

# ***Who will believe my verse? The code in Shakespeare's Sonnets***

**James Leyland & James Goding**

A day seldom goes by when we don't hear Shakespeare's name or a phrase quoted, but we know very little of his life. When we think of Shakespeare, we probably think of his plays. But he also wrote poems and this is where we might hope to hear directly from the man himself. What did he observe? What did he feel?

*Shakespeare's Sonnets* of 1609 offers the greatest hope. This little book of 154 short poems seems to speak to the reader very directly and personally – much like a letter. But even here the lines are cryptic and many can be read with the opposite sense of their surface meaning. Just as baffling is the unpoetic 12-line Dedication; whereas the poems are cryptic but magnificent, the Dedication is just cryptic.

Code-based theories around the identity of Shakespeare have come and gone – all apparently alien to the wit and humanity of the writer. Nevertheless, it was from assembling fragments of his name in the Dedication that Brenda James first identified Sir Henry Neville as a candidate for Shakespeare in 2005. She noted that in 1601, as England's Ambassador to France, Neville was convicted of treason, stripped of his knighthood (thus becoming *Mr*) and was imprisoned in the Tower with the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's supposed patron. This catastrophe coincides perfectly with a profound darkening in the mood of the plays which is not well-explained in relation to what is known of Shakespeare's life. In 2006 Bruce Leyland and James Goding assembled the name Sir Henry Neville from clues in the Dedication and published their findings in *The Australian*.

In 2008 Leyland and Goding theorised that the Dedication might provide a "map" of the sonnets. In the Dedication, the first hint of this mapping approach is an acrostic in which the writer uses the first letter each lines to form new words. Though it is obscured by the curved left-hand margin, the Dedication offers a simple acrostic.

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

BY.

OVR EVER-LIVING POET.

WISHETH

THE WELL-WISHING.

ADVENTVRER IN.

SETTING.

FORTH.

T. T.

The Dedication to the sonnets with the acrostic *TTMAP*

This acrostic may easily be disregarded as insignificant, but the Dedication is signed *TT*.

Over the next two years, they pin-pointed many examples where a word in the Dedication was central to the sonnet to which it mapped. However, while the pattern seemed consistent, they could find no precedent mapping code.

Finally, they stumbled upon the mapping of the ancient Polybius Square.

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C	D	E
2	F	G	H	I	K
3	L	M	N	O	P
4	Q	R	S	T	U
5	V	W	X	Y	Z

The Polybius Square

Using the Polybius Square, a letter may be represented by a number pair so that *H* would be 32, and *HAT* would be 32-11-44. The coordinates could also be reversed, so that *H* could be represented as 23.

The Polybius Square was certainly known to Sir Henry Neville. His lifelong mentor assisted in translating Polybius's *The Histories*, which includes this code, from the Greek. Moreover, Polybius's model of *mixed government* was exactly that explicitly pursued by Neville in the parliaments of King James over a period of 10 years or so. Perhaps even more significantly, the Polybius Square was also the predecessor of Neville's own documented diplomatic codes.

The number of columns in the Dedication grid is directed by *TTMAP*. The first instance of *TT* occurs at the 15<sup>th</sup> letter (in BEGETTER). *TTMAP* is therefore 15MAP – a map of 15 columns. *HENRY* is immediately apparent.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	T	O	T	H	E	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T
2	T	E	R	O	F	T	<b>H</b>	E	S	E	I	N	S	U	I
3	N	G	S	O	N	N	<b>E</b>	T	S	Mr	W	H		A	L
4	L	H	A	P	P	I	<b>N</b>	E	S	S	E	A	N	D	T
5	H	A	T	E	<b>T</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>T</b>	I	E	P	R	O
6	M	I	S	E	D	B	<b>Y</b>	O	U	R	E	V	E	R	-
7	L	I	V	I	N	G	<b>P</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>T</b>	W	I	S	H	E
8	T	H	T	H	E	W	E	L	L	-	W	I	S	H	I
9	N	G	A	D	V	E	N	T	U	R	E	R	I	N	S
10	E	T	T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H	T	T		

*HENRY (TERNIT)*

When *IT* is reversed (or *TERN*-ed) new words are formed, as below.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	T	O	T	H	E	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T
2	T	E	R	O	F	T	<b>H</b>	E	S	E	I	N	S	U	I
3	N	G	S	O	N	N	<b>E</b>	T	S	<b>Mr</b>	W	H		A	L
4	L	H	A	P	P	I	<b>N</b>	E	S	<b>S</b>	E	A	N	D	T
5	H	A	T	E	<b>T</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>I</b>	I	E	P	R	O
6	M	I	S	E	D	B	<b>Y</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>R</b>	E	V	E	R	-
7	L	I	V	I	N	G	<b>P</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>T</b>	W	I	S	H	E
8	T	H	T	H	E	W	E	L	L	-	W	I	S	H	I
9	N	G	A	D	V	E	N	T	U	R	E	R	I	N	S
10	E	T	T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H	T	T		

*YOUR POET MrSIR HENRY*

Leyland and Goding surmised that if the construction of the Dedication were aligned with the construction of the sonnets, this would indicate that the author of the Dedication was at least familiar with the sonnets. And, if this mapping revealed unrecognised attributes of the sonnets (perhaps known only to the author) this would confirm that both were written by the same person. The author of the Dedication would necessarily be the author of the Sonnets.

