

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.
THESE.INSUING.SONNETS.
MR.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.
PROMISED.
BY
OUR.EVER-LIVING.POET.
WISHETH.
THE.WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTURER.IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.

T.T.

For roughly the first hundred and seventy years after the appearance of the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609, its dedication (shown here) was completely ignored, as far as we can tell. Since then it has intrigued countless scholars and amateur sleuths: Who was Mr W.H.? Why was he the sonnets' 'only begetter'? Who is 'our ever-living poet'? What is the eternity that is promised by that poet?

Mr W.H. has become a famous literary mystery-man, because of the common assumption that the sonnets are not only dedicated to him but also addressed to him: the 'lovely boy' to whom Shakespeare pours out his heart in a number of the poems may be their 'begetter' in the sense of the person who, by his romantic inspiration of the poet, brought them into existence. This theory offers the possibility of unlocking the poems' biographical allusions and exposing the private life of the great playwright. For two centuries Shakespeare buffs have searched for suitable W.H.'s among his acquaintances, or failing that, invented them. Oscar Wilde proposed, half jokingly, that the Sonnets may have been dedicated to 'Willie Hughes', an imagined, beautiful young boy-actor who may

have played the leading female roles in all his major plays, and with whom Shakespeare may have been infatuated — in spite of the fact that there was no evidence for the existence of any such person. Among more serious scholars so many candidates for W.H. have been proposed that the full list reads like the H section of an Elizabethan population census (the full catalogue can be found in Hyder Rollins' 1944 edition of the Sonnets); but since we know virtually nothing about Shakespeare's circle of friends, every theory is inevitably based on speculation and purely circumstantial evidence, which makes it impossible to choose between them. Standards of proof have been very low. Scholars sometimes seem to assume that all they need to show is that their story, and their candidate, is possible, when in fact that gets us nowhere at all. There must be at least a million possibilities. Others more reasonably suppose that at such a distance from any source of solid information the mystery is now insoluble.

Anti-Stratfordians meanwhile have been convinced that Thorpe's message is in fact a teasing and ingenious word-puzzle and that its strange layout contains the encrypted identity of the sonnets' (and plays') true author, whether it be Francis Bacon, Walter Raleigh, or Queen Elizabeth. Another theory is that W.H. stands for 'William Himself' or is just a misprint for W.S.

Continuing this long tradition here is a new explanation. In fact it is only a minor variant on an existing theory and contains little that has not been said before; but it has a fairly good chance of being right.

Elizabethans were very fond of puns. The second part of the inscription contains a pair of them and is only unclear because the puns are now obsolete. 'Adventurer', as well as having the sense it still bears, at the time also meant 'a person undertaking a business venture', which in this context meant the person who was paying for the printing of the book: the publisher. 'Setting forth' as well as meaning 'setting out' (i.e. on a journey or adventure) was also the standard term for 'publishing'. Both puns would have been obvious to Elizabethan readers. The phrase 'the...adventurer in setting forth' meant quite straightforwardly 'the publisher in publishing [them].'

The subject of the main verb ('wisheth') is 'the well-wishing adventurer', who is then identified as T.T. (Thomas Thorpe). So the sentence, simplified, runs like this: 'To Mr W.H. all happiness etc. wisheth the publisher'. This is an inversion of normal English word

order, but quite conventional in the context of a dedication. It is an imitation of Latin inscriptions, which almost always begin with the name of the dedicatee and end with the name of the dedicator. In the early seventeenth century most formal inscriptions in England were written in renaissance Latin and English ones tended to mimic the classical models. The block capital letters and full stops (rather than spaces) are also nothing more than a visual allusion to classical inscriptions. Leaving the classicism aside, in a modern idiom what we have is this: 'T.T., the publisher, heartily wishes all happiness etc. to these sonnets' only begetter, Mr W.H.'

