

**THE ONLIE BEGETTER**  
*The Sonnets Epigraph Analyzed*  
by David Basch

This article on the *epigraph* -- the brief dedication that opens *Shakespeare's Sonnets* -- is an expanded adaptation of a part of the fourth chapter of *The Shakespeare Codes* (Basch, *Revelatory Press*, 2000). Leading up to it in the book was the unraveling of Shakespeare's cipher code and some of his other hidden communications. Among the revelations brought was that some of the sonnets were written as praises to God in the pattern of the *Bible's Psalms*. The epigraph turns out to be a magnificent example of both the arts of literature and of cryptography.

**T**he mysterious eleven line *epigraph* — *the dedication that begins Shakespeare's 1609 publication of the Sonnets* — has given birth to countless volumes in attempts to unravel its elusive meaning and mysteries. These probes have demonstrated the abundant resourcefulness of commentators in bringing forth novel interpretations of an epigraph that consists of less than 30 words.

It is on the third line of the dedication that a reference to "Mr. W.H." is made. He is the person assumed to be the "*friend*" of the poet and the inspirer of the *Sonnets* as well as the one addressed in most of its 154 poems. This scant reference and his station as "Mr." have ever since invited efforts to explicitly identify him.

On the next page is a copy of the original *Sonnets* dedication page that appeared in the 1609 *quarto* publication — *called a quarto after the printing process that produces four pages with each imprint*. It shows

TO. THE. ONLIE. BEGETTER. OF,  
THESE. INSVING. SONNETS.  
M<sup>r</sup>. W. H. ALL. HAPPINESSE.  
AND. THAT. ETERNITIE.  
PROMISED.

BY.

OVR. EVERLIVING. POET.

WISHETH

THE. WELL-WISHING.

ADVENTVRER. IN.

SETTING.

FORTH.

T. T.

Dedication page, 1609 quarto edition of *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS*.

the epigraph with its series of short text lines that to modern sensibilities seem to be a disjointed sequence of phrases. It is made even more puzzling by its peculiar system of "*pointing*" that uses a period between each word and at the end of every line. There is also an occasional, non uniform, vertical spacing between lines that creates separate clusters of text. The text concludes with the initials *T.T.* Although these are identified as that of the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, presumed to have written the epigraph, there are some commentators who would debate that.

The identity of "*Mr. W.H.*," the alleged *friend* of the poet, is the single most controversial feature of the dedication. While in the opinion of some scholars, the "*Mr.*" before his initials would preclude that he is a person of royal rank, yet, among the 30 or more proposed candidates, there are at least two royal peers. Royal identifications are made plausible by the fact that some of the sonnets address the *friend* in a mode befitting royalty. One of the royals proposed, the *Earl of Southhampton, Henry Wriothesley (possibly pronounced Riley or Risley)*, is the leading candidate of scholars. The poet had dedicated to him his early narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and similar phrases from the latter dedication appear in *Sonnet 26*.

Of the many other candidates proposed, one presented by Leslie Hotson, a Yale professor of the Elizabethan period, has been particularly intriguing. Hotson's approach to identifying the *friend* is notable because of his ingenious scholarly methods. Hotson concluded that *Mr. W.H.* was *William Hatcliffe*, a young, 18 year old student at *Grays Inn* who had been befriended by the then 24

year old poet. *Grays Inn* was one of England's four major universities training the elite of the nation. Hotson proposed that this young man met Shakespeare, who was then part of an acting company that wrote and staged plays for the university's winter revelries. Hatcliffe, exceedingly handsome and outstanding, had been elected by his fellows to the prestigious position of "*Prince of Purpoole*," a form of *monarch of misrule* for university festivities. This role called for his being honored by all in the full semblance of nobility in a mock-serious tradition of royalty.

