

THE HANDWRITING OF SHAKESPEARE

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UNTIL quite recently it was accepted as certain, not merely that no play or portion of a play by Shakespeare had come down to us in his own handwriting, but that no specimens of his writing were in existence with the exception of six signatures. Three of these are appended to the three sheets of his will, written on March 25, 1616, less than a month before his death, and now in Somerset House. One is attached to the conveyance of a house purchased by Shakespeare in Blackfriars, dated March 10, 1613; and another, dated on the day following, to a mortgage of the same property: these are respectively in the Guildhall Library and the British Museum. The sixth, discovered by an American scholar, Dr. C. W. Wallace, so lately as 1910, is in the Public Record Office, and consists of his signature to his deposition in a lawsuit, dated May 11, 1612.

All were written after the date at which, according to our best evidence, Shakespeare had written his last play and retired to Stratford on Avon. In the three earliest of them the name is not even written at full length, but in various forms of abbreviation. Only in the case of the last signature to his will is anything written beyond the mere name. Here we have the words, 'By me William Shakspeare.' These two words, 'By me,' were, until recently, believed to be the only words, apart from his own name, that have

come down to us in the hand of the greatest writer of the English language.

There was, after all, nothing very surprising in this. The original manuscripts of the plays of most of Shakespeare's contemporaries had perished with equal completeness. Two of Ben Jonson's masques, in his own hand, are in the British Museum. One play by Massinger, *Believe As You List*, was identified by Sir George Warner in 1900 as being in the poet's autograph, and was secured very cheaply for the British Museum. But that is nearly all. Of Marlowe, Beaumont, Fletcher, Webster, Ford, Chapman, and many others of the contemporaries of Shakespeare, no play survives in their own hands. It was not the practice of the time to attach importance to the author's autograph. After it had served its purpose, perhaps as a prompt-copy in the theatre, or as copy for a printed edition, it was allowed to perish; and Shakespeare's autographs went the way of all the rest.

The discovery — if, as I believe, it be a discovery — not of a whole play, but of a considerable passage, in Shakespeare's own hand is therefore a literary event of no small interest. It is not wholly a new discovery, but it is only quite recently that criticism has brought to light its true character. Among the manuscripts collected by Robert and Edward Harley, first and second Earls of Oxford, to receive

which, with the Sloane and Cotton libraries, the British Museum was founded in 1753, is one, numbered 7368, which contains a play entitled *Sir Thomas More*. As a whole, it is not a work of much literary merit. The author of the main body of it is now known to be one Anthony Munday; and thirteen out of the twenty leaves of which it consists are in his hand. The other seven contain additional or substituted passages by no less than five different writers — a striking example of the manner in which, in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, plays were modified and rewritten to suit the requirements of the theatre.

Now of all these additions one, occupying three pages of the manuscript, with one blank page, stands out above all the rest in literary merit. It is 'a scene representing the insurrection of the London apprentices against the aliens resident in the city, which was quelled by the intervention of More, then sheriff.' The vigor and dramatic genius of this scene may be judged from a quotation, in modernized spelling, of its most striking passages: —

MORE. Grant them removed, and grant that
this your noise

Hath chid down all the majesty of England;
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage,

Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,

And that you sit as kings in your desires,
Authority quite silenced by your brawl,
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed,
What had you got? I'll tell you: you had taught
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
How order should be quelled; and by this pattern
Not one of you should live an aged man,
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
With self-same hand, self reasons, and self right
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous
fishes

Would feed on one another. . . .

. . . . What do you then,
Rising 'gainst him that God himself installs,
But rise 'gainst God? What do you to your souls

In doing this? Oh, desperate as you are,
Wash your foul minds with tears, and those same
hands,

That you like rebels lift against the peace,
Lift up for peace, and your unreverent knees,
Make them your feet, to kneel to be forgiven.

. . . . Say now the king,

As he is clement, if the offender mourn,
Should so much come too short of your great
trespass

As but to banish you, whither would you go?
What country, by the nature of your error,
Should give you harbor? Go you to France or
Flanders,

To any German province, Spain or Portugal,
Nay, anywhere that not adheres to England,
Why, you must needs be strangers. Would you
be pleased

To find a nation of such barbarous temper,
That breaking out in hideous violence
Would not afford you an abode on earth,
Whet their detested knives against your throats,
Spurn you like dogs, and like as if that God
Owed not nor made not you, nor that the elements

Were not all appropriate to your comforts,
But chartered unto them? What would you
think

To be thus used? This is the strangers' case,
And this your mountainish (?) inhumanity.

It is surely not difficult to discern the hand of Shakespeare here, and it is not surprising that more than one competent critic has assigned this passage to him on literary grounds alone.

But is it not possible to go further? This scene, so markedly superior in style and power, is written in a hand different from that of any of the other contributors to the manuscript; and the corrections that are made in it are of such a kind as to suggest most forcibly that the scribe of these lines was also their author. On these grounds the possibility was first noted by Mr. Richard Simpson, in 1871, that we might have here a manuscript in Shakespeare's own hand. He remarked that Shakespeare's writing, as it appears in his signatures, was that of the ordinary copyist of the time — that is, was the English, not the Italian, script; but he was not an expert in palæograph-

ical science, and was consequently unable to push home the argument on this side. His suggestion consequently, though backed by James Spedding, attracted little attention, and was put aside as a mere fancy.

