Reply to Morse's Critique of the *Sonnets* Dedication Puzzle

by Robert Prechter

In a presentation at the Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference in April 2014, Michael Morse criticized my article (Prechter, 2005, Parts 1 and 2) on the *Sonnets* dedication along with others' claims to have found hidden texts within larger texts (Morse, 2014). Morse denounced "fictive ontologies" leading to "the alleged onomastic encipherment of identity or authorially-ascriptive details within a particular text [containing] solecistic phrasing, lapidary form and unusual orthography." He also referred derisively to "Prechter's fallacious leap" and "the speciousness of his claims," which he found to be "terminally flawed."

In his report of the SAS Conference in the Spring 2014 *Newsletter*, Howard Schumann gave significant coverage to Morse's speech, so many Oxfordians are by now aware of it. While the Oxfordian movement does need a careful critique of hidden-text, hidden-math and hidden-image claims, Morse's isn't it.

On the Record as a Code Skeptic

I have long displayed my skeptic's credentials, not only as an erstwhile subscriber to *Skeptic* magazine but specifically as an authorship code skeptic. In a 2010 paper (Prechter, 2010) I analyzed B.M. Ward's discernment of Edward de Vere's name supposedly hidden within a poem in *A Hundreth sundry Flowres* by George Gascoigne. Ward had 69 poems from which to choose, hundreds of letters in each poem, an inconsistent decoding approach even within his chosen poem, and a tortured construct that seemed purposely designed to produce the answer he wanted. Within this context, I also showed that other complex solutions to Ward's specific instructions are available. In this case, the additional point is valid, because the evidence indicated that Ward manufactured his answer. I concluded, "There is no special anagram and no case whatsoever that Oxford's name is deliberately embedded in the poem" (Prechter 2010, p. 56).

So, as a code skeptic, why would I write an article on embedded names within the dedication of *Shake-speares Sonnets*? The answer, as argued therein, is that a positive conclusion in that case is statistically warranted.

A Fundamental Error

Morse's technique is simple. He performs data mining on a block of text and asserts that doing so negates the author's work. But his demonstration is insufficient for debunking anything. Just because *he* uses data mining doesn't mean the author did. To succeed, he must show that the *claimer* data mined, as I did in 2010 with respect to Ward.

Pulling random artifacts from text using the method offered in my article is indeed easy. As Morse neglected to mention, however, *I said so*. My article reads, "We can even use the Dedication Puzzle to concoct 'messages' such as 'this is all wrong.' Any string of letters can provide the spelling for many things." (Prechter, 2005, Part 2, p. 20) The design of Morse's attack on my work is not original with him; it is original with me. I brought up this anticipated objection in order to dismiss it as irrelevant.

The definitive question relating to my method is not, "How many words and phrases can you concoct from a text?" The proper question is, "If you choose a text, what is the probability that the key names relating to Shakespeare's Sonnets will appear?" or, "What is the probability that pre-identified letter combinations *relating to the text* will appear?" The chances of either outcome are low, as I explained in the original article.

Contrary to Morse's assertion, the Dedication Puzzle's solutions have a substantial degree of exclusivity. All of them take the same form: a full proper name, correctly spelled, in the same direction as the text. His demonstration, on the other hand, extracts names, places, phrases, clauses and pairings; uses *and* and *the*, which are common in texts; and resorts to using 'U' for 'V' and 'V' for 'U' to make the spellings work out. Although his audience seemed impressed that he could derive "Owl Roo Tigger and Eeyore" from the dedication text, few seem to have recognized what a cheat this is. An embedded name has only one rendition. But four separate, short words (leaving "and" in its place) have six orders of expression (*abcd*, *abdc*, *acbd*, *acdb*, *adbc*, *adcb*). Searching until you find one out of six letter groupings isn't that hard. It would be as if he were to allow "ryw hen hesley riot" as one of half a dozen renditions of "Henry Wriothesley." Morse says it's easy to find solutions; it certainly is if you go about it like this.