Hotson showed that the name *Hatcliffe* was actually pronounced *Hat'liffe*, its "c" silent, a fact that allegedly enabled Shakespeare to embed this name in sonnets as many as 43 times through *a series of text-assembly devices*, such as "*that live*," "*that life*," "*hath life*," and "*that . . . leave*" — a not unheard of mode of commemoration in Elizabethan literary works. Hotson also attempted to show how this very name was secretly represented in the dedication epigraph through a literary device, as described below.

Hotson placed each line of the epigraph against a common left margin. At the words "*Mr. W.H.*" on line 3, he vertically aligned the "*H*" of "*W.H.*" with the "*H*" of the word "*THAT*" on the line below and subsequently aligned the *first periods* encountered in succeeding lines — with the exception of using the *hyphen* between the words "*EVER-LIVING*" as a first period. Doing so, he came up with an arrangement that gave the full name of his candidate as "*Mr. W. HAT-LIV*," as shown on the next page:

**Mr. W. H.** ALL HAPPINESSE.  
AND **THAT.** ETERNITIE.  
PROMISED.  
BY.  
OVR. EVER-**LIV**ING. POET.

In skeleton form, this reads as follows:

**Mr. W.**  
**HAT.**  
.  
.  
**-LIV**

In addition to his devices, Hotson offered other corroborating evidence. Among these were his analyses of certain telltale sonnets and early versions of two sonnets. These suggested an early writing of the *Sonnets* around the year 1588 — the period when the friendship between the two young men would have been most robust.

But Hotson's scholarship was not persuasive to his academic colleagues, who doubted an early writing. Hatcliffe's relationship with the poet, if at all, occurred 20 years before the *Sonnets* publication and had shown no continuing impact on the life of the poet. Scholars found other scenarios, such as a relationship with nobleman *Henry Wriothesley* to more closely fit historical events and to be far more compelling than Hotson's proposal.

However, despite the herculean efforts made by Hotson and other commentators to definitively identify *Mr. W.H.*, his identity has remained uncertain as has the precise meaning of the dedication. These continuing ambiguities have been among the strange curiosities associated with the *Sonnets*, a major literary work that bears the irony

of being composed by a poet acknowledged to be the greatest communicator in language.

Turning to the text of the epigraph, the question has persisted as to why it was written with *periods* after each word, a literary punctuation device that is found almost nowhere else except on stone monuments and memorial plaques. As becomes evident, the periods at the end of each line obscure the exact nature of the links between sequential words, lines, and thoughts, thereby making meaning uncertain. Unless the writing of the dedication was an incompetent effort by publisher Thorpe and its arrangement a careless afterthought, there would have had to have been some important reason behind its form. As it stands, its mode imbues the dedication with the same kind of mysterious ambiguity and opacity observed to pervade many of the individual sonnets.

In an attempt to shed light on these mysteries, scholar Donald Foster in an informative article ("*Master W.H., R.I.P.*," *PMLA* 102, 1987) made the case that individual phrases that appear in the dedication are not unlike those found in others of the period, including some written by Thorpe. These precedents would probably have given readers at the time the impression that they had before them a tried and true conventional dedication, however unusual it may appear today.

Foster informs that in the Elizabethan period the word *begetter* in such dedications could only refer to the creator of the work — *like a father who begets his children*. Foster asked how *Mr. W.H.* could be regarded as the one who was "*THE ONLIE BEGETTER*" of the ensuing sonnets

unless *Mr. W.H.* referred to the Poet himself. In line with such thoughts, one nineteenth century scholar had suggested that the initials *W.H.* stood for "*William Himself.*" In a variation of this thinking, Foster proposed that the initials had been meant to be read as "*Mr. W. SH.*" in reference to the poet as the *begetter*. Foster hypothesized that it was probably *the compositors*, the printer-technicians, who had made one of their many alleged mistakes in the *Sonnets* by here accidentally dropping the "S" and reducing the initials to the "*W.H.*" that appears.

