philip Howard's brother Thomas may have given the manuscript of *A Four-Fold Meditation* to de Vere in the early 1590s as part of an effort to obtain "royal clemency" for Philip, who had been attainted and imprisoned in 1589. Howard, an avowed Catholic, and Oxford were frequently seen together during the 1580s at tournaments and court events. "Thus one suspects *A Four-Fold Meditation* among de Vere's books and papers at the time of his death in 1604" (365). If the manuscript remained in de Vere's household, it may, after his death, found its way to William Hall and to Thomas Thorpe in the same way as the *Sonnets* manuscript did.
14. Brian Vickers agreed with this conclusion as recently as 2007 (8).
15. Because of a similar discourtesy just a year earlier, "Sir Henry Colte was indicted in the Star Chamber for addressing a peer, Lord Morley, as 'goodman Morley.'" See Lee, *Shakespeare* 689, n. 1.
16. Foster 44. The title page reads "Printed for Thomas Thorppe, [*sic*] and are to bee [*sic*] sold by Walter Burre, 1611." It will be noticed that the dedication is arranged in three triangles.
17. He added that "An unverifiable cipher solution, employing techniques not recorded as having been used until the 20th Century is unlikely to be the genuine solution of a hypothetical cryptogram dating before 1609." Malim, ed. *Great Oxford*, 265–6.

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