

THE PLAY OF 'SIR THOMAS MORE' AND SHAKESPEARE'S HAND IN IT.

THE announcement late last year by an expert in palæography that a holograph manuscript of Shakespeare is preserved in the British Museum was an event of national importance, though the Press universally ignored it. Perhaps that was characteristic of 'the usual channels of information,' as we call them in satiric moments; but the omission was deplorable, even in war time. For the claim was not the shallow guesswork of an amateur; it was the outcome of an exhaustive study of Shakespeare's handwriting, made by so high an authority as Sir Edward Maunde Thompson.¹

The work crowned with this unique distinction is a play entitled 'The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore,' preserved in Harley MS. 7368. It is a thin folio, the thirteen original leaves of which have been identified as in the autograph of Anthony Munday. A mixed assortment of plays, pageants, poems, translations of romances, annals, and miscellaneous pamphlets issued from his facile pen between 1577 and 1633. Once, and once only, a contemporary made the mistake of placing him on a

¹ 'Shakespeare's Handwriting. A Study by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson.' Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1916. See also the first Review.

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pinnacle of genius. Looking round on the theatrical world in 1598, Francis Meres enumerated the chief English writers of comedy, and from a group which included Shakespeare, singled out Munday as 'our best plotter.' Even if his other plays afforded any justification for this extravagant eulogy, 'Sir Thomas More' would go far to invalidate it. It is just a dramatised biography like 'The true and honorable historie, of the life of Sir John Oldcastle, the good Lord Cobham,' in which Munday collaborated in 1599, and 'The True Chronicle Historie of the whole life and death of Thomas Lord Cromwell,' a play of unknown authorship published in 1601. These works are a narrowing down of the chronicle play proper, which in Shakespeare's hands acquired a national significance, and the stress laid on their 'truth' is unconscious testimony to their low dramatic value. Munday was not the kind of playwright to overcome by any felicity of touch the difficulties inherent in this type of drama. He pounds away with a heavy hand at his intractable material, but he does make an effort to turn More's homely humour to account for purposes of comic relief, and he imports some brisk life into the action by working up from Hall's 'Chronicle' the record of Evil May-day—the apprentices' riot of 1517, which was quelled by the intervention of More.

Unfortunately this praiseworthy expedient brought him into collision with the censorship. On the first leaf of the text is a curt marginal note by Edmund Tylney, Master of the Revels from

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1579 to 1607, to whom plays had to be submitted for licensing, ordering the players to 'Leaue out the insurrection wholly' and its causes, and merely 'report' More's services in suppressing it: 'A short reportt and nott otherwise att your own perrilles.'

The nervous attitude of the licenser could not be better illustrated. He was instinctively on his guard, not against open attacks on the government—which were necessarily rare—but against any form of writing which he held to be fraught with lawless or disloyal suggestion. The historic occasion of the riot of 1517 was the competition of foreigners in the labour market by which 'the poore English artificers coulde skarce get any lyuyng,' and the tyranny, amounting to open outrage, practised upon Londoners by highly-placed Frenchmen and Lombards. So the mob took the law into their own hands. Munday's attempt to portray the attack was from the official standpoint highly reprehensible.

Come gallant bloods, you, whose free soules doo scorne
to beare th'enforced wrongs of Aliens.

Add rage to resolution, fire the houses
of these audacious straungers. . . .

Shall these enioy more priuiledge then we
in our owne countrie? lets then become their slaues.

Since iustice keeps not them in greater awe
weele be our selues rough ministers at lawe.

Tylney, with a spice of Dogberry in his composition, vetoed all criticism of the higher powers, but he surely over-estimated the educative value of the theatre when he had this and similar passages

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excised for fear of their proving an object-lesson in sedition. He even shrank from admitting the appearance of discontent: 'Mend yⁱ' is his comment against the following lines:

My Lord of Surrey, and Sir Thomas Palmer,
might I with pacience tempte your graue aduise.
I tell ye true, that in these daungerous times,
I doo not like this frowning vulgare brow.
My searching eye did neuer entertaine,
a more distracted countenance of greefe
then I haue late obseru'de
in the displeased coñons of the Cittie.

The effect on the play was disastrous. As Munday planned it, it opened with a lively illustration of the Englishmen's grievances. A foreigner enters dragging in Doll Williamson, a married Englishwoman, who shakes him off and threatens to 'lay him along on Gods deare earthe'; this Amazon, a creation of Munday's, becomes a leader of the rebellion. The censor's remedy is to begin at the second scene, laid in the serene atmosphere of the council chamber. The climax of the riot must also go: for this he desiderates 'a short report'—one feels he ought to have added 'on an official form' to indicate with precision the workings of the departmental mind. There was nothing for it but to go over the play and mark the necessary cancels.