On the other hand, Foster does mention a prior collection of poems, *Delia*, by Samuel Daniel, in which the author declares that his verse was "*begotten*" by the "*hand*" of his love, she having provided to him the "*quickenning seede*" that was added to his "*desire.*" Hence, despite Foster's conclusion that *Mr. W.H.* was the poet himself, if we credit Samuel Daniel's precedent, the model of *a more ultimate begetter* is not out of the question as standing behind the actual writer. The lines could after all be interpreted as applying to the *Mr.W.H.* who was sonneteered. He could well have been the inspirer of the poet, the "*quickenning seede,*" and in that sense "*the onlie begetter*" of the *Sonnets*, especially if no firm evidence appears to render this assumption untenable.

Foster is also most helpful when he brings his scholarship to bear on the meaning of the words, "EVER-LIVING.POET." While this has been popularly assumed to be Thorpe's reference to Shakespeare, surprisingly, Foster takes another view. Apparently, this phrase and its variants were

not uncommon at the time and, as Foster points out, *had always been found to refer to God*. He suggests that this is the God of *Whom "the firmament proclaims the Poetry of His hands."* This is God envisioned as a Poet according to the Greek translation of *Psalm 19* that appears in the *Septuagint*, the well known Greek translation that goes back to the third century *B.C.E.*. The latter takes the original Hebrew word *ma'a'seh* (מעשה), usually signifying "creative work," to mean "poetry," one of its possible meanings. Foster, considering the facts, concluded that the wording, "OVR.EVER-LIVING.POET," most likely referred to the then not unusual conception of *God as the Supreme Poet*.

Foster sees this surmise as making sense of the words, "ETERNITIE. PROMISED," which also appear in the dedication. He observed that it was then widely assumed that *the promise of eternity* was something that only God could be expected to fulfill. While in *Sonnet 18*, Shakespeare does promise his friend "life" in "eternal lines to time," this is not the kind of *eternity* that readers would have thought of in dedications, but rather an *eternity* promised by God and *never by a poet*. Foster took this as the probable context of the dedication and as firm support for interpreting the words of the dedication as telling of *an eternity promised by God as the "Ever-Living Poet."*

It is at this point that we may propose a connection between Foster's findings that he did not. It seems an open possibility that, if we reject Foster's surmise that the *begetter* of the *Sonnets* is Shakespeare himself and use the opening that Foster gives about a more ultimate begetter, we

may begin to see this as pointing to none other than *God, The Ever-Living Poet*. Thus, the dedication would turn out to be addressed *to God*, the One Who can be said to guide all events and Who can fit the role of *the only inspirer of the Sonnets*.

If this were so, it would appear that the form of the dedication actually misdirects readers so that this meaning would not be suspected, probably done so because this was in a mode of an unseemly direct address to God within a context that was associated with what appear to be highly profane poems.

Let us now explore anew the connections between the lines of the dedication to see how we may understand the whole of it differently, beginning with its first two lines:

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.  
THESE.INSVING.SONNETS.

With the above as the opening lines of a dedication to a large collection of sonnets, who is it that could be regarded as its "*onlie begetter*"? We have learned that the implication is that, *if* the *begetter* is not assumed to be the poet as author, he would have to be a more ultimate *begetter* in the mode of Samuel Daniel's beloved *Delia*. Would it make sense that this was "*ONLIE*" *William Hatcliffe* or *Henry Wriothesley*? With more than 20 sonnets addressed to a woman, would either men be the only *begetter*? What is more, from what was learned from analyses of sonnets in *The Shakespeare Codes* (Basch, Revelatory Press, 2000) in which it was shown that some sonnets were addressed to God, it would hardly seem likely that either of these earthly friends could have been the ultimate inspirer.