What all this means is that in its structure and in its second half (the only part that everyone agrees is fully understood) there is nothing remotely unclear about the inscription. A few puns and a classical word order do not suggest a cryptogram. The alleged weirdness of the dedication has led many interpreters to the view that it is deliberately obscure or at any rate designed as a private and personal message and likely to contain intricate biographical or poetical allusions. There is absolutely no reason to accept these assumptions. In fact we should start from the very opposite idea, that the dedication has some plain and simple meaning and is a public message suitable to its public context. Other dedications of the same period (as opposed to poems) are perfectly clear and straightforward, so it makes no sense to begin by assuming that we have an exception in this case, even if it would be more exciting to do so. The assumption of simplicity is in any case our only option. Without it any absurd or convoluted theory will look just as good as any other. So by this method, if a proposed solution involves unusual features, for which there is no evidence besides the dedication itself, then it should be dumped in favour of any alternative that makes things simpler, raises fewer questions, and has better precedents.

In this text 'begetter' is almost always taken to mean one or other of the following: (1) 'Inspirer' (usually identified with the 'lovely boy' to whom many of the sonnets are addressed); (2) 'procurer' or 'getter' (the publisher is thanking the person who acquired the manuscript of the sonnets for him); (3) 'author' (i.e. the misprint theory: the publisher is thanking Shakespeare himself for the poems).

Entirely regardless of who W.H. may be, the 'inspirer' theory has a number of major drawbacks. The dedication, on the only sensible interpretation of the initials 'T.T.', is

a message from Thorpe, not Shakespeare. How would the publisher have known who inspired the poems (if indeed any real person did inspire them)? And if we suppose that Shakespeare instructed Thorpe to name W.H. in the dedication, we then need to explain why he didn't just do the dedication himself — something he could have done in a matter of minutes. Next, why isn't the dedicatee named in full? How were people supposed to know who was being referred to? If we assume that Thorpe wished to conceal W.H.'s identity except from those 'in the know', we need some further, speculative explanation for the secrecy.

Most scholars ignore these problems, assume that the 'inspirer' theory is correct, and argue about who the inspirer of the sonnets might have been. By far the most popular candidates are both aristocrats: Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (in spite of the initials being the wrong way round) and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. Both men were literary patrons and both had well attested connections with Shakespeare — reasonably good circumstantial evidence. Advocates of these candidates trawl through their life-histories, looking for details that suggest that they could be Mr W.H., rather like the way that people trawl through late Victorian biographical records, then pick on some vaguely suitable Londoner and insist that he was 'probably' Jack the Ripper.

On this view of the dedication Thorpe is fishing for aristocratic patronage — a fairly common practice for the time. Unfortunately, there is no direct evidence to link either man with our dedication and the indirect evidence that there is all hangs on the further assumption that the poems are addressed to one or other of them (so that vague details in the poems can be matched with vague details in their biographies) even though there is no independent suggestion that any of the sonnets were addressed to either of them. All this only means that we have no reason to accept either theory, not that they are especially implausible. What does make them very implausible is the fact that an aristocrat cannot be referred to as plain 'Mr' in a text of this kind, if it is remotely conventional. In dedications of the period (including the only two definitely written by Shakespeare himself) aristocratic titles are given in full. Here is a typical example:

To the High and Honourable and his especial good Lord, Lord Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Baron of Denbigh, and Knight of the most noble Order of the Garter, High

Steward of Her Majesty's Borough of New Windsor, Edward Hake, understeward there,
wisheth daily preservation with increase of honour to God's glory.

It would be utterly bizarre, when dedications like this were standard, for Lord Dudley to be addressed by Hake simply as 'Mr R. D.', or for some other aristocrat to be our 'Mr W.H.' It would be like a modern public inscription referring to the present Queen as 'Mrs E.W.' At any rate, the combination of the initials and the irregular form of address would certainly have made the identity of an aristocratic W.H. absolutely opaque to the reader. Why? It is not impossible that one of these people is our man; perhaps we could invent some complicated story to explain this unusual and mysterious form of the name; but that is simply not to the point. We want a plausible explanation of the dedication, not one that is merely possible. Even Willie Hughes is possible.

