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Fingerprints from Shakespeare's Hand?

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Here is a puzzle, still unsolved yet surely not insoluble, about the first edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, dated 1609 (hereafter Q). This volume contains some sixty misprints, each of which occurs only once, together with one that occurs at least fourteen times all told, namely 'their' instead of 'thy'¹. The poet himself, like his editors over the last three centuries, would certainly have spotted such solecisms. In his absence, the Q compositors had no doubt striven to set what they saw before them. But how could they possibly have turned 'thy' into 'their'?

There is a clear clue. The same surprising misprint is also found four times² in the 1596 first edition of *Edward III* (hereafter E3), a play now officially accepted as Shakespearean;³ but it has never been noted in any other printed source. A recent editor of Q⁴ has offered two explanations, viz.: '(1) if the printer's copy for [E3] was authorial...the [Q] copy was also partly authorial; (2) if the printer's copy for [E3] was scribal...the same scribe, earlier associated with Shakespeare's work, may have been employed by him, when, as is now thought to be likely, he was revising and ordering [Q] and adding *A Lover's Complaint* some time after 1603-4, to transcribe a substantial portion (if not all) of the [Q] copy directly from holograph copy'. The editor in question opted for (2), which is the only explanation offered in his later textual note on E3,³ now included in his own one-volume Shakespeare. But the laity will find (1) far preferable, because (2) entails so many unevidenced assumptions. For example, not only the 'scribe' himself but the total or partial need for his services, and a willingness to pay for them, all have to be imagined as existing in 1596. Then they all have to be imagined again, many years later, together with the same incurable handwriting quirk which would cause another fourteen mistakes in Q. But a real copyist would hardly have proved so eccentric and misleading, or been so indulged.

Nor, surely, would any real compositor have imposed his own personal preferences, if any, on the tray of type before him. So why look further than Shakespeare himself? His accredited autographs exhibit profuse variance and illegibility, which no doubt caused many if not most of the frequent misprints found throughout his early published plays. The accredited data consist of six signatures and a three-page scene (hereafter Hand D) from the manuscript play *Sir Thomas More*. All these are helpfully reproduced in facsimile by the *Riverside Shakespeare*⁵ together with an old-spelling reproduction of the Hand D pages. In signing his surname in six different spellings, and his first name in five, the mature Shakespeare used more than 40 distinct characters, though he needed only twelve.⁶ The undated (and apparently undatable) Hand D deploys 24 small letters and 15 capitals in at least 45 and 20 different forms respectively, together with two distinguishable styles of penmanship.⁷ Of Hand D's 480 different words (types) no fewer than 64 (or 13%) are varied into 148 distinct spellings, whether of words or stems (e.g. Shreiff, shreef, shrevalty, shreeve, Shrieue, Shreue, all within five consecutive lines).

But even these striking facts fall far short of the indescribably chaotic variance visible in the surviving autographs, with their alterations, contractions, additions, deletions, omissions and errors. Shakespeare's hand leaves its own clear and characteristic fingerprints of profusely Protean multiformity. And the Hand D pages, with their speeches separated by ruled lines, may well have been intended for printing. If so, they would have been a compositor's nightmare. In the absence of positive proof, no external agency should be accused of adding to these already copious convolutions. On the contrary; any non-authorial changes would be far more likely to aim at consistency. There are, moreover, good reasons (such as fatigue, uncertainty, or respect for a famous writer, together with the sheer weight of variance) why authorial idiosyncrasies might be expected to escape a compositor's eye and persist in print. So any text set up from Shakespeare's own manuscript should show traces of the same recognisable fingerprints. Conversely, their presence argues an imprint originating from Shakespeare's own hand (which

in any event must have been their original source) especially in a text such as Q, which cannot have been altered for any theatrical reason.

Sadly, the original documents are now all but illegible. But the published Q and E3 have long been available for study and comparison. They are analysed here for the first time. The results are striking. The former volume totals 3239 different words (types)⁸, in modern spelling. In the original spelling, however, there is vastly more variability; as with Hand D, at least 13% of these types are spelt in two or more different ways. Here is further evidence against a copyist, who would be paid to reproduce the work of the most famous of all poets ever to have written in English, not to hurl handfuls of his own personal preferences all over his own workmanship and thence into pages published as Shakespeare's. Nor would any compositors be in the least likely to take analogous liberties, especially those who were so unliturgical as to leave a long trail of misprints winding through Q. Yet they were presumably professionals; so their failures offer further evidence that the manuscript before them was hard to follow. The same applies to E3, which bristles with errata. It too displays the same high rate of variance, c. 13%, when its 3724 different words are analysed into their original spellings.

