The Mystery of the Missing 'M'

It has long been established that there is a strongly cryptic element in the introductory material to the Shake-speare *First Folio* of 1623, although "Stratfordians" stubbornly refuse to acknowledge this fact.[1]

In an article first published in 2007 in the printed *Newsletter* of the Marlowe Society[2], I drew attention to a strange anomaly in the verses attributed to Ben Jonson ("B. I.") which were printed in the *First Folio* opposite the equally strange Droeshout engraving, which purportedly depicts the author of the Shake-speare plays (though it is most unlikely that Martin Droeshout ever met the Stratford man, having been just 15 years old when the latter died in 1616):

This Figure, that thou here seest put
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut
Wherein the Graver had a Strife
with Nature, to out-doo the life:
O, could he but have drawne his wit
As well in brasse, as he hath hit
His face; the Print would then surpasse
All, that was ever writ in brasse.
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.

B. I.

Like many others (including John Michell), I had long felt that there was something mysterious about these lines, not only in their somewhat contradictory tone, but also bearing in mind the pointedly challenging phrase "Reader, looke" and the rather forced repetition of the words "in brasse".

The "strange anomaly" (mentioned above) is the mysterious fact that the letter "M" does not occur in these lines. To the best of my knowledge, this fact has not been previously noted. As we will see, it is extremely unlikely to have arisen by chance.

It is now generally accepted that the statistical analysis of word frequency, as carried out by such researchers as Dr Thomas Mendenhall[3] and many others - often, nowadays, with the aid of computers - is a valid and important technique in establishing the authorship of literary works and the development of an author's style. Likewise, the analysis of *letter frequency* can be used to reveal the cryptic content of literary works and encoded texts, just as mathematical techniques have long been used by government organisations

[1] For an excellent overview, see John Michell, *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (Thames and Hudson, 1996)

[2] See Marlowe Society Newsletter #28 (http://www.marlowe-society.org/pubs/newsltr/newsltr28.html) - p26.

[3] In 1901 Dr Thomas Mendenhall, a distinguished physicist, carried out an extensive word-length analysis, in which he compared the writings of "Shake-speare" with those of other contemporary writers: to his own astonishment, he found a *100% exact match* with the writings of Christopher Marlowe.

to decipher secret codes and communications. In literature, this field of research is known as Stylometry, or Stylometrics.

It is true, of course, that languages and alphabetical characters do not function in quite the same way as numerals; it is clear, therefore, that the best scientific method in establishing letter-frequency must be the examination of a large selection of texts from the relevant period in history. The larger the amount of text analysed, the more reliable the results will be (as I will show in due course).

So far as today's English language is concerned, it has been demonstrated by a recognised expert on Cryptography, Dr Simon Singh, that the letter "M" occurs at a frequency of 2.4%, based on a sample of 100,362 alphabetic characters;[4] this frequency, when applied to the 272 letters of the "B. I." poem, would produce an average of 6.53 "M"s.

Looking back at Jacobean or Elizabethan English, at what frequency did the letter "M" normally occur? We will seek to ascertain this figure.

When I was preparing my earlier article on this subject, I decided to check, as a completely random sample, the first twenty Shake-speare *Sonnets*, restricting my analysis to only the first *eight* lines, because the Sonnets' pentameter lines are slightly longer than the tetrameter used in the ten lines quoted above. The results are shown in Table 1:

Sonnet	No. 'M's in first 8 Lines	No. Letters in Sample	Percentage 'M's
1	9	280	*3.2%*
2	2	275	*0.7%*
3	6	274	*2.2%*
4	2	266	*0.8%*
5	6	278	*2.2%*
6	6	264	*2.3%*
7	7	265	*2.6%*
8	3	293	*1.0%*
9	5	266	*1.9%*
10	4	277	*1.4%*
11	7	300	*2.3%*
12	5	272	*1.8%*
13	5	283	*1.8%*
14	6	251	*2.4%*
15	8	289	*2.8%*
16	10	264	*3.8%*
17	8	286	*2.8%*

[4] Dr Simon Singh, *The Code Book* (Fourth Estate, 1999) - p19. The most common letter in English is "e", at 12.7%, while the least common letters are "q" and "z", each at 0.1%.

