

5 December 1985

Dear Mrs. Cox,

How agreeable to hear from you. I trust you are well and flourishing. I'll be happy to accept your kind lunch-and-look invitation. But I don't see how, even with the best will in the world, as well as about the best Will in the world, that's going to help me, enjoyable though it's sure to be. Perhaps I've failed (though it's not for want of trying) to make the tenor of my enquiry entirely clear. It's this: why is a public body, paid from public funds, publicly proclaiming as gospel truth what are, after all, just your own private and personal opinions? Perhaps I should be writing to my M.P., not the P.R.O?

My point is that if you are mistaken the whole world is being totally misinformed, by and on behalf of the U.K. Government. In my days as a Civil servant, we strove to obviate such eventualities. And I think you might concede the possibility that you are mistaken, on the following grounds: (a) nobody is infallible (b) what you assert as fact has never been said before by anyone (c) it stands in complete contradiction to all known serious scholarship on the subject, including the authorities cited in your own bibliography.

As you may infer from the enclosed press notice, which I hope may interest you, all ^{those} things arguably apply to some of my own opinions. The difference is that the Government isn't paying for them to be published as if they were well-known facts. I think, and shall continue to complain, that such practices are outrageous, and a misuse of public money. Nothing personal, you understand; we all have to speak as we find.

Cordial regards

Yours sincerely

Eric Sams

29 January 1986

Dear Mrs. Cox,

Thank you for an agreeable lunch and chat. It's at any rate a relief to know that my total dissent from what you say, however vigorously and sharply I expressed ^{it}, isn't going to be taken personally. We both agree, I'm sure, that getting Shakespearean facts and arguments right is the paramount preoccupation.

You wondered in the Times of 11 October 1984 whether He could write his own name. I wrote on 18 October to complain about such Baconianism, and to hope that the forthcoming handbook would be more judicious. Well (as I see it) it wasn't. On the contrary, it announced as self-evident something that no one in the world except you and one or two unnamed Baconians (who are they?) has ever given a moment's credence to in the whole history of scholarship. Some or all of the six signature claims the custodianship of four of them, are unauthentic. I wrote and complained about this fantastic assertion, as soon as I saw the handbook. Nothing happened for two months, and I had to send a reminder.

At our meeting yesterday you were kind enough to show me the will signatures. I'm sure that it won't do simply to omit all reference to the first of these, incidentally. There are plenty of good reproductions, in well-known sources, of that signature in an earlier and more legible state.

You told me that you thought those three signatures were probably genuine. But doesn't that make it rather hard to understand why you spend a whole page (34) disputing their authenticity?

The reason you give for doing so (33) is this: 'it is obvious at a glance' (though not to anyone else) 'that these' (except the last two will signatures) 'are not the signatures of the same man', for the reason that the letters are not formed in the same way in each, and you have made an a priori rule that they have to be, before they can pass muster as the signatures of the same person, in your view.

For this private and personal theory ~~no~~ no evidence at all is offered. A glance at the will signatures shows that it is obviously wrong. Those are, on an hypothesis, the signatures of the same person. It was perfectly apparent to me (and, I believe, to you) that their actual letter-forms are, in fact, different.

For example, there are ~~three~~ ^{two} quite different capital Ws, three Ss, three lls, three hs, at least two ms, two as, two ss, two es, three is, two rs, two ks, two ps, All these differences are set out perfectly plainly, in reasonably clear facsimile, in E.B. Everitt's The Young Shakespeare (Plates I & II). On your own showing these cannot possibly be, and at the same time probably are, the signatures of one and the same person.

Whether that same person was also a sick person is not really much to the purpose. The point surely is that if, as a matter of agreed fact, the same person ^{sign with} ~~can~~ (for whatever reason) use different letter-forms, then your theory is thereby refuted.

As to whether that person was Shakespeare, it is surely relevant to consider (though you don't give it a mention) the 147-line speech in Sir Thomas More which by massive and long-standing consensus is in his hand. The clear and striking feature of that handwriting, which has not so far as I know been observed anywhere else is its habitual use of different letter-forms. The evidence for this was set out by Maunde Thompson in the 1923 STM symposium. He notes two different capital ws, two hs, two ms, two as, two ss, two es, three is, three rs, two ks, two ps, i.e. the very differences observed in the will signatures.

