

SONNET 107: SONG OF THANKSGIVING

by David Basch

While critics will agree that *Sonnet 107* is one of Shakespeare's great sonnets, agreement ends there. In general, critics recognize the triumphant tone in its celebration of a new era dawning. It is evident that something spectacular had happened within the world described by the sonnet. It *then* raised hopes for lasting peace and gave the firm prospect that the poem will have lasting significance as a tribute to the poet's "*beloved*" and for his own fame. But what was the event celebrated and why did it impact so dramatically on the poet's life? While answers to these questions have long simmered in controversy, at last, a key has been discovered to resolve these issues. As has happened before with the poet's work, the key to understanding is to be found in sonnet's hidden elements.

Below is a copy of the sonnet in its original 1609 spelling, punctuation, and approximate layout, the latter padded with spaces to retain some of its original vertical alignments (*see the last page for a facsimile of the original sonnet*):

I 07

- [1] **N**ot mine owne feares, nor the prophetick soule,
[2] **O**f the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
[3] Can yet the lease of my true loue controule,
[4] Suppose as forfeit to a confin'd doome.
[5] The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur'de,
[6] And the sad Augurs mock their owne presage,
[7] Incertenties now crowne them-selues assur'de,
[8] And peace proclaimes Oliues of endlesse age,
[9] Now with the drops of this most balmie time,
[10] My loue lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes,
[11] Since spight of him Ile liue in this poore rime,
[12] While he insults ore dull and speachlesse tribes.
[13] And thou in this shalt finde thy monument,
[14] When tyrants crests and tombs of brasse are spent.

To be sure, there have been no lack of proposals for identifying the ambiguous allusions in the sonnet. One of the proposals identifies "*The mortall Moone*" in line 5 as alluding to Queen Elizabeth and assumes that it was she that had "*indur'de*" — *escaped or succumbed to* — her "*eclipse*," possibly involving a major illness.

But the most interesting of the proposals was one by Leslie Hotson, a Yale scholar of the Elizabethan period. Hotson had asserted that the sonnet's

words, “*the mortall Moone,*” refer to none other than the deadly *half moon formation* of the Spanish Armada that had menaced the British nation in 1588. As it turned out, the dreaded Armada was miraculously *eclipsed* by a combination of the effective seamanship of Britain’s small, speedy ships and a sudden, raging storm that unexpectedly vanquished the entire enemy fleet.

Hotson concluded that the relief described in the sonnet is in the aftermath of the British people’s deliverance from what had appeared as the nation’s immanent destruction. The endless period of peace ahead — “*Olives of endless age*” — was what was at the time reported as the people’s joyful expectation of peace — symbolized by the *olive* — in the wake of their deliverance.

The historical record cited by Hotson revealed some other illuminating detail. For 100 years prior to 1588, there had been numerous prophecies of coming dire events centering on the year 1588. These had been based largely on interpretations of astronomical observations of the coming in 1588 of what was called a “*threatening conjunction*” of the planets Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. In that year, the sun was calculated to be eclipsed on the 16th day of February, to be followed by a total eclipse of the moon at the very next full moon. On top of that, there was to be a second eclipse of the moon during the following August — three eclipses in one year. As Hotson reported concerning a noted astrologer of the period, “*the renowned Hermes Trismegistus had laid it down that ‘there insue manifold mischiefes in the world when the Sun, and Moone are both eclipsed in one moneth.’*”

With such fearful prophecies in the background, the British people gazed with paralyzing fear at the great Spanish Armada that had loomed on the horizon. It was thought that this was surely in fulfillment of the dire prophecies and was destined to snuff out the independence of Britain and the independent religious course the nation had taken. It was to such “*feares*” and “*augers*” that *Sonnet 107* seems to have alluded. And when it turned out that, by failing to materialize, the “*sad Augers mock[ed] their own presage.*” Then was the British nation’s joy boundless in entering what was described in the sonnet as a new age of peace.

Though Hotson’s views were most credible and some few British critics came to regard this sonnet as indeed “*the national sonnet,*” there were yet some lingering loose ends in interpretation and in resolving the sonnet’s alleged internal contradictions. These together with a lack of direct confirming evidence about the sonnet’s allusions led many critics to remain unconvinced by Hotson. Today, two leading commentators on the *Sonnets* have chosen not to take sides on this issue nor do they mention Hotson’s view in their books, except in one case to deride it. But now, new information has surfaced that not only speaks decisively in favor of Hotson’s thesis but also promises to unravel the sonnet’s unresolved mysteries.