These duly jettisoned, all hands, so to speak, were called to the pumps. It was decided to make a serious effort to float the damaged craft. Whether, even after repairs, the work would have passed the censor, is very dubious; but the revision was full

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and fairly systematic. There are gaps in the original MS. after folios 5 and 11; at these two points a leaf of Munday's text has been torn out. But the MS. now contains seven additional leaves of supplementary or revised matter; and slips of paper were originally pasted over cancelled passages on the lower portion of two folios. These additions are in five distinct handwritings, and are not, apparently, the work of mere copyists; each addition has author's corrections made in the process of composition. Thus the author of one addition, originally writing 'seeming a bright Starre in the heauen of Court,' pauses to make the alteration 'in the Courtly Sphere.' Only one explanation of this extraordinary rush of five revisers to retrieve an interdicted play seems possible; it was urgently needed for performance, and all the playwrights engaged in the service of the theatre must have been requisitioned together. Dr. W. W. Greg cautiously suggests, on the evidence of handwriting, that one of these is Dekker; Sir Edward Maunde Thompson pronounces definitely that another is Shakespeare. It is a pity that we have no playhouse record of the revisers at work—and of their views on Tilney. The dull routine of duty seldom yielded a court official such an opportunity for an epitaph.

It is unnecessary to notice in detail this series of elaborate changes; they are set forth with admirable lucidity in Dr. Greg's edition of the play printed for the Malone Society in 1911. This is the only trustworthy reprint, and it discusses such points as the paper, the forms of the handwriting,

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the colour of the ink, the point and place of the insertions, and the problem of the date. There is also a collotype facsimile, issued under the direction of Mr. R. B. Fleming, in the 'Tudor Facsimile Texts'; it is valuable where the text is legible. But the MS. has suffered injury and been clumsily repaired, so that quite a number of pages are a total blur.

The insertion attributed to Shakespeare is on a sheet of two folios, 8 and 9, of which it fills three pages. It is the crisis of the riot, which is depicted with force and humour. Tilney would have gasped on reading it, but an adroit effort to placate him was made in the speech of More which induces the disturbers to surrender or disperse: so far from being a 'short' and therefore colourless 'report,' it is an eloquent vindication of law and authority. The suggestion of Shakespeare's authorship was first made by Richard Simpson in 1871, but only on the evidence of style: he was influenced by the close likeness of the Jack Cade scenes in 'King Henry VI.' Next year James Spedding, a better equipped critic, supported the attribution, and called attention to the fact that the handwriting resembled the autograph signatures of Shakespeare.

The world was not convinced, and no editor of Shakespeare has felt sufficient confidence in the authenticity of the fragment to include it in his text. There was one thing lacking—an exact palæographical analysis of the handwriting; this crucial test has now been searchingly applied in Sir Edward Maunde Thompson's monograph.

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The data for such an investigation are slender enough. Sir Edward confines himself to the six legal signatures—Shakespeare's deposition in the lawsuit of 1612, the documents of the Blackfriars property, and the will. Three of these signatures are abbreviated; and the total number of letters is only fourteen, four of which are discarded as insufficient for comparison. The decisive clues are afforded by two signatures only—those of the deposition of 11th May, 1612, and of the conveyance of the Blackfriars house on 10th March, 1613—together with the first words of the final signature to the will 'By me William,' the only portion which the failing hand succeeded in writing firmly. Well may Sir Edward compare his achievement to an attempt 'to identify a face in the dark by the dim light of a lucifer match.'

His method is first to examine the general character of the signatures, to note how accident or occasion modified the form and quality of the writing, and consequently to point out some serious defects which impair their value as evidence: those in the Blackfriars documents are cramped by being written on the confined space of the label which carried the seal—the supposed lawyer's clerk not knowing enough of law to be aware that he could write freely across the parchment—and the three signatures to the will are in a shaken and faltering hand, which betokens a critical illness. The inquiry then proceeds to details: every letter is put under the microscope, and its character and formation are minutely described.

The general result is to tabulate a body of

evidence, which is of the utmost value for a study of Shakespeare's handwriting. In competent and careful hands it will serve as a master-key, and Sir Edward instructs us in the proper use of it. The first test in a palæographical problem of this nature is 'general impression.' To recognise a handwriting is 'a valuable asset in identification,' which 'will carry the cautious expert an appreciable distance on his way.' But, however important and even necessary as a preliminary step towards identification, general impression stops short of the goal. It must be supplemented by evidence of personal peculiarities. Trivial perhaps in themselves, their cumulative effect adds the decisive touch. Broad impression and detailed points or identity, taken in combination, are tantamount to proof.