In short, Morse confuses random coincidence with specific coincidence. Consider this analogy: If you were to travel with a friend to a faraway country, and one day you ran into one of his cousins, he might exclaim that the odds against such an event are astronomically high. But actually the probability of *some* coincidence occurring at *any* unspecified time in one's life is so high as to make any single occurrence quite usual. On the other hand, if the same friend had said to you that morning, "I think we will run into one of my cousins today," and you do, well, that outcome would have a very low probability absent special knowledge on the part of your friend. In fact, you would be justified in suspecting special knowledge. Morse says we're dealing with the former situation, but in my case we're dealing with the latter. The *Sonnets* dedication in essence said, "We are going to run into a bevy of my cousins today," and we did.

The Original Results

Using the method described in my article, the *Sonnets* dedication yields names many scholars would expect to find if the author of the text had wished to embed secret

information about the subject at hand. Key names embedded include Henry Wriothesley (widely identified as the Youth of the *Sonnets*), Emilia Bassana (the Dark Lady, according to some Stratfordians and Oxfordians), William Herbert and Philip Herbert (the "grand possessors" of Shakespeare's work, and William as the Youth according to some scholars), Edward Vere (the author) and Elisabeth (the Dark Lady, according to some Oxfordians), whose name is rendered beginning at every one of the 23 *E*'s in the dedication. The Dedication contains *all* the names of the people most widely suspected to be involved, with no key name omitted.

It does not matter that one of these names, or other names, might show up by chance. The positive result of producing all the key names is still highly statistically significant.

Morse charges that the Puzzle's solutions derive from a "non-exclusive" methodology, which is true, but he says so as if that closes the case. *Non-exclusive* is not a synonym for *unbounded*. People who allow tortured syntax in their solutions, such as "THIS VER ME DECLAR BE SHSP," do open the door to criticism, since they have implied that their approach is virtually unbounded. Non-exclusivity *per se*, on the other hand, is insufficient to negate a puzzle's existence. It is not my fault that we are not dealing with a code. While non-exclusivity means that we cannot be *absolutely certain* that the results are due to deliberate design, we may nevertheless be *highly confident* that they are.

One of Morse's claims about my method is that "the absence of any equidistant or patterned spacing in the selection of letters *opens the linguistic floodgate* and *ruins* any legitimate claims for the puzzle's exclusivity" (Morse, 2014, and Schumann, 2014, p. 25; emphasis added). Yet Morse's criteria are arbitrary, and his conclusion is irrelevant, since I specifically disclaimed solution exclusivity. His statement has no point unless it is to imply that his unmet criteria somehow ruin my claim that the solutions are *meaningful*. A brief test will show how wrong this is.

Test It

The method: In a pre-chosen 143-letter text, locate all instances of the starting letter of a pre-chosen name and, from any of them, see if you can spell the name by moving through the letters in their normal sequence until you return to your starting point. See how many names from a pre-chosen list you can spell out.

Morse scored points with his audience by using mockery in deriving names related to *Winnie-the-Pooh*. So let's use A. A. Milne's classic children's book for a test.

Find the first preface or chapter within *Winnie-the-Pooh* in which the author does not actually name the book's key players within the first 143 letters. Seek in that text just three *Sonnets* names: Henry Wriothesley (16 letters), William Herbert (14 letters) and (as Simon Forman spelled it, presumably at her direction) Emilia Bassana (13 letters). Keep in mind that you are using a method that supposedly "opens the floodgates" to solutions. I doubt you will succeed.

Alternatively, seek within this same block of text just three names of similar length that are most related to the text in question. The equivalent, textually related names in *Winnie-the-Pooh* are: Christopher Robin (16 letters), Winnie the Pooh (13 letters) and Alexander Milne (14 letters). Realize that the second name is relatively easy to find since it contains the word *the*, which appears in many short texts. I still predict you will fail.

Let's really open those supposed floodgates. Run both tests on the qualified text in each of Milne's three other books: *The House at Pooh Corner*, *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*. I suspect you will die of thirst before finding either set of names in any of the chosen texts.

Finally, choose in advance any 143-letter block of text in the whole world, and look for the three *Sonnets* names. Then look for three pre-chosen names of equivalent length *relating to that text*. I won't bother to ask if you succeeded.