Judging then by discussions in the earlier chapters of *The Shakespeare Codes* that made the case that in some sonnets the poet directed his words *to God* in the pattern of the *Psalms of David* and now by Foster's illuminating information, it must be seriously considered that it is God to Whom the work of the *Sonnets* is dedicated. This credits *the hand of God* with planting the *quickenning seed* that made this poetry burst forth. If so, it is *the Lord, the Ever-Living Poet*, that is "*The Onlie Begetter*" of the poems that ensued. Clearly, the *Sonnets* would appear to be *other* and *deeper* than has been supposed these past 400 years.

Additional evidence for the view of God as the *Begetter* of the *Sonnets* comes from the fact that there are in the epigraph some credible transliterations of God's name as the *Tetragrammaton*, the *Pentateuch's* four letter Hebrew name, **YHVH**. These are shown in bold below in an approximation of the original configuration and discussed ahead:

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.  
**T**HESE.**I**NSVING.**S**ONNETS.  
 Mr.**W.H.** ALL.HAPP**I**NESSE.  
**A**ND.T**H**AT.ET**E**R**N**ITIE.  
 PROMISED.  
 BY.  
 OVR.EVER-L**I**VING.POET.  
 W**I**SH**E**T**H**.  
 THE.WELL-W**I**SHING.  
 ADVENTVRER.IN.  
 SETTING.  
 FORTH.  
 T.T.

The four letter, sacred name of God, *not vocalized by observant Jews*, is pronounced either **YeHo'VaH** or **YaH'VaH**. (In written Hebrew, vowels are not represented but understood from context.) The pronunciation is further varied by *Sephardic Jews*, who unlike *Ashkenazic Jews*, sound the letter **V** (*Vov*) as a **W** (for example, **YaH'WaH**). Also, when transliterated into English, the Hebrew "Y" becomes either "Y," "I," or "J." ("I" and "J" are both represented in the Elizabethan alphabet by the letter "I.") In fact, the poet in his *Sonnet 124* replaces the opening letter "I" in the word "IF" by the letter "Y" to read "YF," communicating this letter linkage to his readers.

Reading down on line 2 of the epigraph, diagonally left from the letter "I" to the "H" of "Mr. W.H." and then on to the "W" and continuing on the diagonal downward or upward, we respectively engage either an "A" or an "H," which yield transliterations of the *Tetragrammaton* as **I-H-W-A** or **I-H-W-H**. (**Y-H-W-A**, **Y-H-W-H**). Another is read down from the letter "Y" of "BY" in the string "**Y-V-H**," which when voweled in the Hebrew manner yields **Y[a]V[a]H**. (See all these letters shown in bold on the previous page.) Note also that voweled the numerous letter combinations of **I-V** or **I-W** read in the epigraph as horizontal, vertical, or diagonal strings yields additional transliterations of the *Tetragrammaton* as (**I[a]V[a]**, **I[a]W[a]**).

Another representation method, called the *Equal Letter Skip (ELS)* device, brings additional transliterations of this sacred name, *all extending from the single "Y" of the epigraph*. Two occur running backwards, as **Y[a]-W-O** at a letter skip of 40 and as **Y-A-W-H** at a skip of 20. Extending the latter another 20 letter skips yields **Y-A-W-H-O**, which transliterates

**YA-Hu** — Hebrew for "He is God." Similarly, other *ELS* strings read forward in consecutive letters as **YOV**[a]; as **Y**[a]-**V-E** at a skip of 2; and **Y**[a]-**V-V-O** at a skip of 5. The letters of the earlier three devices cited are shown *underlined* in the epigraph on the previous page. The latter three are shown below, two of which marked either in *bold* or *underlined*:

**BY.**

OVR.**EVER-LIVING.POET.**

Note, the last three *ELS* versions emerge mostly from the very words Foster alleged as referring to God. (See all these *ELS* devices in a matrix on the last page of the *Appendix* to this article.)

Continuing now from line 3 of the epigraph, Foster's insights are again helpful:

Mr.W.H.ALL.HAPPINESSE.  
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.  
PROMISED.