The palæographical aspect of Sir Edward's claim will be discussed on another page; it will be sufficient here to indicate the chief peculiarities on which Sir Edward lays stress in the signatures and which he also finds in the inserted scene of 'Sir Thomas More.' First there is the fact that Shakespeare used to the end of his life the native English script, which in his day was giving place to the imported Italian hand, modelled on the style of the calligraphers of the Italian renaissance. Thus the Tudor princes were taught this newer style, and there are extant beautiful specimens of it in the handwriting of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth, and Lady Jane Grey. But Shakespeare clung, with one modification, to the 'rugged and tortuous' style which he learnt in boyhood. The ex-

ception is interesting; he used for medial *s* the long Italian *ſ*—not the English *f*, written with an 'aggressively large bow topping the line of writing,' and so perhaps awkward to write after the tall looped *k*. Secondly, he made use of a peculiar *k*, which Sir Edward has not found elsewhere: 'the stem is rounded at the base like a modern cursive *l*, and the pen is carried upwards to the level of the middle of the stem, and then, without being lifted, forms the cross-bar by moving horizontally to the left and then travelling back on the same line to the right, a heavy dot or comma being afterwards added above the cross-bar to represent the central loop of the normal letter.' One specimen of this letter is found in the signature on the second sheet of the will. Finally, there is Shakespeare's use of a delicate introductory upstroke to the letters *m* and *W* in the final signature 'By me William Shakespeare. These upstrokes are ornamental flourishes, found, but not frequently, in the handwriting of the period; they are usual only in the formal hand of the professional or the expert.

From this preliminary investigation Sir Edward passes to an equally close scrutiny of the three pages of the play. Again he analyses the text alphabetically, which yields him twelve capitals and all the small letters except *x*. In line 110 he finds, for example, the peculiarly shaped *k*. After working out his double test of general and detailed resemblances, he 'feels confident' that the fragment is in Shakespeare's autograph. His examination at this point is extremely subtle; he distinguishes between the character of the handwriting of the

first two pages and that of the third page. The text of the former is written with speed, which shows signs of slackening in the lower half of the second page. The writing of the third page is more deliberate. Test letters of this modification are *f* and *l*, thin, unusually long-shafted and ending in a point on the first pages, stoutly-shafted and inclining to be truncated on the last page. Moreover, at the end of the second page four lines of verse are written in the space of two, suggesting that the writer, on reaching that point, decided not to pass on to a fresh page. Sir Edward conjectures that this last page was written later—'at least, not at the same sitting.'

With this difference in the quality of the handwriting there is an equally marked difference of style. The scene opens with the serio-comic appeal of the mob-leader John Lincoln:

Peace heare me, he that will not see a red hearing at a
harry grote, butter at a levenpence a pounce, meale at nyne
shillinges a Bushell and Beeff at fower nobles a stone lyst
to me.

This is, of course, the political economy of Jack Cade (2 Henry VI, iv, ii):

There shall be in England, seuen halfe peny Loaves
sold for a peny: the three hoop'd pot, shall haue ten
hoopes, and I wil make it Fellony to drink small Beere.

The dialogue continues in this vein until the entrance of the Lord Mayor and the Earls of Surrey and Shrewsbury: then there are commonplace commands to keep the peace, rival calls upon the two Earls, and 'weele heare both.' The change

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of tone—and of handwriting—begins with the speeches of More, and especially his second speech on the 'removing of the straingers':

graunt them remoued and graunt that this yo' voyce
hath Chidd downe all the ma[ies]tie of England.

His argument is 'What would you gain if you saw the strangers, bag and baggage, quitting London? You would only be the prey of other ruffians whom you had taught to sett law at defiance'; and finally he cites the authority of Scripture to urge obedience to authority. Rioters are 'in armes gainst God.'

The pause comes at this point, as if the writer felt that at last he was at grips with Tilney. This was the 'passage perilous' of the revision; it depicted a genuinely dramatic incident in the life of the hero; the play would be simply crippled without it. Could a hopeless situation be retrieved by the exercise of literary tact? The attempt was carefully and methodically made. The speech that follows is the most eloquent in the play; its theme is the sanctity of law; and the change of tone is reflected in the more deliberate handwriting:

for to the king god hath his offyc lent
of dread of lustyce, power and Comaund
hath bid him rule, and willd yo^u to obay
and to add ampler matie to this
he hath not souly lent the king his figure
his throne & sword, but gyven him his owne name
calls him a god on earth, what do yo^u then
rysing gainst him that god himself enstalls
but ryse gainst god, what do yo^u to yo' sowles
in doing this o desperat as you are.

