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978-1-108-01535-6 - Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More

Edited by W. W. Greg

Excerpt

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## I. INTRODUCTION

BY ALFRED W. POLLARD

### I

THE writers of the successive chapters of this book are interested in the old play of *Sir Thomas More* mainly because, on various grounds and with varying degrees of confidence, they believe that part of a scene, represented by three pages of the extant manuscript, was composed and written with his own hand by Shakespeare. Yet the play has some interest in its own right and the section in which the three pages occur makes a very popular appeal. Although in the end the hero goes (manfully and merrily) to an unjust death with the full sympathy of the reader, or hypothetical spectator, the play is not a tragedy, hardly even a chronicle history. It is made up of three groups of scenes, each group being fairly homogeneous and the scenes composing it with one exception consecutive. The first group (scenes i and iii-vii) describes from beginning to end the anti-alien riots on the 'ill May-day' of 1517, the quelling of which is, with very scant historical justification, attributed to More's pacifying oratory, and represented as promptly rewarded by knighthood (which was conferred on him in 1521), membership of the Privy Council (conferred in 1518) and Lord Chancellorship (conferred in 1529). Of the scenes of the second group (ii, viii, ix) the earliest shows More, while one of the city Sheriffs (he was really a per-

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manent under-Sheriff), saving a thief from the gallows as a reward for his help in a practical joke on a pompous city justice; in the later scenes we see him changing clothes with his steward in order to trick his friend Erasmus (who had known him since 1497), giving an offensively long-haired servitor his choice between prison and the barber (a story told in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* of Thomas Cromwell and here, rather unhappily, transferred to More) and stepping in to supply by improvisation the place of a missing actor in an interlude performed in his own house for the entertainment of the Lord Mayor and Mayoress. Finally, the scenes of the third group (scenes x–xvii) exhibit More's refusal to sign certain mysterious 'articles' presented to him in the King's name, his resignation of the Chancellorship, and the successive steps by which his seclusion in his own house at Chelsea was followed by his arrest as a traitor, despatch to the Tower, condemnation and execution.

The four episodes of the second group of scenes are not very successful. The trick played on the pompous justice is well told up to almost the end and then goes to pieces; the trick on Erasmus is badly muddled; the treatment of the long-haired servitor seems to have aroused some doubts, as there are variant endings to it; the improvisation is the best of the four, but rather a slight matter to make so much of. Even if much more perfectly set forth these stories would form a very inadequate link between the picture of More's (much accelerated) rise to power and his (equally accelerated) fall, condemnation and death.

The last group of scenes show touches of dignity, humour and pathos; but the writers do not rise to the height of their argument, partly because they had not

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the courage explicitly to state it. More is shown refusing to sign the articles exhibited to him by the King's command, but the contents of the articles are carefully left unexplained. Elizabeth retained the ecclesiastical supremacy which More died rather than approve, and blind as these playwrights were to the difficulties in their path they had at least the wit to see what must inevitably happen if they let him argue his case.

In the first group of scenes there is no such hesitation. The writers explain quite clearly what the 'ill May-day' riots were about, and they are so full of their subject that now and again they almost forget their hero. In the two other groups of scenes More is always in our minds. Even when Bishop Fisher crosses the stage on the way to the Tower we think not of him, but of More and the penalty he too will have to pay. The anti-alien scenes are written for their own sake; they come very near indeed to being a complete play in themselves, a play in which More appears as Athene might in some Greek tragedy, full of reasonableness and persuasive wisdom, surpassing the hero and heroine and yet not displacing them in our affections. The hero and heroine are Lincoln and Doll Williamson; and our *deus ex machina*, Sheriff More, suffers somewhat in our esteem because the hard facts of history made it impossible for him to be represented as saving Lincoln from the gallows as (in the play) he was deeply pledged to do. The effect of this miniature play is weakened by the interposition of the Sessions scene with its presentation (at once lengthy and a little ragged) of the joke More plays on the city justice, and again by the heaviness of the two groups of scenes by which it is followed. It is a

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pleasure to print the miniature play for the first time without these encumbrances. It is a pity that the main purpose of our book forbids us to edit it specifically for the enjoyment of modern readers, as it deserves.

