Lyric cryptography.

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Lyric Cryptography 🛒

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dictum, "The sound must seem an echo to the sense." In this model,
poetic sounds at most second or underscore meanings already there. In

this article I describe a different kind of poetry writing and reading, one in which sound actually precedes and helps produce meaning. I suggest, for example, that the surprising "shatter" in Milton's "Lycidas" ("I come to / Shatter your leaves...) is a distortion of the more common *scatter*, and that Shakespeare's description of "boughs which *shake* against the cold, / *Bare* ruined choirs..." is partly shaped by the syllables of the author's name. I call this process *lyric cryptography*. I justify cryptography by recourse not to authorial intention (Milton and Shakespeare may not even have been aware of the cryptographs I identify in their texts) but to what I call the *textual act*: the poet's act of setting the text and letting it stand. Cryptography is a form of *productive reading*, a practice that involves taking the poem neither as an isolated object nor merely as a document for cultural study, but as the product of multiple forces, some of them deriving from the poet (his or her psyche, biography, education, poetics, intention, etc.), others from his or her history, culture, and especially language.

My aim in this essay is to explore the whole range of cryptographic possibilities and also to differentiate cryptography from other related phenomena (puns, wordplay, Freudian slips, and so on). I hope to demonstrate that cryptographic writing (and, to a lesser extent, reading) is utterly pervasive—a feature of mainstream as well as avant-garde writing.

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