ANALYSIS

An overlooked clue to the meaning of *Sonnet 107* may already reside in the striking parallels between the sonnet and the *Bible's* correspondingly numbered *Psalms* 107. The psalm's first two verses speak of thanksgiving to a merciful Lord given by "*the redeemed of the Lord,*" namely, given by those who were delivered "*from the hand of the enemy.*" The psalm goes on to cite four instances of such deliverance, each followed by the psalmist's behest that all give thanksgiving in recognition of Lord's role in bringing it about.

The implication of this parallel would suggest that Shakespeare's sonnet was composed to parallel its numerical sister psalm. Hence, the sonnet could be read as following the psalm's pattern in the aspect of the behest to give thanks to the Lord for the similar national deliverance of Britain from "*the hand of the enemy.*" Hotson had averred that no event at the time other than Britain's deliverance from the Spanish menace corresponded to the portent and scope of what is described in the sonnet.

If this is what *Sonnet 107* truly describes, where then in the sonnet do we find the called for thanksgiving to the Lord? Reviewing the sonnet, it may be concluded that this is to be read as the meaning of its last two lines, which dedicate the sonnet to the poet's *beloved friend*. If that is the case, the poet's *beloved friend* can only be *The Lord* and hardly the mysterious young man often assumed by scholars and seemingly alluded to in many of the other sonnets.

Of course, such a radical surmise would entail drastic reinterpretations of elements of the sonnet. Among such changes is to read the words in line 3, "*the lease of my true loue,*" as referring *not* to *the duration of the life of the alleged person mentioned*, the poet's "*true loue*" — *illogical as applied to God* — but only as applied to *the duration of the sincere affection of the poet*. This is a focus on *the lasting of the poet's affection, the lasting of his feeling of "true loue,"* rather than that of the life of his *beloved* — a view already posed as a possibility by some commentators. Thus, what the earlier "*feares*" and "*prophesies did not alter*" was "*the lease,*" *the continuance of the poet's deep affection* in his faithful attachment to *God, his Beloved*. It was the continuation of this attachment that the dreadful portents could not "*controule,*" though others had supposed it "*forfeit to a confin'd doome.*"

In this light, the unusual word, "*incertenties,*" in line 7, usually interpreted as a reference to what were *formerly uncertainties about a deliverance* that later became "*assured,*" could rather be referring to *ideas* that, by their nature, tend to be permanently uncertain, *like doubts about the existence of God's guiding hand*. While the miraculous deliverance may have then confirmed the existence of God's guidance and, for the moment, transformed it into a thing "*assured,*" the insinuation of the word "*incertenties*" is that this stance, typically, would last only for the duration in which lingers the aura of the experience of having been delivered. After that, the

assured existence of God's guiding hand would likely again revert to one of those perennial "*incertenties*," as Shakespeare's insightful word seems to suggest.

The poet goes on to declare that for him the ordeal strengthened his love — "*My love lookes fresh*" — and that, in spite of the force of death, the poet would go on to "*liue in this poor rime*," a confidence given by the then assured survival of his nation and the culture it made possible. (*Note the poet's initials, W.S., appearing at the head of lines 11 and 12, the lines mentioning his own survival.*) The poet concludes his closing couplet with words directly addressing his *Beloved*, telling *Him* that this sonnet recounting *His* deeds of deliverance and expressing the poet's deep, abiding love will be an enduring monument to *Him* — *a monument of thanksgiving*. Though "*poore*" materially, it will yet out last the supposedly more durable and bombastic structures that tyrants build to honor themselves.

The sonnet message is further affirmed by its reference to death as insulting over "*dull and speechless tribes*." This appears as a parallel to verse 42 of *Psalm 107* — "*all iniquity shall stop her mouth*." The latter verse explains the poet's expression, "*speechless tribes*," as alluding to the *silence*, the fated *doom*, of iniquitous nations, such as the one that menaced Britain, which the words of the full biblical verse make clear: "*The righteous shall see it [the doom of the oppressor], and rejoice: and all iniquity shall stop her mouth*."