Perhaps it would be as well to analyse the will itself, in view of the well-known suggestion that it is holograph. On that question you say that it cannot be, because it is unlike the signatures. Here you assume that the signatures are in fact Shakespeare's (otherwise the argument makes no sense), which you later dispute. You say also that Shakespeare had legal knowledge, and ~~also~~ ^{the will} that ~~it~~ consists of a first draft and a second draft. You also say that the handwriting is 'probably' that of an imaginary clerk (shouldn't there be some more samples of his work in the Stratford archives, if so?). But ~~how-can-that-be~~, if (as you also say) the will was dictated to Francis Collins, how did it come to be written down by an imaginary clerk to whom it was not dictated?

'Some scholars have failed to recognise the problem' is surely a rather unusual way of saying that your approach is entirely unique and unprecedented among serious scholars? One explanation would be that the problem is as imaginary as the clerk.

On almost every page you use the argument: in deciding whether the observed phenomena are ~~not~~ (a) usual or (b) unusual, we have to prefer (a), since otherwise it would be unusual. At the same time (34) you say that although will-signatures forgeries were less common than authentic signatures, this is enough to call Shakespeare's into question. But of course it isn't.

How many of the 55 wills in the Prerogative court are 'numerous'? About a quarter, you said. But that's not really numerous, is it? One would like to know the actual figure, and how we know they are forgeries?

You say that if we must select one document as the best evidence of S's hand, then the will has 'no better' claim than the rest. But of course it has, for the very reason you have just given. Each one of those signatures has a far stronger claim to be thought genuine than you have any reason to dispute it. You will see that on p.10 your colleague affirms the deposition signature as genuine, which you are disposed to doubt or dispute, as in the other cases, for (so far as any ordinary reader will be able to see) no reason at all except the a priori insistence that people have no business using different letter-forms for their signatures. But so far from being 'unthinkable' that Shakespeare varied his letter-forms, there is in fact,

in his signatures will not I think be found very compelling.

While I'm about it, perhaps I might offer a few further points for whatever they're worth.

26 (mid-page): omission.

27 Shakespeare's son was named Hamnet or Hamlet (alternative spellings of the same name, as in the variant forms 'chimney' and 'chimley' after Sadler who ~~is-thus~~ spelt Hamlet in the body of the will. The fact that Shakespeare's son was called by the name sometimes spelt 'Hamlet' seems perhaps worth mentioning.

Weren't the rings left to Heminges and Condell commemorative rather than mourning? I mean, they weren't supposed to burst into tears or ~~wear-on-~~ a black arm-band every time they looked at their rings? But perhaps they were to be reminded about the First Folio.

33 I wonder what the Guildhall and the British Library people think about the authenticity of their signatures? Would they agree that what they're so carefully conserving are very likely just forgeries, with their ~~---dif-~~ as proved by their different letter-forms? ^{Are they} ~~is-the-PRO~~ going to label its own exhibits thus? Is the P.R.O.?

33 'calligraphy' surely means beautiful writing, deliberate penmanship?

33-4 It's no use knocking the anti-Stratfordians. You have greatly forwarded their cause. If, as a fact, the signatures are not those of the same man, then there must be some extraordinary Shakespeare mystery, which may well have some equally mysterious explanation. That's surely a sight more sensible than the unsupported opinion of Jenkinson in 1922. Within three lines that opinion has somehow become a 'practice', and used as a basis for discrediting the signatures; indeed Shakespeare is imaginatively kidnapped and bundled away out of London, for no reason at all. This is a whole page of what everyone can see is baseless speculation, which I have to say reads to me like obvious nonsense.

You may not agree about that. But I wonder whether you may not think, as I do, that there is something to be said for a recall, reconsideration and recasting of this Government document? I'm sure, as I began by saying, that we're both keen on getting the record straight about Shakespeare.

If, after this, we're still (as I hope) on speaking and meeting, as well as writing, terms, there are some rather grandiose plans and projects I'd welcome a chance of discussing with you.

