

nym), for example, Eric Sams's *Shakespeare's Lost Play: Edmund Ironside*, it is apparent that the Stratfordian could not have written all the works in his style, and in my opinion he didn't write any of them. And since no one assumes a conspiracy when I announce that Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, why assume a conspiracy, as Stratfordians do, about the contention that Edward de Vere wrote under the name of Shakespeare and had posthumous plays produced?

Fortunately for us all, Donald Foster's essay does not solve all the puzzles, so both Stratfordians and Oxfordians can puzzle a while longer.

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To the Editor:

Donald Foster's essay on Master W. H. is predicated on the assumption that Thorpe's inscription, written as an introduction to the *Sonnets*, is not a "dedication." Granted, it is not one in the usual sense (as Rollins's Variorum edition already indicates), but it has been customarily taken that way and was most probably meant in the way most readers would be expected to take it. The "dedication" is uncommon because Thorpe, rather than the author, signed it with initials, and it contains some eccentric features characteristic of Thorpe's style elsewhere. The title *Shakespeare's Sonnets* suggests that the poet did not bring them himself to the printer. To say that these poems were dedicated to their author seems, of course, absurd. But it would be begging the question to claim that for that reason the inscription was not truly a "dedication."

Foster is reductive in asserting that the "battlefield is divided into three camps" (43), for he neglects the most likely published meaning of *begetter*: the person who "gave birth" to the sonnets *in print*, who, according to one *OED* definition, was the producer. In citing "acquire and beget" in *Hamlet* as irrelevant if "beget" is taken as a kind of redundancy (52n3), Foster fails to see how "beget" there can also have the meaning of *produce*. In any case, *begetter* did not have the meaning of *creator* in the inscription, as shown by the allusion, incidentally recognized by Foster, to the Nicene Creed, which also happens to contain the key phrase "begotten, not made." Hence Foster's claim that "the obvious reading [is] that the only begetter of the sonnets is the man who wrote them" (43) is itself obviously at discord with the full credal allusion.

Foster makes light of the view that Master W. H. could be a certain W. Hall, referring to that theory as based on another presumed misprint. But some claimants for Hall see the name play involved as uncomic—not accidental but intentional. The notion that the dot after the *H* prevents the initials from referring to Hall is meaningless simply because of the symmetrical, additional pointing throughout the inscription. The extra em space after

"W. H." may well have been intended, too, given Thorpe's penchant for unusual name play and anagrams; it is reasonable enough to believe that Thorpe could even have instructed his printer Eld and the compositor to include the extra em. Foster's view that the "lacuna" (a term that, incidentally, George Walton Williams in *Shakespeare Survey* 36 [1983] corrected to read "em") may be owing to the omission of the letter *S* is fanciful, for the gap occurs after, not before, the *H*. At any rate, it stands to reason that when the manager himself composed the inscription he would have wanted at least to have some hand in proofreading it and would have noticed the misprint, if there was one.

Admittedly, Foster's remarks on what he terms the "ubiquitous conceit" (45) are of interest, but the figure seems to have been used so much that an innovative publisher like Thorpe might easily have wanted to deviate from the general practice. Likewise, though Foster insists that "[i]f, by 'begetter,' Thorpe meant anyone other than the author of the *Sonnets*, his usage is without parallel" (46), I do not find that usage improbable, for Thorpe was very much of an individual. Moreover, Foster's inference that "we cannot, by any rationale, take 'only begetter' as a compliment to 'W. H.'" (50) is odd; if Hall belonged to Shakespeare's son-in-law's family (that of Dr. Hall), the inscription could compliment the physician's brother William for being the "one and only" person responsible for getting the poems to Thorpe. (Recently the suggestion was made in *Shakespeare Quarterly* [37 (1986): 97–98] that the William Hall involved might have been the father instead, but that seems less likely, if only because the elder man died two years before the poems were printed.) In any case, W. Hall was not "a complete nonentity (as the advocates of Hall . . . believe)" (50) if he belonged to the Shakespeare circle and was not merely another stationer's assistant (though he could have been a printer, too, as I indicated in a 1980 article in *Res publica litterarum*). Granted, the case for Hall is speculative, but it is not *inherently* improbable the way that Foster's case for "W. H." as Shakespeare is. As with Thorpe's dedicatory name play on *Blount* and *blunt* (see his epistle dedicatory to the *First Book of Lucan*), the "H. All" collocation involves an "omitted" letter yet does not *depend* on a gap.

Foster argues that "[i]nitials were rarely used in Renaissance dedications unless it was perfectly clear to whom they referred" (50); Sidney Lee, however, had already pointed out in his *Life of William Shakespeare* that initials need show only some intimacy between dedicator and dedicatee.