**BY.**

OVR.**EVER-LIVING.POET.**

In this portion, the dedication addresses *Mr. W.H.* who had played a role in the *Sonnets*. Though Foster suggested that these initials had referred to William Shakespeare and had been been mistakenly truncated, it now seems more likely that it refers to the *W.H.* who had made Shakespeare's disguise of God's role in the *Sonnets* possible. As discussed in *The Shakespeare Codes*, *W.H.* was the person who served as a screen to hide the presence of God as the subject of praise in some of the sonnets. Now it becomes clear that the presence of *W.H.* in the epigraph serves a similar function in hiding the fact that the dedication was addressed to God. To such a useful presence as

W.H., it is appropriate that he be given wishes for "all happiness" and "eternity" — "happiness" in this life and God's "eternity" in the life to come, a frequent formula in dedications as Foster points out.

Were Mr. W.H. a real person sonneteered, there is all likelihood, as Hotson surmised, that his identity was known to Shakespeare's circle. Veiled though he is today, he could well have been Hotson's *Hatcliffe (or the scholars' Wriothesley)*. In any case, those who knew him in connection with the poet would have assumed that the entire collection of poems was essentially written to honor him — aside from those written to the "Dark Lady," her identity then known or unknown.

It appears then that this Mr. W.H. is indispensable to the artifice that was created in the *Sonnets*, enabling God to serve as "friend" and a subject of praise without being apparent. For this to be possible, a Mr. W.H. would have had to be invented if he were not real. The high craft that went into the arrangement of the dedication suggests that a mistake in its initials was most unlikely. Mr. W.H., real or fictional, was put forward to serve as the ostensible person sonneteered throughout the sonnets and the dedicatee, hiding the real one. Were the poet to have directly and openly praised God, it would have raised questions about his style of praise and his poems — a trouble that the poet dared not risk in the dogmatism and religious turbulence of his time. At this point, we have separated Mr. W.H. from the dedication to God in the *epigraph* as he has already been separated in sonnets addressed to God discussed in *The Shakespeare Codes*.

Were Mr. W.H. a real person and recognized in the dedication for good wishes, then these wishes

were well taken as his due, particularly, since — were he *Hatcliffe* or *Wriothesley* — both were still alive in 1609 and could have read the dedication and been warmed by its message commemorating the early friendship with the poet.

It is probable that Shakespeare wrote the above portions of the dedication with the cooperation of Thomas Thorpe, who acted as another true friend. In this light, the finale of the dedication would also have played its part in the poet's plan:

**G.**

**WISHETH.**

THE.WELL-**WISHING.**

ADVENTVRER.IN.

SETTING.

FORTH.

T.T.

The above portion is separated from the preceding text by a skipped line and seems awkwardly tacked on. One of its irregularities, a detail, reported by Foster would indicate that this was part of the poet's deliberate misdirection. Foster observed that the expected formula in dedications where the word "WISHETH" appears has the initials of the person doing the wishing *coming before it*, usually reading, for example, "*T.T. wisheth.*" However, it is now apparent that the initials at the end of the dedication give the impression that *T.T.* wrote it entire. This would enable the poet to present his own covert message in the first part of the epigraph and still not force the publisher to participate in something false when his initials appear.

Thus, the prior sections of the epigraph, having remembered the ultimate *Begetter* and *Mr. W.H.*, it is the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, who then enters

to extend to the reader his own good wishes. He could with good conscience put down his initials at the end of his statement as a truthful signatory, though readers would assume he had written all the prior text. He offers his good wishes to the "WELL-WISHING ADVENTVRER. IN. SETTING FORTH," *that is, to the reader of good will*, regarded as an "ADVENTVRER" in setting forth to read the challenging poetic work he has been instrumental in bringing to the public.