At this point, as a basis for what is to follow, I may perhaps be allowed to state the opinions which I had myself formed before the publication of the researches which have raised the possibility observed by Mr. Simpson to a very high degree of probability. On the literary side I held, and still hold, most emphatically that the lines are Shakespeare's and could have been written by no other dramatist alive about 1593, which Mr. Pollard has shown to be the most probable date for the play. Indeed, I would go further, and say that of all the Shakespeare Apocrypha — the plays or scenes attributed to Shakespeare which do not appear among his traditionally accepted works — this is the only passage which carries conviction to my mind. On the other hand, my impression of the handwriting was that it was just the kind of hand which the writer of the Shakespeare signatures *might* have written. Signatures are a precarious basis for the identification of a man's handwriting, especially when one of them — the signature to the deposition — is a hurried and abbreviated scribble, and all the others were written under special circumstances which might affect their claim to represent the writer's ordinary hand. Hence it seemed to me that the proposition would be difficult to establish with any certainty, but was in itself highly credible.

It is here that we come to the new work, which has transformed the situation, and which deserves to rank as a discovery. In 1916, in connection with the commemoration of the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, — a

tercentenary which fell at a time when men's thoughts were too much engaged elsewhere to allow of a due celebration of it, — the attention of Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, formerly Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum, and the foremost living authority on all questions connected with palæography, was directed to the subject of Shakespeare's handwriting. After a minute study of the six signatures, by and for themselves, he came with a basis of full knowledge to an examination of the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More*. No one was less likely than Sir Edward to jump to a sensational conclusion without sufficient evidence, and no one possesses a sharper palæographical eye or a sounder palæographical judgment; but a careful study of the *More* MS. satisfied him that the hand of the riot scene corresponded in all respects with the hand of the Shakespeare signatures. This conclusion was set out in full detail, with a separate study of each single letter, in his volume entitled *Shakespeare's Handwriting*, which appeared at the end of 1916.

The war, and the perturbations resulting therefrom, disturbed and delayed literary researches; but the textual study of Shakespeare has recently been followed up with especial intensity by a small group of highly competent scholars, who in the autumn of 1923 produced the volume which is the special occasion of this article. Mr. A. W. Pollard, who may be described as the general inspirer of the group, contributes an introduction on the character of the play, its bibliographical history, its date and occasion, and the problem of the three pages. Mr. Greg describes the six different hands concerned in the manuscript. Sir E. Maunde Thompson repeats, in even greater detail, his study of the Shakespeare signatures and the writing of the

three pages. Mr. Dover Wilson brings a new line of argument to bear by pointing out remarkable parallels between the three pages and the evidence obtainable as to Shakespeare's writing from the contemporary quarto editions of some of his plays which there is most reason to believe were printed from his own manuscript. Finally, Mr. Chambers shows how closely the political and social ideas expressed in More's speech correspond with those of Shakespeare as they appear in such plays as *Coriolanus*, *Julius Cæsar*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and the Jack Cade scenes.

It is a fascinating study, and will, I think, convince many that the resemblances are not superficial, and that the attitude displayed toward the populace is markedly individual and such as we easily associate with the widely tolerant and sympathetic mind of Shakespeare, which yet clung to order and discipline as the safeguard of a State.

The strength of the argument for the Shakespearean penmanship of these three pages is the convergence of two totally distinct lines of evidence — the literary and the palæographical. Either separately might fail to carry conviction; but when we have, on the one hand, the literary argument that these lines are strongly Shakespearean in style, and on the other the palæographical argument that the hand in which these lines are written has all the characteristics which are found in Shakespeare's signatures, while the corrections in the manuscript are those of an author, not of a scribe, the total proof comes very near to demonstration. Both lines of argument have been immensely strengthened by the study and researches of Sir E. Maunde Thompson and of Mr. Pollard and his colleagues; and henceforth the visitor to the Manuscript Saloon of the British Museum may feel with substantial

confidence that he is indeed looking on a scene written by the actual hand of the author of *Hamlet*.

The importance of this conclusion is not merely sentimental. To know an author's handwriting is often to have a clue to the corruptions which have crept into his text. Our knowledge of Shakespeare's plays rests in the main on the First Folio of 1623, produced by his literary executors, Heminge and Condell, who tell us that they made use of his original MSS. Only in a few instances have we also quarto editions of single plays, published in his lifetime, which can be supposed to rest on an equally good authority. Now Shakespeare's handwriting, whether in his signatures or in the *More* MS., though fluent enough, is not carefully formed, and lends itself easily to misunderstanding by printers. Such misunderstandings unquestionably underlie many of the difficulties and obscurities which abound in his printed text. Hitherto critics and editors have had to rely on their own intuition for the correction of such passages. Now we have an additional instrument ready to our hand, for it is possible to judge how Shakespeare would have written the words in question, and how they might have been misread by a careless or uneducated compositor. Indeed, in some passages of the *More* MS. even experts may differ as to the letters or words.

Therefore, by the discovery which has been brought to its climax in the centenary year of the First Folio, not only have we gained — with the satisfaction of knowing that it is safely enshrined in our national library — a personal relic of our great poet of immeasurable sentimental interest, but we have also acquired a more valuable engine for the purification of his text and for the fuller comprehension of his incomparable genius.

A PAGE OF VERSE

A YEOMAN

BY EDMUND BLUNDEN

[*To-Day*]

THIS man that at the wheatstack side
Sits drinking of the twilight air,
This man's my friend, in him's supplied
My refuge from the traps of care.

His life now past meridian mark
One can but say is blossoming yet,
His summer day smiles back the dark,
His sun seems nearer rise than set.

In lusty youth, when surging blood
With foam and din bemuses most,
Leander-like he rode the flood
And strongly came to manhood's coast.

Since, with a sturdy steady tread
He sowed and stored himself good grain,
And glowing yet he bows his head
With plough and scythe across the plain.

And like the North Star stablished true
He cheers and guides my asking eye,
To see him at his door anew
Is like a sign shown in the sky.

With all his calm he's eager still,
New dreams in his old vision thrive,
He seizes chance on dale and hill
And all his life has been alive.