The reason you can't find these names easily is that Morse's critique is invalid. You are not data mining as he was; you are applying the method I used in the Dedication Puzzle. Anyone can data mine many texts and come up with, say, names of Bible characters or messages relating to World War II. But one cannot routinely make a list of 13- to 16-letter solutions in advance and then find all of them in a pre-chosen text. Yet that's what the *Sonnets* dedication allows us to do.

One could also undertake an extensive search and locate some other text that contains the *Sonnets* names or pre-identified, equal-length names pertinent to the text. But this would be just another form of data mining.

For all the entertaining "solutions" Morse found in the Dedication, he neglected to mention that he failed to find the second most important name in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, namely Christopher Robin. This is because the chances of succeeding by the method are small even when you are blatantly engaged in data mining.

In statistics, a *p*-value of 0.05 or less implies significance, and a *p*-value of 0.01 indicates a highly significant result. From a calculation in my article, finding just the three noted *Sonnets* names in the Dedication has a *p*-value less than 0.001. The *Sonnets* dedication yields at least *five* directly related names and omits no important name. Per my study, the probability of finding these five names were they not deliberately embedded in the Dedication is 1 in 33,500. Even if this estimate were shown to be ten times too high, our *p*-value is still better than 0.001. The Dedication Puzzle result is, by statistical standards, *non-random*. The null hypothesis—that there is no deliberate embedding—is rejected.

More Evidence of Purpose

My article demonstrated that the practice of hiding names in like manner shows up in at least two other related texts, one by the very publisher of the *Sonnets*, Thomas Thorpe, the other by the author of the text on the Stratford Monument, which yields the name "Edward de Vere" in a unique and highly exclusive way. Alexander Waugh (2014) identified the Latin text on the Monument as referring to Francis Beaumont, Geoffrey Chaucer and Edmund Spenser, yet none of these names appears in that way even once; nor does William Shaksper, despite the last name ("Shakspeare") having been placed within the text. These and other points noted in the article suggest deliberate purpose and a related method behind all three of these results.

More Charges

Morse makes at least three additional charges, all erroneous. First, he says I "summarily dismiss" or "throw out" certain names found in the text. What I actually did was to suggest William Hall and Roger Manners as possible artifacts among the solutions. But the names are obviously *there*; they haven't been *thrown out*. Some people believe that they do pertain.

Second, he says that I am being "logically unsound" in saying that if the puzzle is real we can dismiss all proposed candidates for *Sonnets* relevance whose names do not appear among its solutions. But this line of reasoning is perfectly logical and consistent with my case. In that vein, I showed that omitted names (e.g., Anne Vavasor) are in fact terrible candidates. These aren't problems but instances of cross-validation. Morse neglects to offer any person whose name is *not* embedded in the text as the true Youth, Dark Lady, grand possessor or author. I doubt he will, because the good names are all there, and any missing alternatives really are bad candidates.

Finally, aiming to neuter my finding that all 23 *E*'s in the Dedication text lead to a solution of "Elisabeth," he commented, "the letter 'e' is the most frequently occurring letter in the English language, both in modern corpora and in those from the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods. If Prechter's fallacious leap doesn't beg the question here, surely nothing does." But the number of *e*'s in the English language—then or now—is irrelevant. It's what *follows* each *E* in the Dedication that matters. It is not easy to find 143-letter texts in which Elisabeth is spelled by our method from every *e* (see test results below). The plethora of *E*'s in the Dedication, then, serves to *raise* the number of successful solutions and therefore *lower* the probability that they are there by chance. By Morse's own equation, nothing I said begs the question.

Perspective

Let's get some perspective here. I offered my hypothesis in an article for a newsletter, not in a paper for a journal. I believe the newsletter forum to be appropriate for highly speculative treatments and for certain topics, such as those which might trigger Oxfordians' justified paranoia about looking like Delia Bacon. Yet I think it's fair to say that the care taken in my article is high compared to that in other Shakespeare-authorship hidden-text/math/image arguments. I even solicited the help of an independent statistician and included his supporting comments in the article, so readers would not have to rely only on my assessment.