But, having now drawn this far reaching interpretation, have we now merely side-stepped the original difficulties by adding new, equally unverified assumptions based on seeming parallels between sonnet and psalm? The issue is made even more problematic by the now ascribed religious tone of the sonnet that many critics would regard as most uncharacteristic of the secular Shakespeare, long assumed. (*On the other hand, some commentators have alleged the presence of a religious content in two others of the 154 sonnets — Sonnets 55 and 146.*) As before, critics are unlikely to accept what appears as a most radical view that challenges long held assumptions without what they regard as conclusive, compelling evidence. Observations about the many parallels between sonnet and psalm, like the sonnet's "*tombs of brasse*" (line 12) and the psalm's "*gates of brass*" (verse 16), while suggestive, will hardly conclusively settle the heated issues raised. However, as will be shown, there is considerable evidence about the poet's direct thoughts on these matters.

THE POET'S THOUGHTS

An examination of a facsimile of the original sonnet printing discloses two very conspicuous vertical columns of letters occurring within lines 3 to 6. These yield the letter strings, "*y-o-m*" and "*A-M*," the *former* read downward and the *latter* read upward and capitalized in the original text as though for emphasis. These are shown below as extracted from the text and then as set within the full lines:

Here the word of this phrase, *zoo* (זוּ), is approximated by the letters “*s-ow*.” What is special about this version is that, while hyphens here have been added in this article to indicate jumps between letters from line to line, there is an *actual hyphen* present in the quarto text on line 7 between “*m*” and “*s*” (“*them-selues*,” giving an *integrally hyphenated* representation as “*om-sow*.” Notable about this is that it reproduces the *hyphen* that appears in the Hebrew *Bible’s* actual spelling of the two instances of this phrase — “*om-zoo*” (עַם־זוּ). This suggests the poet knew this reading in the original Hebrew since he conveys it by reproducing it in his representation.

Additional evidence of the poet’s deliberate inclusion of these transliterations comes from the fact that the word “*co’ny’sa*” (“*You acquired*” - קְנִיתָ) that appears in one of the phrases with “*om-zoo*” also appears transliterated twice in the sonnet, represented as “*C-N-y-s-o*” and “*conita*” — the latter using the *Sephardic* pronunciation of the Hebrew “*s*” as “*t*.” This is shown and discussed below, both as extracted from the sonnet text and as merged with it:

[1]	N	
[2]		
[3]	Can y	cont
[4]		s
[5]		o

[1]	N ot	mine	owne	feares,	nor	the	prophetick	soule,			
[2]		Of	the	wide	world,	dreaming	on	things	to	come,	
[3]		Can	y	et	the	lease	of	my	true	loue	controule,
[4]		Supposde	as	forfeit	to	a	confin’d	doome.			
[5]		The	mortall	Moone	hath	her	eclipse	indur’de,			

In these transliterations, the poet has treated English consonants in the manner of Hebrew letters. In written Hebrew, words are usually written by consonants alone, with the reader recognizing a word and inferring its appropriate pronouncing vowels from the context. Hence, reading upward from the letter “*C*” that begins line 3, the vowel “*o*” may be inferred between the “*C*” and the large letter “*N*” above. Then reading down from the “*N*,” we observe letters in a descending diagonal that include “*y*,” “*s*,” and “*o*” spell out “*Co’NY’S*O,” a credible transliteration of the Hebrew “*CoNySa*” — reinforced by the reading “*Can y*” from the first “*C*” of line 3 and again down to the letters “*s*” and “*o*” — again “*Can y-s-o*.”

Concerning the rendering of this word as “*cont*” at the end of line 3, reading these letters voweled in the Hebrew manner yields “*co’ni’ta*.” As noted, this version uses the *Sephardic* pronunciation of the Hebrew “*s*” as “*t*.”