Sonnet	No. 'M's in first 8 Lines	No. Letters in Sample	Percentage 'M's
18	18	275	*6.5%*
19	6	285	*2.1%*
20	11	293	*3.8%*
Total:	**134**	**5,536**	*2.4%*
Average:	***6.7***	***276.8***	*2.4%*

Table 1 - Analysis of Letter 'M' Appearing in First 8 Lines of Sonnets 1-20

From this we can see that the average number of 'M's in a text of this length is between six and seven, so it is fair to conclude that the poem opposite the Droeshout engraving would normally have contained about six or seven "M"s (though it could have contained as many as *eighteen*, as in Sonnet 18). As we have seen, the ratio in modern English is very similar.

Using the above data, we can also calculate the exact frequency at which the letter "M" occurred in Elizabethan and Jacobean English: **134** divided by **5,536** equals 0.0242052. This figure, expressed as a percentage, is **2.42052**%, which matches Simon Singh's statistic for modern English, mentioned above, i.e. **2.4 %.**[5]

Having analysed the first twenty Sonnets in some detail, I then checked the first eight lines of all one hundred and fifty-four Sonnets, and found that *there is not a single case in which the letter "M" is absent!* The same applies to the Shake-speare poem *A Lover's Complaint*, which can be divided into 41 separate "stanzas" of eight-lines each; it also applies to the first eight lines of all thirty-seven Shake-speare plays (i.e. the 36 plays published in the *First Folio* of 1623, plus *Pericles*).

So, in summary, the original sample consisted of:

- 154 eight-line "stanzas" from the 1609 *Sonnets*;
- 41 eight-line "stanzas" from *A Lover's Complaint* ;
- 37 eight-line "stanzas" from all 37 Shake-speare plays:
- giving a total of 232 "stanzas" in all, without a single missing "M".

On that basis, back in 2007, I concluded that the odds of the "missing M" phenomenon arising purely by chance were more than 200 to 1 against. *I now believe that this conclusion was far too cautious.* Having carried out a much

[5] This methodology has been endorsed by a distinguished fellow-Marlovian, Professor Mikhail Malyoutov PhD, of the Faculty of Mathematics at North Eastern University in Boston, USA, whose kind assistance I here acknowledge.

more detailed analysis, based on a larger amount of text, I can now demonstrate that the odds of the "missing M" occurring by chance are in fact *more than two thousand to one against* (the relevant data is given below).

My enlarged sample of text consists of the following:

- All **154** initial eight-line "stanzas" from *Shake-speares Sonnets*;
- All **41** eight-line "stanzas" of *A Lover's Complaint* ;
- All **37** initial eight-line "stanzas" of the 37 plays attributed to Shake-speare;
- All **37** final eight-line "stanzas" of the above plays;
- Plus **305** eight-line "stanzas" from *Julius Caesar* (307 less the first and last "stanzas" already counted);
- Plus **369** eight-line "stanzas" from *Romeo and Juliet* (371 less the first and last "stanzas" already counted);
- All **215** eight-line "stanzas" from *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Christopher Marlowe;
- All **298** eight-line "stanzas" from *Tamburlaine the Great (Part One*) by Christopher Marlowe;
- All **292** eight-line "stanzas" from *Tamburlaine the Great (Part Two)* by Christopher Marlowe;
- All **289** eight-line "stanzas" from *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe;
- All **324** eight-line "stanzas" from *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe;
- All **343** eight-line "stanzas" from *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe;
- All **163** eight-line "stanzas" from *The Massacre at Paris* by Christopher Marlowe;
- That is a total of **2,867** "stanzas" in all.

The total selection now comprises 2,867 eight-line sections of text ("stanzas"), of which *not one* lacks the letter "M". The complete absence of this letter is therefore an entirely artificial device which confirms the cryptic element in the *First Folio* and demands an explanation. One point that it *does* prove, is that there was definitely a secret about "Shake-speare".