Agreed, Foster's view that "Benson appears at least to have understood Thorpe's begetter as a figure for the author" (50) is arresting; yet, as Foster himself notes, Digges praised "never-dying" Shakespeare in Benson's edition; thus Digges probably found "our ever-living poet" to refer to Shakespeare—not God, as Foster prefers. For, strictly speaking, the Lord does not "promise" eternity

(at least not in heaven, the implication here) outright to anyone. Otherwise, what would be the point of hell? Moreover, Foster's claim that "ever-living" was not used in reference to someone alive and so could refer to God raises a question regarding Christian mysticism, to say the least, for the Deity, especially in Christ, can be considered very much a live person. Surely "ever-living poet" referred to a living person promised posterity (as in the phrase "Liue euer [Shakespeare]," which Foster himself cites [46]).

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### Reply:

I am pleased with Oscar Mandel's generous remarks, and I certainly agree with him that the weakest link in my argument is my identification of God with Thorpe's "ever-living poet." Nor can I quarrel with his suggestion that "our ever-living poet" may yet refer to William Shakespeare even if "W. H." is a misprint. I have tried, in fact, to acknowledge that as a possible reading by noting the doubleness of Thorpe's phrasing: ". . . like God, the Author of all, whose only begotten Son promises eternity to all who believe, W. [S]H., a mortal poet and the only begetter of the ensuing sonnets, promises a figurative immortality" (47). But if I may speak once again in God's behalf, I should like to clarify a few points that were insufficiently stressed in my essay, for I am still inclined to think that Thorpe has in mind another Poet, or Maker, in addition to Shakespeare.

First, I should underscore the biblical language of Thorpe's phrase "the only begetter." In the Gospel of John, "the only begotten of the Father" denotes "the Word," "the only begotten Son" through whom believers are promised eternal life (John 1.14–18, 3.16–18). This was familiar language to Thorpe's readers, for it is found throughout *The Book of Common Prayer*. During Holy Communion, for example, parishioners were taught that "our heavenly Father . . . hath promised forgiveness of sins . . ." through "his only begotten Son" (*The Book of Common Prayer 1559*, ed. John E. Booty, Charlottesville: U of Virginia P for the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976, 260). Thorpe in his epigraph appears to have drawn on such language in order to emphasize the implicit parallel between our Maker-as-Poet (with the Word as his only begotten Son) and the poet-as-maker (with his only begotten sonnets).

I should like also to reiterate that the conventional wish, in Renaissance greetings of this sort, was for all happiness here and eternity hereafter. I cannot find any epigraph or epistle from this period in which the addressee is wished a literary "eternity" or mention of anyone but God who has "promised" eternity. It may be worth noting, too, that in 1609 Thomas Thorpe was probably much

involved with editing *St. Augustine of the Citie of God* (1610, reg. 3 May 1608), translated by John Healey. In this volume—the largest undertaking of Thorpe's career—it is repeatedly stressed that no one but God can promise "happiness," much less "that eternal and true happiness" which God "promised before all eternity" (6.12, 12.16; cf. 2.12). (In the same volume the figure of the poet-god makes a frequent, though damnable, appearance; e.g., 18.12–14.)

It is, after all, "the only begetter" of the *Sonnets* to whom Thorpe wishes "that eternity promised by our ever-living poet." If, then, our "ever-living poet" is *only* Shakespeare, we arrive at a reading that is unnecessarily strained in its self-reflexivity. Mandel is probably right that Shakespeare is both "our ever-living poet" and "the only begetter," but to conclude that the "ever-living poet" refers only (or even primarily) to Shakespeare will destroy what appears to me to be the careful symmetry of Thorpe's conceit.

The objections of Robert Fleissner can be addressed more briefly. Greetings to the author (call them what we will) are commonplace in the front matter of Renaissance texts. If Fleissner wishes to call Thorpe's wish to Mr. W. H. a "dedication," I can see no harm in his doing so. Fleissner's main point lies elsewhere, in his identification of "W. H." with a certain William Hall. That "W. H." stands for "William Hall" was first suggested by Ebenezer Forsyth in 1867. Since then, some half dozen William Halls have been proposed (Fleissner's William Hall is the brother of Shakespeare's son-in-law). The central proof for all the "William Hall" parties, however (Fleissner included), lies in a cryptogram: Thorpe wished to Mr. W. H. "all happinesse," a phrase that reveals W. H.'s true identity, thus: to "Mr. W. Hall, happinesse." This theory has had several vigorous supporters; yet Hyder Rollins, surveying the literature in the Variorum *Sonnets*, concludes that "William Hall seems . . . as much a figment of unsound speculation as William Hughes" (2.219).

All readings of Thorpe's epigraph are partly speculative, including my own. My hypothesis cannot be proved; nor are the particulars of my argument especially important to our understanding of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. I should find the principal value of my essay in its methodology, which I think demonstrates that noncanonical texts, at least in Renaissance studies, can help us to address questions of "literal" meaning in those texts that most concern us. In defending our critical hypotheses, we may be tempted to ignore the historical context altogether or to allow a cursory check of the *OED* to substitute for a firsthand acquaintance with contemporaneous practice. In discussing *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, for example, the usual temptation is to begin with a private conviction and to argue by assertion—as in Frazer's remark that the hyphenation of Shakespeare's name "definitely indicates a pseudonym" (when in fact stationers with compound surnames often hyphenated even their *own* names) or in