

DID YOU WRITE A SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET?

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One can divide humanity into two groups—those who can be identified as the real author of a Shakespearean sonnet, and those who cannot. Willard Espy revealed in his book *The Word's Gotten Out* (Clarkson Potter, 1989) the method for establishing authorship: look for the first letter of a name anywhere in the first line of a given sonnet, the second letter of the name anywhere in the second line of the same sonnet, and so on until the full name is spelled out. Sure enough, WILLARD ESPY appears in Sonnet 114:

or Whether doth my mind, being crown'd with you,
drInk up the monarch's plague, this flattery?
or whether shaLl I say mine eye saith true,
and that your Love taught it this alchemy,
to mAke of monsters and things indigest
such cheRubims as your sweet self resemble,
creating every baD a perfect best
as fast as objEcts to his beams assemble?
o, 'tiS the first! 'Tis flatt'ry in my seeing,
and my great mind most kingly drinks it uP.
mine eYe well knows what with his gust is greeing.
and to his palate doth preserve the cup.
if it be poison'd, 'tis the lesser sin
that mine eye loves it and doth first begin.

It was a near miss—the P in Espy is the last letter on the line!

How surprising is this result? Not very, it turns out. This essay assesses the mathematical likelihood, and provides the Word Ways reader with a method of determining whether a search through the 154 sonnets has a chance of revealing his name.

The letter frequencies of the sonnets more or less resemble those found in present-day English-language texts. However, to allow for differences due to vocabulary choice, the first 30 sonnets were examined to determine how many lines out of 420 contained each letter at least once. For the rare letters JQXZ, all 154 sonnets were examined. The resulting probabilities are given below, in the first column following the letter.

A .90 ½	H .94 0	N .90 ½	T .97 0
B .13 9	I .90 ½	O .93 0	U .68 2
C .37 4	J .03 15	P .33 5	V .10 10
D .74 1	K .07 12	Q .02 17	W .56 2
E .99+ 0	L .75 1	R .87 1	X .02 16
F .47 3	M .59 2	S .93 0	Y .58 2
G .45 3			Z .01 21

To calculate quickly one's chance of success, select those integers from the rightmost column corresponding to the letters of one's name. If the sum is 19, there is an 80 per cent chance that at least one of the 154 sonnets will contain your name; if 24, 50 per cent; and if 28, only 20 per cent. For example, WILLARD ESPY corresponds to $2+\frac{1}{2}+1+1+\frac{1}{2}+1+1+0+0+5+2 = 14$, which suggests that the probability of success is about 90 per cent!

If one's total suggests some likelihood of success, the search through the sonnets can be made a little less tedious by selecting the rarest (highest-scoring) letter in one's name and searching that line first in each sonnet.

How do present and past editors of Word Ways fare? ROSS ECKLER appears three times, in Sonnets 34, 89 and 93. DMITRI BORGMANN, who requires all fourteen lines in the sonnet, appears but once, in Sonnet 114 (the one featuring Espy as well). Alas, HOWARD BERGERSON has a name of fifteen letters, denying him his chance for immortality.

What about FRANCIS BACON, the putative author of Shakespeare's plays? His score is $23\frac{1}{2}$, suggesting a 50-50 chance of appearing in a sonnet, but none of the sonnets qualifies. However, since his name has only twelve letters, one can give him an additional chance by allowing his name to start on the second or third line of a sonnet. This stratagem results in success; he appears in Sonnets 60, 104 and 107, and twice in Sonnet 89!

say that thou didst forsake me for some fault,
 and i will comment upon that ofFence.
 speak oF my lameness, and i stRaight will halt,
 against my Reasons, mAking no defence.
 thou cAnst Not, love, disgrace me half so ill,
 to set a form upoN desired Change,
 as i'll myself disgraCe, knowIng thy will.
 I will acquaintance strangle and look Strange.
 be aBSent from thy walks, and in my tongue,
 thy sweet Beloved name no more shAll dwell,
 lest i (too muCh profAne) should do it wrong
 and haply Of our old aCquaintance tell.
 for thee, agaiNst myself i'll vOw debate,
 for i must Ne'er love him whom thou dost hate.

The time-honored way of imbedding a name in a poem requires that the letters be the first on each line. The odds that this will accidentally happen are vanishingly small; poems containing acrostics are constructed with this restraint in mind (for example, Lewis Carroll's poems to Alice Liddell). The acrostic TITAnIA appears in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream", at the start of six lines spoken by Titania herself. The August 1985 Word Ways suggests that a self-referential acrostic like this was very likely inserted by Shakespeare.