Astoundingly, not only does “*CoNySa*” appear twice in the sonnet, but so does “*Go’AL’Ta*” from the phrase, “*ahm-zoo go’al’ta*” (גואלת), “*the people You redeemed*.” It appears as a horizontal palindrome running from line 6 to 7 as “*guA-ll-><-ta*”:

[5] The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur'de,
 [6] And the sad Augurs mock their owne presage,

This word also appears vertically running up from line 11 to 8 as “*gh-o’ol’-t-a*” in the following text configuration:

[8] a
 [9] t
 [10] loo
 [11] gh/

[8] And peace proclaimes Oliues of endlesse age,
 [9] Now with the drops of this most balmie time,
 [10] My loue lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes,
 [11] Since spight of him Ile liue in this poore rime,

It is abundantly evident that the poet alludes here to the *Bible’s* triumphal song, *another national song of triumph at an occasion of deliverance by the Lord.*

But this is hardly the end of such embedded transliterations. The sonnet includes transliterations of the *Bible’s* words for “*song*” — “*shir* and “*shi’ra*” — as found in the “*song at the sea.*” These occur in the configurations “*s-h-I-er*” and “*s-h-I-e’ro-h.*” These appear overlapped in lines 9 to 12 of the sonnet text, read down and then to the left, finishing in the second version with an upward reading, as shown below:

[9] s
 [10] sh
 [11] h I
 [12] ore



[9] Now with the drops of this most balmie time,
 [10] My loue lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes,
 [11] Since spight of him Ile liue in this poore rime,
 [12] While he insults ore dull and speachlesse tribes.

Also embedded in the sonnet are three transliterations of “*Ra’MaH,*” another word from the same triumphal song, meaning “*hurled*” or “*cast down,*” occurring in the verses, “*the horse and his rider hath he thrown (“ra’mah”) into the sea*” (*Exodus 15:1*) and “*the Pharaoh’s chariots and his host hath he cast (“ra’mah”) into the sea*” (*Exodus 15:4*). One of these appears on line 5 of the sonnet as “*rom eh,*” read backwards in the words, “*The mortall.*” A second appears as “*ream-uo*” in letters joined from the words in lines 2 and 3, “*dreaming*” and “*loue*” (*read left*). Here the Elizabethan “*u*” of “*loue*” is read as “*u*”:

[2] dreaming
 [3] loue

The third instance of “*Ra'mah*” appears in a setting that transliterates a full phrase in which it appears in the original Hebrew, “*ra'ma ba'yom*” (“*cast into the sea*”). This shows within the couplet lines almost fully in consonants as “**RaMA Ba YoM**” when these are read voweled and in appropriate directions as follows:

[12]
 [13]
 [14]

[12] While he insults ore dull and speachlesse tribes.
 [13] And thou in this shalt finde thy monument,
 [14] When tyrants crests and tombs of brasse are spent.

Given these embedment, can it be doubted that Shakespeare had conceived *Sonnet 107* in the pattern of the “*song at the sea,*” having seen a parallel in the deliverance of the British people to that of Israel? If doubts remain about this, Shakespeare further allays them since he embeds *four* transliterations of the name “*Israel*” in his sonnet within the space of its first five lines.

Two versions of this are found within lines 3 to 6 as “*y-s-r-e-al*” (*transliterated as the name sounds in Hebrew*) and as “*i-es-r-ael*,” the latter version read from left to right. Both show up within similar wavelike configurations, with letter strings that run up and down from one line to the other. The very repetition of this manner must add to the credibility of these readings. These are shown below, extracted and as set within the text:

[3]
 [4]
 [5]
 [6]

[3] Can yet the lease of my true loue controule,
 [4] Supposde as forfeit to a confin'd doome.
 [5] The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur'de,
 [6] And the sad Augurs mock their owne presage,

The other two versions of “*Israel*” appear within the sonnet’s first three lines and make use of an interesting device. Here the same letter “*I*” that in both of these instances begins the name “*Israel*” is formed from the number *1* of the sonnet number, *I07*, that sits above in the original quarto text. This number is printed in a shape that happens to resemble the letter “*I*” and is located just where it can be read with the letter “*s*” below on line 1. From this “*s*,” the letters of the two versions of the name flow in two directions. One flows downward and can be

read “*I-s-rea-l*.” The second is read from right to left from the “s” as “*I-serae-l*” — a convincing representation that resembles one of the earlier ones in incorporating an intruding letter “e,” as can be observed:

I07

[1]	eares	s
[2]	1	rea
[3]		1

I07

[1]	N ot mine owne feares,	nor the prophetick soule,
[2]	Of the wide world,	dreaming on things to come,
[3]	Can yet the lease of my true loue controule,	

From these numerous instances that defy arbitrary chance, we must conclude that the poet did intend to embed the name “*Israel*” into his sonnet — *another nation that had received deliverance from the Lord at the sea*.