The first mapping identified was the single instance of the letter Y.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	T	O	T	H	E	O	N	L	I	E	B	E	G	E	T
2	T	E	R	O	F	T	<b>H</b>	E	S	E	I	N	S	U	I
3	N	G	S	O	N	N	<b>E</b>	T	S	<b>Mr</b>	W	H		A	L
4	L	H	A	P	P	I	<b>N</b>	E	S	<b>S</b>	E	A	N	D	T
5	H	A	T	E	<b>T</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>I</b>	I	E	P	R	O
<b>6</b>	M	I	S	E	D	B	<b>Y</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>R</b>	E	V	E	R	-
7	L	I	V	I	N	G	<b>P</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>T</b>	W	I	S	H	E
8	T	H	T	H	E	W	E	L	L	-	W	I	S	H	I
9	N	G	A	D	V	E	N	T	U	R	E	R	I	N	S
10	E	T	T	I	N	G	F	O	R	T	H	T	T		

*The Y of HENRY and YOUR*

The Dedication has only one Y that completes *HENRY* and begins *YOUR*. Set at position (7,6), Y may be “mapped” to Sonnet 76:

*Why* is my verse so barren of new pride?  
 So far from variation or quicke change?  
*Why* with the time do I not glance aside  
 To new found methods, and to compounds strange?  
*Why* write I still all one, ever the same  
 And keepe invention in a noted weed,  
 That **every word doth almost tel my name,**  
 Shewing their birth, and where they did proceed?  
 O know sweet love **I alwaies write of you,**  
 And you and love are still my argument:  
 So all my best is dressing old words new,  
 Spending againe what is already spent:  
 For as the Sun is daily new and old,  
 So is my love still telling what is told.

The three questions that are being asked in Sonnet 76 all begin with *Why*, offering a pun on the letter Y. The questions are all answered in line 9:

O know sweet love **I alwaies write of you,**

The answer to the *Why* questions is that the poet always writes “of you”. The words “of you” may be read as a possessive. The more familiar possessive form of “you” is “your”, which is the other decrypted word - *YOUR*.

However, there is one other sonnet that has three lines beginning with *Why* and its first line begins with the synonym *Wherefore*. This would seem to weaken the mapping of Y to Sonnet 76. But remarkably, this other sonnet is Sonnet 67 which also maps (6,7) to the Y of *YOUR*. There is only one letter Y in the Dedication, and only Sonnets 76 and 67 have multiple lines beginning with *Why*.

There being 15 columns in the map grid may seem arbitrary, until one sees that 15 columns allows for the greatest number of mappings to the 154 sonnets; so that (1,1) may map to Sonnet 11 and (15,4) to Sonnet 154.

But what of Neville’s own diplomatic codes, are they relevant? At first glance the similarity seems to be limited to the fact they also use a grid. However, a closer look reveals that they they too extend the Polybius approach using letter pairs rather than number pairs, as below.

Q	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K
	L	N	O	S	U	M	R	W	T	P
X	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K
	M	U	L	T	W	N	P	O	R	S
Y	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K
	S	P	R	N	W	O	U	T	M	L
Z	A	B	C	N	E	F	G	H	I	K
	U	N	W	P	T	S	L	O	M	R

To correspond, both Neville (the ambassador) and Cecil (the Queen's Secretary) each used copies of the same grid, where QXYZ forms one axis and a jumbled alphabet the other. For example, **Q.IWUY.NFU** spells "THE DOG". But each letter is really a pair, so that (Q,I), (Q,W) and (Q,U) spells "THE", and (Y,N), (Y,F) and (Y,U) spells "DOG".

The paired mapping is evident in all three code systems, Polybius, the Dedication and Neville's own codes. However, when Leyland and Goding unpicked the mapping of the Dedication, they had no knowledge of Polybius or of his close connection to Neville.

Of course, *Henry* was the most common first name in Jacobean England. To associate the *Mr Sir Henry* of the Dedication with Sir Henry Neville would require a surname. And to establish proof that he is the author of the Sonnets, there would need to be many such mappings. Leyland and Goding's book reveals a array of around 50 wry and artful mappings that illuminate the biography of Sir Henry Neville. They also postulate a new and intriguing candidate for the elusive *MrWH* of the Dedication.