Of course the miniature anti-alien play was doomed from the start to be censored out of existence. It may be doubted whether a modern counterpart of it would easily be passed for performance. The manuscript shows us that a scene in which apprentices wound Sir John Munday (Anthony no doubt introduced this out of family pride) was cut out, as dramatically superfluous and likely to cause trouble, and the climax of the riot was re-written, no doubt also to conciliate the censor. At first the censor himself, Edmund Tilney, seems to have thought that something might be done by botching. He marks individual passages for omission, and substitutes 'Lombards' for 'Frenchmen' or 'strangers,' as there were few Lombards in London at the time the play was written, whereas Huguenots from France and refugees from Spanish persecution in the Low Countries were many, and the Londoners had little love for them. But when he had got to the end of the 'ill May-day' scenes he obviously saw that half measures would be useless, so he went back to the beginning of the play and wrote in the margin the drastic order

Leaue out ye insurrection wholly & ye cause theroff & begin w<sup>t</sup> S<sup>r</sup> Tho: More att ye mayors sessions w<sup>t</sup> a reportt afterwards off his good seruic don being Shriue off Londo<sup>r</sup> vppo<sup>n</sup> a mutiny agaynst ye Lum<sup>b</sup>ards. Only by a shortt reportt & nott otherwise att your own perrilles. E. Tyllney.  
The use of the name of an actor Goodal in the margin of leaf 13\* recto for the part of a Messenger, and an

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attempt (see Dr Greg's note) to reduce the number of actors needed to play scene vi, proves that the players had been sufficiently hopeful of securing a licence to 'cast' the play for performance. But this drastic order must have convinced them that the play was hopeless, and I agree with Dr Greg that the re-writing of the climax of the riot in the three pages with which we are specially concerned should be looked on as an anticipatory attempt to placate Tilney, rather than a (quite inadequate) effort to comply with his order. In the first of these three pages the spectator is no longer invited to sympathize with the objects of the crowd, but to laugh at it amiably and note its foibles. In the speech which follows, in which More persuades the rioters to submit, he puts the case for obedience to the royal authority at its very highest, opposition to the King being represented as opposition to God Himself. The players forgot that there might be subjects which Authority would not allow to be presented on the stage, however judiciously they were handled, and that the rising of a London mob against the foreigners whom it was the policy of Authority to welcome might be one of them. But that the substitution of the three pages of the manuscript in which the mob is ridiculed and obedience to the sovereign exalted for the original scene which they displace was due to a desire to propitiate Authority seems certain.

The belief which underlies this book is that in anticipation of trouble with the censor the players had turned to an 'absolute Johannes factotum' who had previously had no part in the play, and that it is thus no accident that in these three pages we find the attitude to mobs, the attitude to the crown, and the

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deep humanity, which are recurrent features in the work of William Shakespeare.

II<sup>1</sup>

The play of *Sir Thomas More* was first printed in 1844 in an edition prepared for the *Shakespeare Society* by the Rev. Alexander Dyce, who bestowed much care on the task of transcribing the difficult manuscript (Harl. 7368 at the British Museum) in which alone it has come down to us, but contented himself with a single page preface and some extracts from Halle's chronicle and a ballad on the Evil May-day of 1517 by way of introduction.

Twenty-seven years after the appearance of Dyce's edition Richard Simpson (a liberal Roman Catholic theologian who towards the end of his life interested himself greatly in Shakespeare) in an article in *Notes and Queries* for July 1, 1871 (4th series, Vol. VIII), entitled 'Are there any extant MSS. in Shakespeare's Handwriting?' claimed two sections of our play as in Shakespeare's autograph. Simpson based this claim mainly on the literary evidence, the 'Shakespearian flavour' of these sections, but also on the character of the handwriting, asserting that 'the way in which the letters are formed is absolutely the same as the way in which they are formed in the signatures of Shakespeare.' On September 21 of the following year James Spedding took up Simpson's argument, again in *Notes and Queries*, with a keen sense of its importance. He suggested that the relevant pages of the manuscript should be printed in facsimile to facilitate their study, and at the same time reduced those which

<sup>1</sup> Some use has here been made, by permission, of an article contributed to *The Times*, Literary Supplement, 24 April, 1919.

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he thought could be assigned to Shakespeare to three, on which is written the greater part of a scene describing the pacification by More of the anti-alien riot of 1517. As to these he wrote, very justly:

If there is in the British Museum an entire dramatic scene filling three pages of fifty lines each, composed by Shakespeare when he was about twenty-five years old<sup>1</sup>, and *written out with his own hand*, it is a 'new fact' of much more value than all the new facts put together which have caused so much hot controversy of late years. As a curiosity it would command a high price; but it is better than a curiosity. To know what kind of hand Shakespeare wrote would often help to discover what words he wrote.

For a third of a century the seed sown by Simpson and watered by Spedding bore fruit only in occasional references, but in 1908 the play was included in the *Shakespearian Apocrypha* published by the Oxford University Press under the editorship of Mr C. F. Tucker-Brooke and in 1910 by the enterprise of the late Mr J. S. Farmer not merely the 'relevant pages,' for which Spedding had asked, but the entire manuscript was published in facsimile.