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In concluding his appeal More presses home the advice 'Do as you may be done by':

youle put doune straingers
kill them cut their throts possesse their howses
and leade the maf[ies]tie of lawe in liom
to slipp him lyke a hound; say nowe the king
as he is clement, yf thoffendor moorne
shoold so much com to short of your great trespas
as but to banysh yoⁿ, whether woold yoⁿ go.
what Country by the nature of yo^r error
shoold gyve you harber . . .
. . . woold yoⁿ be pleasd
to find a nation of such barbarous temper
that breaking out in hiddious violence
woold not afoord yoⁿ, an abode on earth
whett their detested knyves against yo^r throtes
spurne yoⁿ lyke dogges, and lyke as yf that god
owed not nor made not yoⁿ, nor that the elamentes,
wer not all appropriate to yo^r Comfortes.
but Charterd vnto them, what woold yoⁿ thinck
to be thus vsd, this is the straingers case
and this your mountanish inhumanyty.

The mob surrender, and at a later point of the play, just when all the ringleaders are on the point of being executed and one has been actually dispatched, More procures their pardon from the king.

One point of detail which Sir E. M. Thompson has not noticed reinforces his comment on the character of the handwriting—the punctuation. Where this is obvious, the writer is extremely lax about it; witness this speech of Doll Williamson:

I byth mas will we moor thart a good howskeper and
I thanck thy good worship for my Brother Arthur
watchins.

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But in the verse speeches of *More* the standard distinctly rises. It is a suggestive coincidence that Mr. A. W. Pollard noted the same variation in the set speeches of the First Quarto of 'King Richard II.' The dramatic punctuation of these speeches, he writes, 'will be found sufficiently complete and intelligent to entitle us to believe that Shakespeare punctuated these portions of his own manuscript with some care, and that the Quarto reproduces this punctuation with very much the same substantial fidelity that it reproduces the words of the text.' Instances follow, showing the special value of this pointing for the actor. One such instance (l. 133) is to be found in the scene we are discussing: 'woold not afoord yo^u, an abode on earth,' which would appear in modernised form: 'Would not afford you—an abode on earth,' the speaker pausing to emphasize the utter homelessness of the exiles.

It is evident that the writer was careless. He writes at one point (l. 82) 'how orderd shoold be quelld,' and again (141) 'letts vs do as we may be doon by.' Occasionally he corrects his misspellings: he began to spell 'charge' with an *s* (l. 28), and 'nvmber' with *m* (51). He is especially lax in writing the minims of *m*, *n*, *in*, and *un*: 'and' has the *n* with three minims (101), and 'sound' the 'un' with three (117). One line (137) will not scan:

wer not all appropriat to yo^r Comfortes.

Here Spedding emended 'alike' for 'all.'

¹ 'King Richard II. A New Quarto' (1916), pp. 64-5.

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But the chief textual interest of the scene lies in the writer's own corrections. 'Wee haue scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers,' the editors of the First Folio said of Shakespeare; and Jonson, with an eye to the style of the writing rather than to the look of the manuscript, has also placed on record that Shakespeare 'neuer blotted line.' Lines are blotted in 'Sir Thomas More' by rapid retouchings made at the moment of composition.

go yoⁿ to ffraunc or flanders
to any iarman pvince, to spane or portigall
nay any where why yoⁿ

The writer struck out the superfluous 'to' before 'spane,' and when he had written down 'why yoⁿ' felt a sudden dissatisfaction at the vagueness of 'nay anywhere,' so he revised 'nay any where that not adheres to England,' and then continued 'why yoⁿ must needes be straingers.' One passage he left in chaos:

those same handes
that yoⁿ lyke rebells lyft against the peace
lift vp for peace, and your vnreuerent knees
that

Between 'and' and 'your' he interlined a word, which Sir Edward conjecturally reads as 'bend'; then he wiped this out with his finger while the ink was wet, cancelled 'that,' and resumed

make them your feet to kneele to be forgyven
is safer warrs, then euer yoⁿ can make
whose discipline is ryot; why euen yo^r warre
cannot pceed but by obedienc.

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He altered 'warre' to 'warres,' then disliking the repetition of the word, he substituted 'hurly'; next he interlined 'in in to yo' obedience,' intending to cancel the last line and a half, but left the original reading, and went on writing. A reviser, who contributes other additions to the play, cut the knot by deleting the last three lines and the cancel, and inserting an unmetrical tag 'tell me but this.'