Uncannily, there are yet many more literary feats to be taken account of in this sonnet. Since the poet has just been shown to implicate the sonnet number in the design of his communication, it suggests an examination to determine if he went further in exploiting the opportunity this number afforded. As it turns out, he did so in a few ways. In the first, he appears to have made use of the number 107 as written in the Hebrew *cipher-alphabet* system, in which letters are also numbers. Since the Hebrew letter *Kuf* is 100 and 7 is *Zayin*, the number is *Kuf-Zayin* (קז), the equivalent of *KZ*. Reading these letters right to left and voweled can sound the Hebrew word *ZeeKah*, which means *an attachment* or *tie*. This meaning appears represented in the sonnet in line 3 through the word “*lease*,” which declares *the duration of the attachment of the Poet’s deep love*.

Consider a second use of the sonnet number. *Number 107* is comprised of a *10* and a *7*. Again, changing these into their Hebrew letter equivalents yields the letters *Yud* and *Zayin* (יז) – letters corresponding to “*YZ*.” Reading these with the addition of assumed vowels can sound the Hebrew word, “*YehZeh*,” which means, “*he will dream*.” Is it therefore not noteworthy that in line 2 of the sonnet the words are found, “*dreaming of things to come*”?

Also pertinent is that, reading the numbers 1 and 7 of 107 directly as Hebrew letters – *zero is not represented in the Hebrew cipher-alphabet system* – they become the letters *Aleph* and *Zayin* (אז), equivalent to *AZ*. Voweled, this can be read as the Hebrew word “*AZ*,” meaning “*then*.” Interestingly, the word “*then*” happens to be the subject of considerable homiletic discourse since not only is it the first word of “*the song at the sea*” — which begins, “*AZ ya’shir ...*” (“*Then sang ...*”) — but it

likewise occurs at the beginning of other triumphal songs of thanksgiving in the *Bible*. In each case, the presence of the word **AZ**, “*then*,” relates the song immediately to events preceding — events in which the Lord is revealed as the deliverer. As such, *number 107*, read as representing **AZ** (*then*) becomes an apt title or marquee for this sonnet, which is all about **AZ** (“*then*”) — a transformed era and a rhapsody of thanks sung after a great deliverance by the hand of the Lord.

We cannot fail to note transliterations of the word **AZ** throughout the sonnet. Striking is the acrostic running from lines 13 to 11, “**A-W-S**,” which sounds close to the Hebrew. Also, there are the many readings, up and down, down and up, forward and reverse, as “*a-s*” and “*o-s*” — like “*om soo*” that bears the letters “*os*,” reading right to left. At least ten such “*os*” transliterations are found in the quarto version, plus three vertical and horizontal forms that read “**O-e-s**,” “*o is*” and “**o-es**.”

Still another telltale device reveals that the poet thought of his sonnet as “*song*” — a *song of thanksgiving*. This is discovered through what is known as the *equal letter skip device*. In this, words emerge through equal letter counts between letters — a device also found elsewhere in the *Sonnets*. This is shown in the three letter strings, **s-h-i-r**, **s-h-i-r-e** (sounded *shirah*), and **s-h-r-i**, all of which can be read as transliterations of variants of the Hebrew for “*song*,” found earlier as embedment. The first of these strings can be read as sounding the two forms of the word that actually appear in the “*song at the sea*” — “*shirah*” (שִׁירָה) and “*shir*” (שִׁיר (י)). The third, **s-h-r-i**, when voweled, pronounces “*shi’ri*,” the word for “*my song*” — another appropriate title for a sonnet that is indeed *the poet’s song*.