Speculative explanations of this kind also risk becoming circular. For example, one modern advocate for William Herbert cites as evidence for her theory a dedication addressed to Herbert by Ben Jonson, in which Herbert's name and aristocratic titles are recited in laborious detail. This is very good evidence against the same aristocrat being Mr W.H. (Jonson's dedication would have provided significant evidence if he had also addressed Herbert as 'W.H.:'; and he doesn't). Yet her idea is that Jonson, by the extreme length and formality of his dedication, is deliberately and pointedly rebuking Shakespeare for previously failing to address Herbert with proper respect. The explanation is entirely circular: there is no reason at all to see Jonson's dedication in that way, unless you are already convinced, for some other reason (what reason?) that Shakespeare's dedication is to Herbert.

Apparently in favour of the 'inspirer' theory is the phrase 'that eternity promised by our ever living poet'. The ever-living poet is almost always taken to be Shakespeare himself, such that Thorpe means that he hopes Mr W.H. will enjoy the immortality that Shakespeare promises the 'lovely boy'. The point is that in several of the sonnets Shakespeare urges the boy to marry and to have children; and he quite often says that this will give him a kind of immortality. This isn't really a promise, except in the very weak sense of a prediction: immortality through offspring is not something in Shakespeare's own power to give or promise. Even so, that detail of the sonnets has often been taken to

be what underlies Thorpe's phrase. In other poems Shakespeare predicts that his poetry itself will immortalise its subject. Since he never names the boy, he must mean that the poems will give their subject a kind of shadowy existence in the thoughts of future readers—recalling for all time his beauty and his charm rather than his identity. Perhaps that is what 'eternity' refers to. Either way the interpretation requires that Thorpe is alluding in a very subtle way to the sonnets' contents, in which case contemporary readers would have had no way of understanding the dedication when they first read it. But perhaps none of these is a really decisive problem.

What is decisive is the fact that only a very anachronistic attitude to Shakespeare could ever have made it seem possible that the phrase 'our ever-living poet' referred to him. In 1609 those would have been bizarre and extravagant terms for a still-living and reasonably famous writer. It would be like referring to, say, Ken Loach as 'our immortal director', or Ian Botham as 'our eternal cricketer.' The 'our' as a way of picking somebody out (i.e. without also mentioning their name) requires absolute pre-eminence and uniqueness (as in 'our leader', 'our founder', 'our Father'). Shakespeare was seen as a good writer among many other good writers, certainly not 'our poet'. Nor could anyone have naturally referred to him as 'ever-living'. 'Ever-living' means 'immortal'. The word might be used of somebody dead, meaning in effect that though they are dead their fame and memory live on. It is a strange term to use of someone who is alive, and even if we very loosely allow it to mean that Shakespeare is 'destined to be eternally famous after he dies' it leaves things extremely unclear. It is one thing to say, sycophantically, that 'Peter Carey's fame will last for all time', but quite another to talk about 'our immortal writer' and expect people to have the faintest idea who you mean (even in the preface of one of his novels).

Then there is also the fact that no single person, as far as we know, is the 'only inspirer' of the sonnets (they are addressed to at least two people: the 'lovely boy' and the 'dark lady'). So the phrase 'onlie begetter' taken to mean 'inspirer' doesn't make good sense in the first place.

Regarding the second theory, the word 'begetter' cannot mean 'procurer' in Elizabethan English as has been so often claimed. Unambiguous examples of it with that sense simply do not exist for that period of the language. This mistake about the possible

meaning of the word appears to have been started off by James Boswell, who casually asserted it on the basis of a single contemporary quotation in which ‘to beget’ is clearly being used to mean ‘to bring about’, not ‘to get’. Subsequently, people apparently accepted his claim without checking the evidence. In any case it would be very odd for a book to be dedicated to the otherwise irrelevant person who delivered the manuscript. People who favour this reading tell stories about how the manuscript may have been acquired and delivered secretly (i.e. against Shakespeare’s wishes), and hence as a huge favour to the grateful publisher — all of which is pure fantasy. Also, what would be the point of saying ‘to the only person who got me the manuscript of these poems’— as if manuscripts were usually delivered by several different people?