### **Other Factors**

There are additional factors to be considered in the context of this discussion. The first concerns indications of Shakespeare's role in writing the dedication. A series of *text assemblies* of the poet's first name tells this story. These can be detected in the facsimile of the original (see page 2). Two show up as **W-I-LI** and **W-I-L-Y**, seen in ascending diagonal configurations, both beginning at the first **W** on line 9. Two others spring from a common origin in the letters **WI** on line 8 in-tandem with the **L** and the **LL** on the lines above and below, reading **WI-L** and **WI-LL**. A fourth version can be read in letters of the words, "WELL-WISHING," as a phonetic version as **W-LL** or as an anagram of the letters **LL-WI**

Added to these indications are the separate letter strings, **S-H-G** and **S-P-R**, vertically aligned, directed toward one another. Together these sound *Shagspere*, one of the versions of the poet's surname. (*See these letter strings shown boxed and in bold on page 10.*) This surname is suggestively linked to the descending vertical string, **W-R-I-T**, beginning in the "W" of **WISHING** adjacent to the "S" in the same word that begins the rise of "**S-H-G**" (see this in the lines on the previous page).

A second significant factor concerns recently discovered *ELS* devices by John Rollett, letter strings giving the full name of **Henry Wriothesley**, *a clear link to this historic person*. The letters of **Henry** appear at a 15 letter skip and all the letters of **Wriothesley** appear in three separate clusters at 18 letter skips as **W-R**, **I-O-T-H** (the latter at a minus skip), and **E-S-L-E-Y**. These all are readily seen when the dedication is arranged in an 18 letter wide matrix. (*See the Appendix.*) *The complexity of this name decisively confirms there was knowledge and deliberate use of ELS devices at the time.*

Also to be seen in the epigraph are *text assemblies* of the names *Hat[-]liffe* and *Wriothesley*. The former is read as **HAT-L-V**, *beginning on line 4 and ascending vertically.* (*See the outline on page 10.*) *Wriothesley* is read **R-I-L-Y** and **R-IS-L-Y**. *Both of the latter begin on line 7 and are read in bold in a "u" pattern below:*

**BY.**

OVR.EVER-LIVING.POET.

**WISHETH.**

As mentioned, the poet had strayed dangerously from conventional modes by addressing God in love poems of praise in the pattern of *Psalms* and he had to obscure this if his life was not to be imperiled by his audacity. Hence, contradictory pointers to both *Hatcliffe* and *Wriothesley* as *Mr. W.H.* can be seen to have functioned to deliberately misdirect readers from coming to the realization of the poet's friend's identity as God, providing false clues toward less dangerous identifications.

In the end, this misdirection is corrected by the understanding gained by the poet's many

devices of his own name, revealing himself to be the composer of the dedication and his *friend* to be *God*. But those who found cryptic allusions to plausible candidates as the poet's *friend* would hardly have gone on to discover devices pointing to *God* or to His name rendered in the form of the *Tetragrammaton*. This would leave the poet and his work undisturbed, his hidden trove of religious fealty in his sonnets available for discovery by later generations.

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## APPENDIX

### ELS EMBEDMENTS IN SONNETS DEDICATION

Matrix 18 letters wide, with vertical ELS's underlined and all shown extracted below:

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 T T

E		H
S		E
L H	N	
E T	R	
Y O		
I		W
		R

Summary of ELS names on previous page:

**HENRY** @ SKIP OF 15 LETTERS } shown in bold

**WR** @ SKIP OF 18 LETTERS }

**IOTH** @ SKIP OF -18 LETTERS } underlined

**ESLEY** @ SKIP OF 18 LETTERS }

Matrix 20 letters wide below showing Tetragrammaton versions and extracted following:

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 T T

O

H

W

A

(Y) O V E (V) (V) (O)

ELS Names shown above:

**Y-A-W-H** @ 20 letter skips

Y-A-W-H-O @ 20 letter skips (YAhU)

Y-W-O @ 40 letter skips (YaW0)

YO V @ 0 letter skips (YO V a)

Y-V-E @ 3 letter skips (YaVE)

**Y-V-V-O** @ 5 letter skips (YaVV0)

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