

Mr. W.H.: person known only by his initials, to whom the first edition of William Shakespeare's sonnets (1609) was dedicated

The mystery of his identity has tantalized generations of biographers and critics, who have generally argued either that W.H. was also the “fair youth” to whom many of the sonnets are addressed or that he was a friend or patron who earned the gratitude of one or both parties by procuring Shakespeare's manuscript for the printer, Thomas Thorpe. Among the names offered for consideration are those of **Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton**, who was a noted patron of several writers, and William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, with whom Shakespeare is believed to have had some connection, albeit slight. William Hatcliffe, who was **Lord of Misrule** during the celebrations at Gray's Inn (1587–88), has also been suggested, as have William Hall (a printer) and Sir William Harvey (Southampton's stepfather), both of whom could well have conveyed the manuscript to Thorpe. The ambiguity with which the dedication is expressed presents additional problems, for apparently the person in question was both “wished” eternity by Thorpe and “promised” it by Shakespeare.

The first 17 sonnets are written to a young man, urging him to marry and have children, thereby passing down his beauty to the next generation. These are called the procreation sonnets. Most of them, however, 18-126, are addressed to a young man expressing the poet's love for him. Sonnets 127-152 are written to the poet's mistress expressing his love for her. The final two sonnets, 153-154, are allegorical. The final thirty or so sonnets are written about a number of issues, such as the young man's infidelity with the poet's mistress, self-resolution to control his own lust, beleaguered criticism of the world, etc.

The only edition of the sonnets published in Shakespeare's lifetime, the 1609 Quarto, is dedicated to one "Mr. W.H.". The reality, identity and age of this person remain a mystery and have caused a great deal of speculation.

The dedication in full reads:

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.
THESE.INSVING.SONNETS.
Mr.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.
PROMISED.
BY.
OVR.EVER-LIVING.POET.
WISHETH.
THE.WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTVRER.IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.

- T.T.

'T.T.' stands for Thomas Thorpe, the publisher; it is not certain whether Thorpe or Shakespeare wrote the dedication. The capital letters and periods following each word were probably intended to resemble an Ancient Roman inscription, thereby giving a sense of eternity and magnitude to the sonnets. In the sonnets, Shakespeare often declares that the sonnets will outlast such earthly things as stone monuments and inscriptions. Sonnet 55 states,

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme,

126 of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a young man (often called the "Fair Youth"). Broadly speaking, there are two branches of theories concerning the identity of Mr. W.H.: those that take him to be identical to the youth, and those that assert him to be a separate person.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of contenders:

- William Herbert (the Earl of Pembroke). Herbert is seen by many as the most likely candidate, since he was also the dedicatee of the First Folio of Shakespeare's works.

- Henry Wriothesley (the Earl of Southampton). Many have argued that 'W.H.' is Southampton's initials reversed, and that he is a likely candidate as he was the dedicatee of Shakespeare's poems *Venus & Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Southampton was also known for his good looks, and has often been argued to be the 'fair youth' of the sonnets.
- Sir William Harvey, Southampton's stepfather. This theory assumes that the fair youth and Mr. W.H. are separate people, and that Southampton is the fair youth. Harvey would be the "begetter" of the Sonnets in the sense that it would be he who provided them to the publisher.
- William Himself (i.e. Shakespeare). This theory was proposed by the German scholar D. Barnstorff, but has not found much support.

Most of the sonnets are addressed to a beautiful young man, a rival poet, and a dark-haired lady. Readers of the sonnets today commonly refer to these characters as the **Fair Youth**, the **Rival Poet**, and the **Dark Lady**. The narrator expresses admiration for the Fair Youth's beauty, and later has an affair with the Dark Lady. It is not known whether the poems and their characters are fiction or autobiographical. If they are autobiographical, the identities of the characters are open to debate. Various scholars, most notably A. L. Rowse, have attempted to identify the characters with historical individuals.

The Fair Youth

The 'Fair Youth' is an unnamed young man to whom sonnets 1-126 are addressed. The poet writes of the young man in romantic and loving language, a fact which has led several commentators to suggest a homosexual relationship between them, while others read it as platonic love.