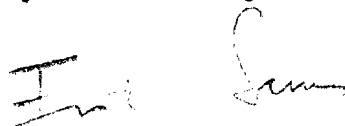
First, there's the idea, which I recall you approved of, and indeed (I think) mooted, of a joint exhibition of actual or putative Shakespeare handwriting, to assemble in one place for public and scholarly scrutiny ~~the~~ ^{all} six signatures. And why not the so-called seventh, in the Folger And the Bodleian initialled Ovid, and the BL/Montaigne, and some of the items recently credited to Shakespeare in Charles Hamilton's new book, (Harcourt Brace) In Search of Shakespeare: A Reconnaissance into the Poet's Life and Handwriting. And a selection of relevant items from Stratford, a la recherche du lawyer's clerk perdu, and the Dering MS of Henry IV, and then (unless this goes too far) the BL MS of Edmund Ironside? *

And then what one needs is a conference or colloquium of experts and commentators world-wide. Myself, Charles Hamilton, Dieter Schamp in Germany, Leki Fox, and others. Great publicity for the PRO; I'd offer to be a PRO man, so to speak, myself. And such a putsch is exactly what Shakespeare scholarship needs at the moment. I bet funds could be found for it, too. Gary Taylor could read his poem. It would all be great fun.

Do you think that some or any of these modest proposals would stand a chance of success, or would at least be worth consulting the Director or Keeper about?

Best regards; sorry to be a nuisance, and worse,

yours sincerely



(note the seven variant letter-forms)

5 March 1986

Dear Mrs. Cox,

I wonder whether you'd had a chance of considering my letter of 29 January? But no doubt your silence might also indicate dissent.

As perhaps you've seen, Charles Hamilton may well also be gunning for your Chapter IV, since his new book In Search of Shakespeare is founded on the authenticity of the signatures. He has some facsimiles which might interest you, showing the utterly and fantastically different ways in which Napoleon, and John F. Kennedy, and Richard Nixon, each wrote their own signatures.

Much of Hamilton is (I'm sure you'd agree with me about this at least rather dotty. But he raises one interesting point among others; why does everyone seem to say that John Combe's will is somehow connected with Shakespeare's via Collins and his clerk? I thought it might perhaps be because the Latin exordium of each does rather seem to be in the same hand, to my admittedly inexperienced eye. I thought too that I might venture to ask your opinion in that matter. If you felt (but why should you?) humane and forgiving enough to let me have a photocopy of the Combe first page I'd be grateful, though still of course implacable.

Are you interested in the fortunes of Edmund Ironside? As I predicted, the lay reviewers are pro and the academics con, so far. But I'm battling back, e.g. in the current issue of the London Review of Books.

Cordial regards,

yours

Eric *Sam*

15 September 1986

Dear Mrs Cox,

I wonder if whether you'd yet had a chance of considering my letters of 29 January and 5 March? and even perhaps looking at Charles Hamilton's recent book on Shakespeare's handwriting?

I was sorry you couldn't spare a photocopy sample of John Combe's will.

I thought you might be interested in some recent developments following further correspondence between Charles Hamilton, Levi Fox and myself.

Your published study of the will concedes that it may be holograph, however unusual that might be. Charles Hamilton is sure it is holograph; and further that it is in the same hand as the Stratford 1605 tithes indenture, and further that this hand also wrote Edmund Ironside (and indeed the Southampton letter about which you may recall writing to the Observer in response to my identification of that as in Shakespeare's handwriting). I enclose his latest comparisons. There is ~~another~~ more work in progress.

I note that already in 1915 F.C. Wellstood at the Stratford Birthplace had made some careful comparisons which, he claimed, established that the will and the 1605 ~~indenture~~ ~~conveyance~~ were without doubt in the same hand. E.B. Everitt in 1954 had already identified the ~~indenture~~ ~~conveyance~~ hand with that of Edmund Ironside, and hence the will. Hamilton was unaware of any of this; he just ordered a photocopy of Ironside from the British Library as a work that had been attributed to Shakespeare, and recognised the writing at a glance.

In his book, Charles Hamilton makes a point which struck me as so self-evidently relevant and prima facie so readily verifiable that I thought I'd venture to you consult you and other experts about it. He says that in a lifetime's experience the words 'by me' on a seventeenth century document actually mean, quite simply, 'in my own hand'. But no doubt you know of counter-instances.

Your comments would come very a propos; my edition of Ironside is to be reissued in paperback later this month, and it's clear (e.g. from the recent Guardian report that some further attention may be paid to the whole handwriting question, with special reference to the will text and signatures.

Best regards,

yours