Frankly, all theories about the dedication I have seen are at best implausible and at worst utterly absurd. Here’s one that at least tries to stick to the normal rules for what constitutes a plausible explanation. It assumes that the dedication has a normal and standard purpose; that there is no strange or secret story behind it; that it contains no complicated or mysterious allusions; and that it was supposed to be perfectly clear.

The metaphor of ‘begetting’ a text — i.e. being its father, creator, or author — almost always referred to authorship, for obvious reasons. ‘Onlie begetter’ most naturally means ‘sole author’. This reading requires that W.H. is just a misprint for W.S. That may seem a bit feeble, but it is not nearly as unlikely as it would be today. There are parallels in books of the period for misprints even in title pages, and Thorpe’s book itself is certainly a shoddy production: in the main text it contains over thirty misprints — one every few pages. Only one edition was ever printed and of that edition a mere handful of copies survive. There is really nothing at all strange about there being a misprint of this kind in all the copies that we have.

That only makes the misprint possible. What makes it probable is the fact that in all the areas where the other two theories create problems the misprint theory works very nicely. Thorpe had a good and simple reason for wanting everyone to know that Shakespeare was the sole author of the sonnets in his edition. A book of poems had been published ten years earlier (*The Passionate Pilgrim*, by W. Shakespeare) in which most of the poems were not authentic. Its publisher had exploited the playwright’s name and defrauded the public. Plausibly, Thorpe wanted people to know that his book was the

genuine article. The same commercial concerns were certainly behind the book's title, Shakespeare's Sonnets (with the name printed in huge block capitals and reprinted on every page) and the subtitle, Never before Imprinted. (The same subtitle was used by Shakespeare's company when they brought out editions of plays that had previously appeared in pirated copies: it means 'this time it really is by Shakespeare'.) There are plenty of precedents for Shakespeare's name and authorship being used to commercial advantage by printers (as with *The Passionate Pilgrim* and the ten or so plays falsely attributed to him during his lifetime).

In contrast to the proposed aristocratic patrons Shakespeare's correct and usual title is 'Mr'; and unlike every other possible candidate there is nothing strange about his name being given in initials rather than in full, simply because he is the author. In a book entitled Shakespeare's Sonnets everyone is going to know without any trouble at all exactly who is meant by 'the begetter of these sonnets, Mr W.S.' In dedications of the period it is a general rule that third parties' names are given in full exactly as you would expect. But authors' names very often appear in initials because it is always obvious whom the initials refer to:

To the right worshipful, Sir John Swinnerton, Knight... W.M. wisheth Earth's Happiness, and Heaven's Blessedness. [Author: William Muggins]

To...Anne, Countess of Warwick, B.C. wisheth in this life all prosperity, and in the life to come sempiternal felicity in the blessed kingdom of God. [Author: Bartholomew Chappel]

These typical examples show that initials were not used merely as a printer's or dedicator's blanket convention: they were used when they could be clearly understood. Virtually all instances of initials are of authors (whose names are already on the title pages) or publishers (whose identity is of no interest to the public).

All in all this seems the easiest explanation, at least of 'onlie begetter of these sonnets, Mr W.H.' considered on its own. It supposes an unintentional misprint but makes good sense in every other way. Other theories are on balance more extravagant and raise more questions than they answer. Here's how Jonathan Bate, a recent advocate of the theory (and my source for many of these arguments) makes the point (*The Genius of*

Shakespeare, p. 61): ‘Let’s assume the customary usage [i.e. the usual meaning of ‘begetter’], leave out the mysterious initials and modernize the wording and word order of Thorpe’s statement. It will then read as follows: ‘Thomas Thorpe, the well wishing publisher of the following sonnets, takes the opportunity upon publishing them to wish their only author all happiness, and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet.’ Had Thorpe not included the initials W.H. wouldn’t everyone have assumed he was addressing Shakespeare?’

But does placing the word ‘author’ in the paraphrase simply beg the question? The problem remains the phrase ‘our ever-living poet’, which no longer makes any sense. If we take it to refer to Shakespeare himself we are forced to assume some other sense for ‘begetter’. Shakespeare cannot be the begetter and our ever-living poet; he can’t appear in the dedication twice. It is this simple point that has usually been considered enough to make the misprint theory unworkable.