The earliest poems in the collection do not imply a close personal relationship; instead, they recommend the benefits of marriage and children. With the famous sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day") the tone changes dramatically towards romantic intimacy. Sonnet 20 explicitly laments that the young man is not a woman. Most of the subsequent sonnets describe the ups and downs of the relationship, culminating with an affair between the poet and the Dark Lady. The relationship seems to end when the Fair Youth succumbs to the Lady's charms.

There have been many attempts to identify the Friend. Shakespeare's one-time patron, the Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton is the most commonly suggested candidate, although Shakespeare's later patron, William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, has recently become popular. Both claims have much to do with the dedication of the sonnets to 'Mr. W.H.', "the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets": the initials could apply to either Earl. However, while Shakespeare's language often seems to imply that the 'friend' is of higher social status than himself, this may not be the case. The apparent references to the poet's inferiority may simply be part of the rhetoric of romantic submission. An alternative theory, most famously espoused by Oscar Wilde's short story 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.' notes a series of puns that may suggest the sonnets are written to a boy actor called William Hughes; however, Wilde's story acknowledges that there is no evidence for such a person's existence.

The Dark Lady

Sonnets 127-152 are addressed to a woman commonly known as the 'Dark Lady' because her hair is said to be black and her skin "dun". These sonnets are explicitly sexual in character, in contrast to those written to the "Fair Youth". It is implied that the speaker of the sonnets and the Lady had a passionate affair, but that she was unfaithful, perhaps with the "Fair Youth". The poet self-deprecatingly describes himself as balding and middle-aged at the time of writing.

Many attempts have been made to identify the "Dark Lady" with historical personalities, such as Mary Fitton or the poet Emilia Lanier, who was Rowse's favoured candidate, though neither lady fits the author's descriptions.

Some readers have suggested that the reference to her "dun" (a dull, grayish, brown color) skin and "black wires...on her head" suggests that she was of African descent, as the trait described is *uniquely* African (as referenced in Anthony Burgess's novel about Shakespeare, *Nothing Like the Sun*). Many people, however, continue to maintain that the Dark Lady is merely a fictional character who never really existed in real life; they suggest that the "darkness" of the lady is not intended literally, but rather represents the "dark" forces of physical lust as opposed to the ideal Platonic love associated with the "Fair Youth". Some have identified her with Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who is also described as dark-haired.

William Wordsworth was unimpressed by these sonnets. He wrote that,

These sonnets, beginning at 127, to his Mistress, are worse than a puzzle-peg. They are abominably harsh, obscure & worthless. The others are for the most part much better, have many fine lines, very fine lines & passages. They are also in many places warm with passion. Their chief faults, and heavy ones they are, are sameness, tediousness, quaintness, & elaborate obscurity.

The Rival Poet

The Rival Poet is sometimes identified with Christopher Marlowe or George Chapman. However, there is no hard evidence that the character had a real-life counterpart. The Poet sees the Rival as competition for fame and patronage. The sonnets most commonly identified as The Rival Poet group exist within the Fair Youth series in sonnets 78-86.

Themes

Shakespeare's sonnets are frequently more earthy and sexual than contemporary sonnet sequences by other poets. One interpretation is that Shakespeare's Sonnets are in part a pastiche or parody of the three centuries-long tradition of Petrarchan love sonnets; in them, Shakespeare consciously inverts conventional gender roles as delineated in Petrarchan sonnets to create a more complex and potentially troubling depiction of human love. Shakespeare also violated many sonnet rules which had been strictly obeyed by his fellow poets: he speaks on human evils that do not have to do with love (66), he comments on political events (124), he makes fun of love (128), he parodies beauty (130), he plays with gender roles (20), he speaks openly about sex (129) and even introduces witty pornography (151).

Useful Websites:

shakespeareintune.com all the 154 Sonnets are here recited with a musical introduction.

<http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/sonnets/sonnets.php> If you visit this webpage you can read all of Shakespeare's sonnets.