But the style of the scene—is it Shakespearian? Obviously it is not composed in the manner of the great plays: it is impossible to say 'No one but Shakespeare could have written this,' but there is at least one brief passage that has the authentic ring:

and leade the ma[ies]tie of lawe in liom
to slipp him lyke a hound.

Not only the cadence but the sporting metaphor would confirm the attribution. But the utmost that it is safe to assert is that the scene is not unworthy of Shakespeare, and that it harmonises with his style in the chronicle plays. He would not put forth his strength within the narrow limits of an improvised collaboration. Still less would he sew a patch of royal purple over a rent in the homespun of Anthony Munday.

It is clear at any rate that the writer of the scene was a leading author of the company. Waiving the literary quality of the addition, there is conclusive evidence in the perfunctory manner in which he set about his task. He knew that he had to stage a mob, the Lord Mayor, attended by a sergeant-at-arms and a sheriff, the two earls, and

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More; he discovered that the ringleader was named Lincoln, that one citizen was named Bettes, and that there was a kind of Mary Ambree named 'Doll'; but he did not know, and he did not trouble to find out, the names of the other actors. So he assigns their speeches to 'other,' 'oth,' and even 'o,' and the reviser had to go over the manuscript and apportion the parts. It is amusing to note that he found only two mild jokes of half a line each to hand over to the Clown; that worthy did not make much of a hit if he 'spoke no more than was set down for him.'

The stage history of a play which has suddenly become so memorable is an important question. Unfortunately it is almost a blank. But we have a slender clue to the company which acted it. 'T Goodal' is entered as the name of a Messenger on fol. 13 * a: he was acting in 1592 for Lord Strange's men—a company for which Shakespeare wrote. This company also performed 'King Henry VI' as a new play in March, 1592, and therefore acted the Jack Cade scenes later in that year or in 1593. One allusion seems to point to a date not far from this: 'Moore had bin better a Scowrd More ditch, than a notcht mee thus,' says Jack Faulkner, who has been compelled to cut his shaggy hair (Addition iv, 215-6, ed. Greg). Stow records the dates of the cleansing of the town ditch 1549, 1569, and 1595: on the last occasion 'a small portion thereof, to wit, betwixt *Bishopsgate* and the *Posterne* called *Mooregate*, was clensed and made somewhat broder: but filling againe very fast, by reason of ouerraysing the ground neare

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adjoyning, therefore neuer the better' ('Survey,' ed. Kingsford, 1 p. 20). The allusion would have point just before the scouring or just after the failure. There is a tantalising reference in scene v, which I have not been able to date: this may yet yield a good clue. Three or four 'prentices enter 'with a paire of Cudgelles.' Robin, complaining that he is out of practice, asks in reference to a city fencing-school: 'when wast at Garrets schoole Harrie?' and is answered: 'Not this great while, neuer since I brake his vshers head, when he plaid his schollers prize at the Starre in Bread streete, I vse all to George Philpots at Dowgate, hees the best back sworde man in England.' This worthy ought to be rescued from oblivion.

Over this vital problem of date Sir Edward passes lightly, as not his business, only pointing out that the scene, if it be Shakespeare's, must be early in his career when he did journeyman work for the theatre. Sir Edward would be prepared to accept 1592 or 1593. The hand is sixteenth century, but can any tests be applied to narrow down the date? Can we say definitely *late* sixteenth century? Dr. Greg assigns the play to the close of the century. Comparing Munday's handwriting in 'Sir Thomas More' with that of his autograph MSS., 'John a Kent and John a Camber,' dated December, 1596, and the 'Heaven of the Mind,' dated December, 1602, Dr. Greg argues that the play was intermediate between these, and suggests as a probable limit of date the years 1598 to 1600.¹ This too is his feeling 'alike

¹ See 'The Modern Language Review,' vol. viii, pp. 89-90.

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on palæographical and literary grounds,' and he therefore questions the Shakesperian authorship: at this late date Shakespeare had definitely turned his back on the chronicle play and was nearing the summit of his achievement.

To solve the problem of the date is essential to further progress. On purely literary grounds I see no difficulty in accepting any date up to 1596, considering the occasion for which this special scene was written. It was the critical point of the play, and was therefore entrusted to a dramatist—judging from the results attained—of higher capacity than any of the others who mingled their ingredients in the hotchpotch. An act of condescension on Shakespeare's part, possibly; but contemporaries named him the 'gentle,' and he was 'of an open, and free nature.' Nothing is more likely than that he should be called upon for help, and be willing to give it to his own fellow-workers, in the emergency provoked by the stupid tyranny of Tilney.

Such are the main points raised by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson's fascinating monograph. It is in the nature of a critical challenge, and it is to be hoped that it will be adequately taken up.

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