These letter strings occur, respectively, at an *equal letter skip* of 24 starting from the letter “*s*” of the word “*as*” (line 4); at a skip of -74, counting back from the final “*s*” of “*insults*” (line 12); and the third (**shr’i**) shows up *twice* at skips of 8 and -49, beginning, respectively, at the “*s*” of “*soule*” (line 1) and “*Augurs*” (line 6). Considering the frequency of the individual letters *s*, *h*, *i*, *r*, and *e* that appear in the sonnet and the number of site opportunities for these strings to emerge, the mathematical probability that collectively these could emerge accidentally, conservatively calculated, is at a low order magnitude of *1 in many millions*. Correlated with the other findings in the sonnet, this already minute probability becomes further reduced at an exponential rate, making it certain that these are devices, demonstrations of the poet’s amazing virtuosity.

Finally, as the poet writes, “*Ile liue in this poore rime*,” he indeed does since he placed his *full* name within this immortal sonnet. Thus, in one of two instances of his surname, it can be read as inserted in lines 11 to 12. This reading begins with the “*s*” of “*speechlesse*” (line 12) and runs upward at a right diagonal to the “*h*” of “*this*” (line 11) and then down diagonally to the letters “*ac*” directly ahead — the sequence reading “**s-h-eac**.” The string con-

tinues above as “*s poore,*” read in tandem in the words, “*this poore*” — giving a string that reads “*s-h-eac-spoore,*” an unmistakable representation of the poet’s name. Note again that, as if to signal the presence of the name within them, the lines begin with an acronym of the poet’s initials, **W.S.** *These lines are shown below:*

- [11] **S**ince spight of him Ile liue in **this poore** rime,
[12] **W**hile he insults ore dull and **s**peachlesse tribes.

A second reading of the poet’s surname shows up within lines 5 to 6 (see these lines on page 8) as a form of palindrome. This begins as a string with the “*s*” of “*Augers*” (line 6) and runs directly to the line above in the letters “*ha*” of “*hath*” and then down to the “*ock*” of “*mock,*” yielding “*s-ha-ock.*” The next part of this string runs from the opposite, palindromic direction that begins with the letters “*spi*” of “*eclipse*” and continues directly leftward in the line below with the letters “*o r*” of the words, “*their owne.*” The total string now reads “*s-ha-ock-spi-o r*” — *another telltale device that tells from where the poem proceeds.*

The poet follows up this amazing double feat of autographing his sonnet with numerous representations of his first name. This can be read in the four instances of vertical alignments of the letters “*w-l*” that show up throughout the sonnet. If these repetitions of short stringed devices are not convincing, they gain credibility when three other devices are seen as “*wi-l.*” The first occurs on lines 2 to 3 in the words “*wide*” and “*lease,*” the letters of which almost aligning (*the letter “i” is just outside the vertical alignment*). A second occurs within lines 10-11 through letters in the words “*with*” and “*lookes.*” Here the letters “*wi*” run in tandem with the letter “*l*” below to again give “*wi-l.*” The third occurs on lines 6 to 5 read from right to left in letters of the words “*owne*” (line 6) and “*eclipse*” (line 5) on a diagonal between them. (*See this at the top of page 7.*) Again, it is the repetitions of these devices that add to their undeniable credibility.

Sonnet 107 is a spectacular work of poetic art. While it masterfully weaves complex patterns that transliterate in a variety of hidden ways Hebrew words as well as the poet’s name, the sonnet does not fail to be a wonderfully stirring, beautiful poem. It performs these wondrous feats while revealing the poet who created them as knowledgeable of Hebrew and a man of deep religious faith, accomplished in many ways not earlier fathomed.

Not mine owne feares, nor the prophetick soule,
 Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
 Can yet the lease of my true loue controule,
 Supposde as forfeit to a confin'd doome.
 The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur'de,
 And the sad Augurs mock their owne presage,
 Incertenties now crowne them-selues assur'de,
 And peace proclaimes Oliues of endlesse age,
 Now with the drops of this most balmie time,
 My loue lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes,
 Since spight of him Ile liue in this poore rime,
 While he insults ore dull and speechlesse tribes.
 And thou in this shalt finde thy monument,
 When tyrants crefts and tombs of brasse are spent.

The above is a facsimile of *Sonnet 107* extracted as it appears in the original 1609 printing and can used to verify the various alleged embedment. Note the Elizabethan practice of using the letter “u” for the “v” in midword and the use of the long “s,” which resembles the “f” without the horizontal line crossing at its center.