Bate proposes that even with the W.S. reading ‘our ever-living poet’ either still refers to Shakespeare anyway, or to some dead poet who somewhere makes someone a promise of immortality (e.g., Edmund Spenser). The first theory requires a violent and unacceptable shift from addressing Shakespeare as dedicatee to referring to him in the third person, rather like this: ‘To George Orwell, best wishes, and may you escape those grim predictions made by the author of 1984.’ The second proposal makes the dedication far too obscure. There is no obvious candidate for the other poet — in nearly four hundred years no one has had any idea who Thorpe might be referring to. Nor could Spenser or any other poet naturally be picked out just by the phrase ‘our poet’ any more than Shakespeare.

‘Our Ever-living Poet’ is not Shakespeare or any other man. ‘Poet’ is another pun, this time a classical one. The term ‘poet’ comes from the Greek *poetes*, which literally means ‘maker’. Thorpe is punning on the literal sense of the Greek word, so that the phrase means ‘our immortal Maker’, i.e., God. This fully explains the troublesome ‘our’ (God is ‘our maker’) and it makes the ‘ever-living’ perfectly appropriate. That term was applied to God more than to anyone or anything else. God is even referred to in the period as simply ‘the Ever-living One’ (rather as we can call him ‘the Almighty’). Also, we can be quite certain that the pun came easily to the Elizabethan mind, not just because of

these strong verbal pointers, or because a classical education was standard, but also, much more significantly, because in Elizabethan English the word 'maker' was commonly used to mean 'poet', a feature of the language of the time which evidently made the literal sense of the Greek equivalent widely known:

The Greeks named him poeten, which name has, as the most excellent, gone through other languages; it comes of the word poein which is 'to make': wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him [i.e. a poet] a Maker. ... Neither let it be deemed too fanc[iful] a comparison, to balance the highest point of man's wit [i.e. poetry], with the efficacy [i.e. creation] of nature: but rather, give right honour to the Heavenly Maker of that maker [i.e. of the poet], who made man to his own likeness... (Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, 1595).

A poet is as much to say as a maker [i.e. 'poet' and 'maker' mean the same]. And our English name [i.e. 'maker'] well conforms with the Greek word: for of poein, to make, they call a maker Poeta. Such as (by way of resemblance, and reverantly) we may say of God [i.e. we could call God a 'Poet']: who without any travell [i.e. effort] to his divine imagination, made all the world...even so the true Poet [as opposed to mere translator] makes and contrives the matter of his poems... (George Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 1589)

Neither of these writers knew Greek especially well. Both make minor errors with their Greek vocabulary. That alone suggests that the literal sense of 'poet' was general knowledge among educated Elizabethans, not a scholarly obscurity. Notice also that both writers explicitly state the connection with God. This is not all that surprising: the most commonly read Greek texts at the time were ecclesiastical: texts in which God is often referred to as 'the Maker' — in Greek, 'the Poet'. Both writers are making sideswipes at religious puritans, who considered poetry to be frivolous and immoral. That is why both are keen to point out that God himself is a poet: a poet in the (literal) sense of a creator, and that poets imitate God's act of creation. What better argument to use against religious fanatics fussing over poetry? And if the debate over the impropriety of poetry was common currency of the time (as it was) then it's very likely that this point about God being a poet was a virtual cliché for fans of the poetic medium — i.e., Thorpe's readers.

Above all, the entire text now makes easy sense. The words ‘all happinesse, and that eternitie promised by Our Ever-living Poet’ mean ‘all happiness in this life, and the eternal life (in heaven) that is promised us by Our Immortal Maker.’ This, in fact, was a standard formula for short dedications of the period, and the existence of that formula alone would have virtually forced the reader to infer this sense for ‘Poet’. There are plenty of examples of the same form of dedication. Here’s a small selection; all come from dedications of similar length, in works of poetry or drama, from exactly the same period, and all have the same sense: ‘[So and so] wishes [so and so] happiness in this life, and eternal life in heaven’:

‘...wisheth content in this life and joy in the life to come.’[1609]

‘...wisheth happy success in all your attempts, and after death, the joys everlasting.’[1595]

‘...wisheth worldly felicity, and heavenly blessedness.’ [1593]

‘...wisheth Earth’s Happiness, and Heaven’s Blessedness.’ [1603]

‘...wisheth the merits of much worthiness on earth, and the joys of heaven hereafter.’ [1603]

‘...wisheth in this life all prosperity, and in the life to come sempiternal felicity in the blessed kingdom of God.’[1593]

This also makes much better sense of ‘promised’; eternal life is something that God promises (in the full sense, i.e., says that he will give) to those people who meet the relevant terms and conditions. (‘This is the promise’, says Saint Paul, ‘that He hath promised us, even eternal life’: 1 John, 2). The pun on ‘Poet’ is perfectly at home in a dedication that we already know contains three other puns; and the point of using the pun here is (probably) that the dedication is addressed to a poet. In the same way you might dedicate a book to, say, a film-director, if you were constrained by the same formula, by saying ‘I wish you all happiness in this life, followed by eternal bliss on the set of Our Almighty Director’.

These several pieces of evidence for the pun seem strong in combination. What’s more, they are documented facts, not speculations, like the various weird circumstances imaginatively proposed in the other theories. There are no maybe’s or may-have’s here. There are no obscure and unlikely stories. ‘Poet’ really does mean ‘maker’ in Greek. ‘Maker’ really does mean ‘poet’ in Elizabethan English. ‘Our Everliving Poet’ does convert

simply and convincingly to 'Our Immortal Maker'. Educated Elizabethans really were fully aware of all this. The dedication clearly works as an example of a standard formula that really was very common at the time, and this reading does make much better sense of both 'our' and of 'promised'. These are facts, not possibilities, and they are independent of one another. Taken together they make this reading of the dedication pretty much unavoidable. Of course, people can still prefer less plausible, but more exciting explanations, and I bet they will.

So with this slight refinement Bate's modernised version of Thorpe's statement is now as follows: 'The publisher, upon publishing these sonnets, heartily wishes their sole author, Mr W[illiam] S[hakespeare], every happiness in this life, and the eternal life promised us by our Immortal Maker.' This is a commercially minded dedication, designed to underline Shakespeare's exclusive authorship of the poems and therefore intended to be perfectly clear and fully conventional; apart from a misprint it has no unusual features of any kind — just a few puns, two of which have long been recognised and always considered trivial. The position of the misprint in the initials of the dedicatee was of course disastrous, and the main reason that the dedication subsequently baffled people. But the other, more interesting reason for the misunderstanding was the fact that by the time people came around to paying any attention to the dedication, well over a century after Shakespeare's death and in a much less religious age, it seemed quite natural to take a phrase intended as a description of the immortal creator of the universe, and assume that it referred to Shakespeare — a misreading that would have been unimaginable to Thorpe's contemporaries. And once Shakespeare was mistaken for God and thrust into the wrong part of the dedication, the theory arose that W.H. must be the person addressed in the sonnets, to whom 'our immortal poet', the immortal Shakespeare, promises eternity — a theory so rich in romantic possibilities that it never subsequently lost its grip on the scholarly imagination.

At any rate this is probably the simplest way of understanding Thorpe's dedication. If the phrase 'all happiness and that eternity promised by our Ever-Living Poet' is not a version of the standard dedicatory formula, then its perfect resemblance to that formula, given the easy pun, is a hugely improbable coincidence. And the pun on 'Poet', which is clearly what we have, independently shows beyond reasonable doubt that the dedication

was supposed to be to Shakespeare and that W.H. is a misprint. Shakespeare, the poet, is called the sonnets' 'begetter', i.e., creator, and God, our creator, is called 'our immortal Poet'. It's a simple joke, and almost certainly the joke intended by Thorpe, and therefore 'begetter' with equal certainty refers to the author of the poems. And although that could just possibly be Queen Elizabeth, or the Earl of Oxford, or the Great Sultan, it's probably Shakespeare.