Even so, were I to rewrite my article of a decade ago I'm sure I could improve on it. I included too much of my thinking process, making it longer than it needed to be. I think I could test more precisely the degree of statistical significance.

In finance, where I work, one of the biggest pitfalls of quantitative analysis is data mining without realizing it. Many computer programmers purport to have conducted research that will produce market-trading riches, but they fail to work because back data were simply mined. Their work is the equivalent of finding "Winnie the Pooh" in the Sonnets dedication and claiming it carries as much weight as valid results.

Contrary to popular belief, seeing patterns where they aren't is no more common than failing to see patterns where they are. Humans examined nature for thousands of years, but it wasn't until 1982 that Benoit Mandelbrot demonstrated that natural forms are patterned as fractals. Just because you don't discern a pattern doesn't mean it isn't there. That's where statistical analysis can help.

Human skepticism is a good thing, but sometimes it gets in the way of believing good data. Many court cases are won on strong circumstantial evidence. That's what we have in the Dedication Puzzle: circumstantial evidence —not beyond all doubt, but beyond *reasonable* doubt.

The Oxfordian theory will surely not stand or fall on this or that circumstance, much less on the probability of hidden text. I consider my article to be less mainstream than the journal papers I have written. But every brick helps build the case.

Postscript: Test Results

Per the prescription above, let's check the first 143 letters of each qualifying block of text within Milne's four books. As it happens, they begin chapter 3 of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, chapter 5 of *The House at Pooh Corner*, the preface to *When We Were Very Young* and the introduction to *Now We Are Six*. We find that *not one* of these passages contains all three key names from the *Sonnets*; and *not one* of them contains all three key players within the Pooh books, either. That's eight tests, all failures.

The failures, moreover, are dismal. Among the three *Sonnets* names—Henry Wriothesley, William Herbert and Emilia Bassana—the number of names found in each of the four texts is 0, 0, 0 and 0. Not one of the names shows up (and the third text even has the name "William" right in it). Such low outcomes are due to randomness *absent* deliberate embedding. So much for floodgates.

Among the three *Pooh* names—Christopher Robin, Winnie the Pooh and Alexander Milne—the number of names in each of the four texts is as follows: 1, 1, 1 and 1.

The only name that shows up at all is Winnie the Pooh, an outcome we fully expected. In how many of these texts can we spell Elisabeth from every *e*? Answer: *zero*. One can always data mine. But one cannot pull *specific* nuggets out of the mine unless it's been seeded. Morse derided my article for finding "a litany of" names suspected to be related to the *Sonnets*. But as these brief tests show, the real problem is finding enough of them. That "litany" is yet more evidence that the puzzle is a deliberate construct.

The Twelve Individual Test Results

(*Winnie the Pooh*) THE PIGLET LIVED IN A VERY GRAND HOUSE IN THE MIDDLE OF A BEECH TREE AND THE BEECH TREE WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FOREST AND THE PIGLET LIVED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HOUSE NEXT TO HIS HO

Test 1: 0 out of 3 Sonnets names
Test 2: 1 out of 3 Pooh names (Winnie the Pooh)
Test 3: Elisabeth: 9 fails out of 28

(*The House at Pooh Corner*) IT WAS GOING TO BE ONE OF RABBITS BUSY DAYS AS SOON AS HE WOKE UP HE FELT IMPORTANT AS IF EVERYTHING DEPENDED UPON HIM IT WAS JUST THE DAY FOR ORGANIZING SOMETHING OR FOR WRITING

Test 1: 0 out of 3 Sonnets names
Test 2: 1 out of 3 Pooh names (Winnie the Pooh)
Test 3: Elisabeth: 9 fails out of 13

(*When We Were Very Young*) AT ONE TIME BUT I HAVE CHANGED MY MIND NOW I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO WRITE A LITTLE NOTE AT THE TOP OF EACH OF THESE POEMS IN THE MANNER OF MR WILLIAM WORDSWORTH WHO LIKED TO TELL HIS