In 1911 a great step forward was taken by the production for the Malone Society by Dr W. W. Greg of an edition of the play which must always rank among the best examples of English literary and palæographical scholarship. In this the present state of the manuscript was carefully described and it was divided palæographically into thirteen leaves in a main hand (called S), seven leaves of Additions in five different hands (called A-E) and some notes by a censor, easily identified with Edmund Tilney, Master

<sup>1</sup> Dyce had dated the play 'about 1590 or perhaps a little earlier.'

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of the Revels, one of whose duties it was to grant or withhold licences for the public performance of plays. In Dr Greg's classification the three pages assigned to Shakespeare by Simpson, as amended by Spedding, are in hand D. As to these Dr Greg wrote:

These hasty pages of D's have individual qualities which mark them off sharply from the rest of the play. There is wit in the humours of the crowd, there is something like passion in More's oratory. So striking indeed are these qualities that more than one critic has persuaded himself that the lines in question can have come from no pen but Shakespeare's. The possibility acquires additional interest from the fact that the passage is undoubtedly autograph. Here possibly are three pages in the hand that so many have desired to see. The question is one of stylistic evidence, and each reader will have to judge for himself. I do not feel called upon to pronounce: but I will say this much, that it seems to me an eminently reasonable view that would assign this passage to the writer who, as I believe, foisted certain of the Jack Cade scenes into the second part of *Henry VI*.

By a comparison with MS. Addit. 30262 fol. 66<sup>b</sup> at the British Museum and with Henslowe's Diary fols. 101 and 114, at Dulwich College, Dr Greg had identified the hand of one of the Additions to the play (that which he calls E) as Thomas Dekker's. In 1912, again by the enterprise of Mr Farmer, the publication of a facsimile of Munday's play *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, then in possession of Lord Mostyn, showed (as was promptly pointed out by Dr Greg) that this manuscript is autograph and that the writing is that of the bulk of *Sir Thomas More*, that of the hand S to which we owe the thirteen original leaves. Thus we now know that these thirteen leaves were written by Anthony Munday, though



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the occurrence of the curious mistake 'fashis,' for fashiō, i.e. fashion, in line †1847 (Greg's numeration), which no author could make in transcribing his own manuscript, proves that for some of these thirteen leaves he was only a copyist.

The manuscripts of *John a Kent* and *Sir Thomas More* are connected not only by the first being wholly and the second in part in Munday's writing, but also by both being cased in leaves from the same fifteenth century Breviary or Legenda, *John a Kent* having also a patch from a thirteenth century copy of the *Compilatio prima* of Canon Law by Bernard of Pavia. Each, moreover, is inscribed on the front wrapper with its title (the word 'booke' being used in each case: *The Booke of John a Kent and John a Cumber* and *The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore*), in large engrossing characters. The two plays must thus have been in the same hands at the same time, and they must also have continued probably for some years in the same ownership, as both have suffered in the same way from damp which has rotted the outer margins of the paper leaves of both manuscripts in like manner.

The *More* manuscript is undated; that of *John a Kent* below Munday's signature at the end of the play bears a mutilated date '...Decembris 1596,' in a fine Italian hand differing from Munday's writing of the same class and in a different ink. The mutilation is unlucky, as on the probable supposition that the inscription was put midway in the breadth of the page there is room for more than the word 'die' and a number (which must have preceded 'Decembris'), and if another word preceded the day of the month, this might have revealed the meaning of the date which at present is mysterious. The only point toler-

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ably certain is that it cannot be the date at which Munday completed and signed the play. Had it been this he would surely have written it with his own hand, it would have come more to the right on the page in immediate connection with his signature and would hardly have been in Latin. Latin, if we may generalize from other notes in books, would be appropriate to a date of purchase, and if so, the date would presumably be either that at which it was acquired by the company of players by whom it was acted, or that at which some private purchaser recorded his purchase of it from the company. The refinement of the hand and the use of Latin both support the latter alternative, and if Fleay's identification of *John a Kent* with *The Wise Man of Westchester* acted by the Admiral's men in and after the autumn of 1594 is not now to be rejected this view must certainly be preferred.

Three or four years after the publication of the facsimile of Munday's *John a Kent*, which led to the identification of the main hand of *Sir Thomas More* as his, Sir Edward Maunde Thompson in contributing a chapter on 'Handwriting' to the book on *Shakespeare's England*,<sup>1</sup> with which the delegates of Oxford University Press in 1916 were to celebrate the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, passed in review all the various signatures, etc. which had at any time been attributed to Shakespeare. He condemned all the signatures<sup>1</sup> save those respectively attached to

<sup>1</sup> In a subsequent paper contributed to *The Library* (3rd Series, July, 1917, Vol. VIII) Sir Edward gave *in extenso* his reasons for regarding as forged the signature in the copy of Florio's translation of the *Essays* of Montaigne, acquired by the British Museum at the instance of Sir Frederick Madden, and also that on the Bodleian Ovid.