The B. I. Verses: a Strange Ambiguity of Language

The *First Folio's* commendatory verses attributed to "B.I." have long presented something of a riddle, being obviously cryptic; and the curiously ambiguous language of the poem, with its note of artifice and challenge, supports the notion of a "missing letter". Let us look again, in particular, at the first four lines:

This Figure, that thou here seest put
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut
Wherein the Graver had a Strife
with Nature, to out-doo the life:

The Oxford English Dictionary confirms that the word "Figure" can mean

- "*A written character; e.g. a letter, etc.*" - 1660 (O.E.D. "Figure" *sb.*, IV.1).

Furthermore, the word "cut" (in line 2) can mean:

- "*to sever for the purpose of taking the part detached*", or:
- "*to separate or remove by cutting*" (O.E.D. "Cut" *v.* II.5 & III).

Likewise, to state that the engraver had engaged in "a strife with Nature, to out-doo the life" could signify (in today's English) that the deviser of these verses had undertaken "a battle against natural occurrence" – or, as we would say, "a battle against probability" – in order to exclude a particular letter of the alphabet, in this case the letter "M", which is relatively common in English – hence the difficulty of the task. Furthermore, the word "out-doo" can mean:

- "*to defeat, overcome*" (O.E.D. "Outdo" *v.* I.b).

A Possible Interpretation of the "Missing M"

When we seek to interpret this phenomenon, a number of possibilities arise, but it is almost more important to acknowledge the fact that there are cryptic elements in the *First Folio*, especially in the introductory material. The best-known example is the very strange "reversed sleeve" in the supposed "portrait" by Martin Droeshout. This feature has been widely discussed by anti-Stratfordians, but it is still ignored by Stratfordians, since they have no real answer to the problem. On the other hand, even Stratfordians have conceded the unsatisfactory nature of the portrait - the mask-like face, the blank expression, etc. John Michell states the following: "Ludicrous, grotesque, monstrous, inane, are among the terms applied to [Droeshout's] engraving." [6]

Since the "B.I." verses are placed next to the "portrait", we might surmise that the missing "M" is an invitation to look within the verses for the encrypted

[6] Michell, op.cit - p.84. Michell also quotes Samuel Schoenbaum on the portrait's many deficiencies (see Appendix B, below).

name of the real author. Alternatively (or additionally), it may be intended that we should look for a "missing letter" elsewhere, one which is related to the engraving and to the true identity of "Shake-speare".

One of the most obvious anomalies is the fact that, while nine of the ten lines begin with a capital letter, the fourth line begins with a lower-case "w". This may signify that the other "missing letter" has something to do with a "W" (then usually printed as two "V"s adjoining, thus "VV").

We do not need to look very far. I believe that this hint about a "missing letter" is related to the heading and first line of another memorial poem in the *First Folio*, likewise written by Ben Jonson, which begins thus : "To draw no envy [*i.e. "no end-V"*] (Shakespeare) on thy name". This interpretation may be confirmed by the "one half missing" motif in the Droeshout engraving, since one side of the sitter's strangely distorted doublet bears a certain resemblance to a letter "V", which could be a hint about the missing half of a concealed letter "W" ("VV").

For additional information, I would ask readers to refer to my book, *Shake-speare's Voyage to America*,[7] in which the "no end-V" cipher and other cryptic features of the *First Folio* are examined. The matter is somewhat complicated, since there are slight differences of layout in surviving copies of the *First Folio*, and unfortunately very few of these are available in facsimile. I understand that the largest number of copies of the *First Folio* are in the possession of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C.