Test 1: 0 out of 3 Sonnets names
Test 2: 1 out of 3 Pooh names (Winnie the Pooh)
Test 3: Elisabeth: 4 fails out of 16

(*Now We Are Six*) WHEN YOU ARE RECITING POETRY WHICH IS A THING WE NEVER DO YOU FIND SOMETIMES JUST AS YOU ARE BEGINNING THAT UNCLE JOHN IS STILL TELLING AUNT ROSE THAT IF HE CANT FIND HIS SPECTA

Test 1: 0 out of 3 Sonnets names
Test 2: 1 out of 3 Pooh names (Winnie the Pooh)
Test 3: Elisabeth: 14 fails out of 16

Works Cited

Morse, Michael, "A Critique of Oxfordian Cryptographic Analysis: Falsifiability, the Non-Exclusivity Problem, and the Seductive Allure of Fictive Ontologies," Presentation at the 2014 Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference, Concordia University, Portland, Oregon (partial presentation notes received by private email, April 23, 2014).

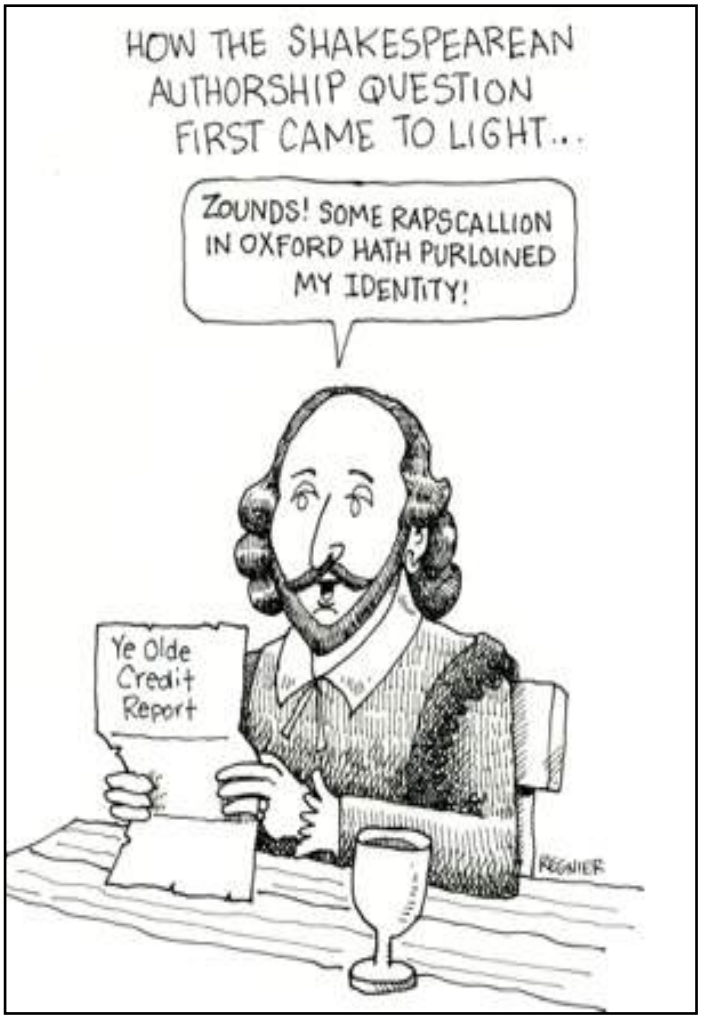
Prechter, Robert, "*A Hundreth sundry Flowres* Revisited—Was Oxford Really Involved?" *Brief Chronicles*, Vol. 2 (2010), 44-77.

Prechter, Robert, "The Sonnets Dedication Puzzle, Part 1," *Shakespeare Matters*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring 2005), 12-19.

Prechter, Robert, "The Sonnets Dedication Puzzle, Part 2," *Shakespeare Matters*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 2005), 18-26.

Schumann, Howard, "Continued Support Pledged at 18th Annual Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference," *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring 2014).

Waugh, Alexander, "'Thy Stratford Moniment' Revisited," working paper, received by private email November 16, 2014.



Cartoon by John Regnier