Finally, in conjunction with the phenomenon of the missing "M", there is the possibility of a geometrical "figure" superimposed on the lines of the "B.I." verses. I give a possible interpretation in Appendix A (below), in the form of an equilateral triangle. This theory receives further support from the O.E.D. in connection with the word "Figure" *sb.*, I.2:

- *Geom.* "*A definite form constituted by a line or lines so arranged as to enclose a superficial space … any of the classes of such forms, as the triangle, cube, sphere, etc.*"

[7] Christopher Gamble, *Shake-speare's Voyage to America* (Cappella Archive, 2005)

Appendix A: The Missing "M" and the Equilateral Triangle

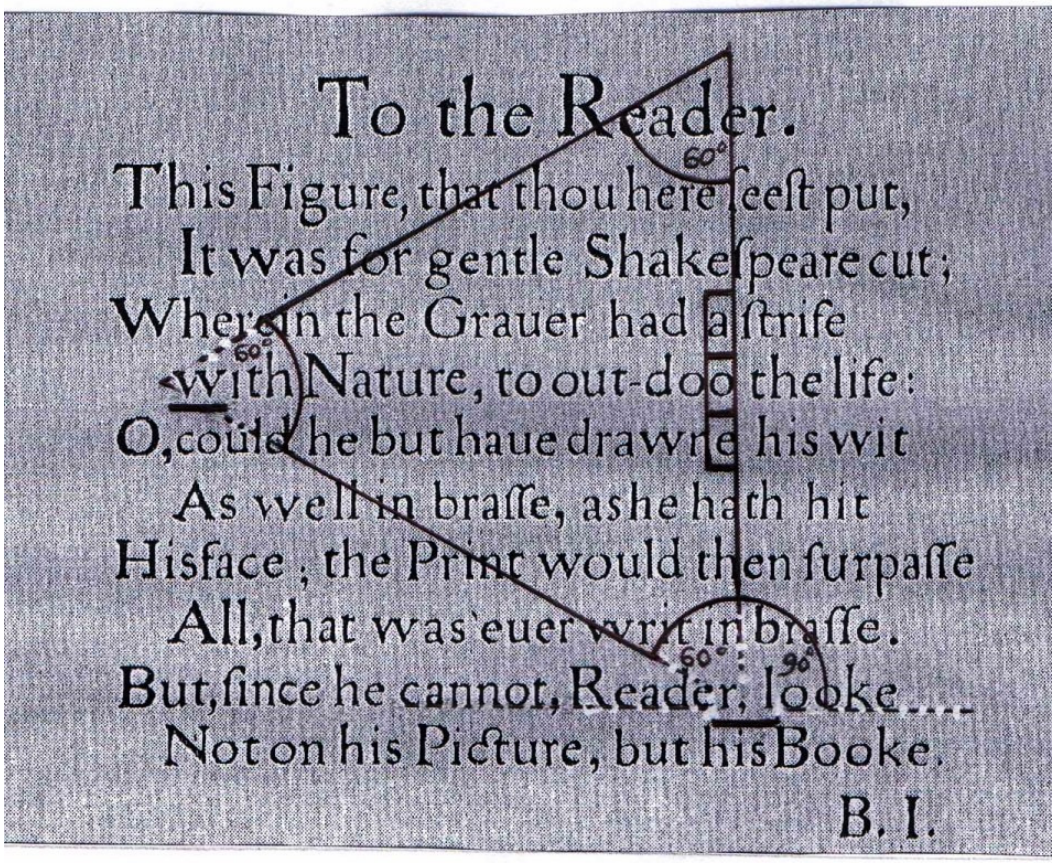

Figure 1- The Missing 'M' and Equilateral Triangle from the Shake-speare *First Folio* of 1623

Appendix B: Samuel Schoenbaum's Remarks on the Droeshout Engraving

"In the Shakespeare engraving a huge head, placed against a starched ruff, surmounts an absurdly small tunic with oversized shoulder-wings … The mouth is too far to the right, the hair on the two sides fails to balance. Light comes from several directions simultaneously : it falls on the bulbous protuberance of forehead – that "horrible hydrocephalous development", as it has been called – creates an odd crescent under the right eye, and (in the second state [i.e. later print run of the 1623 First Folio]) illuminates the edge of the hair on the right side."

From *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford and New York, 1970)

Strangely, it seems that Schoenbaum had nothing to say about the famous "reversed sleeve"!