Like effects tend to have like causes; so here is yet another reason for invoking one known hand, rather than several imaginary agents.¹⁰ What high-powered magnets could have deflected so strong an inference? Here they are, again in Professor Evans's own words:⁴ 'the weight of other evidence (the lack of such misreadings elsewhere in the Shakespeare canon and the absence of any recognised spelling forms in either [E3 or Q]) still favours, I believe, the use of basically scribal copy for [both]'.

Even setting aside speculation about how much a lack and an absence would weigh, even when added together, the first objection is readily explicable on other grounds. e.g. (a) other printing-houses were familiar with Shakespeare's hand, but those working for the booksellers Cuthbert Burby in 1596 and Thomas Thorpe in 1609 were not; (b) the peculiar way of writing 'thy' was an early-Shakespearean quirk, later corrected; or even (c) the canon is still incomplete. Indeed, both (b) and (c) are somewhat supported by Evans's own composition date of 1590-2 for E3, and his own inclusion of it.

As to his second point (the alleged absence of recognised Shakespearean spelling forms in Q or E3) no sources or authorities are cited. But my own 1996 edition of E3 lists some 300 examples of orthography found in the canon, on the authority of John Dover Wilson.¹¹ Further, Professor Evans later silently contradicted his own assertion, by identifying in E3 a spelling form³ that he himself recognises as Shakespearean. Professor Honigmann¹² has suggested several Shakespearean spellings, which appear in the first edition of *Othello*, 1622. They are also found, by the hundred, in both E3 and Q. The latest editors of Q, Professor Katherine Duncan-Jones¹³ and Professor Helen Vendler,¹⁴ have both offered cogent reasons for positing authorial copy. So did Professor Tucker Brooke¹⁵ in his own edition, sixty years earlier.

Such conclusions, though largely left uninvestigated, entail far-reaching consequences. For examples, Shakespeare's language may be not only visible as graphemes but audible as phonemes; variant spellings like 'Shak' in the signatures or 'graunt' in E3, Q and Hand D alike, may well reflect the Midland speech of the Warwickshire poet, while such spellings as 'emured' for 'immured' in E3, among many other such samples, would confirm his well-documented lack of freedom in Latinity.¹⁶ Indeed, his multiforn phonetic spellings strongly suggest the educational disadvantage of a farmer's boy who (as his first biographers duly record) was prematurely removed from school to help on the homestead.

At least the main question posed in this essay can now be re-examined in the light of the facts; how did Shakespeare's 'thy', in one of its variant spellings, come to be printed as 'their'?

Professor Evans accepts⁴ that 'a contracted manuscript form of "thy" (i.e. "yⁱ" or "y^{ie}") is misread as "their" (i.e. "y^r" or "y^{er}")'. But this was never an established fact; it is merely a theory advanced in 1780 by Edmond Malone, who was no palaeographer, about what 'probably' happened; and even that old theory remains either unreferenced³ or unmentioned.⁴ It also remains unsupported by any evidence or expertise. In particular, Professor Evans³ himself has found no such contraction of "thy" in any manuscript later than 1585, or in any playscript of any period, and no such contraction of "their" anywhere at all.

This absence also applies to Hand D, where initial 'th', in 'their' or 'thy' among some thirty other such words, is always written as 'th', not abbreviated as 'y' or anything else. But that manuscript, containing both 'Countrie' and 'Country', clearly confirms that Shakespeare's many variants included the alternative endings 'ie' or 'y'. So he could perfectly well have written either

'thy' or 'thie'.¹⁷ Analogous alternatives appear throughout *E3* and *Q*, which both have dozens of such ie/y duplets, sixteen of which, including 'crie/cry', are common to both texts. All that is needed is a compositor unfamiliar with 'thie' as a form of 'thy'. And such unawareness poses no problem; it is shared by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which lists no such form. *Prima facie*, 'thie' for 'thy' was rare in 1596 and rarer still by 1609. Penned on the page, it might have looked like 'thir' or 'thier', both of which (as the *OED* confirms) were once possible spellings of 'their'. And objective evidence elsewhere in *Q* confirms that its manuscript contained exactly that peculiarity.¹⁸

So the evidenced answer to the puzzle is also the economical answer required by Ockham's Razor; both *E3* and *Q* were set up from manuscripts in Shakespeare's own hand. Many other grounds (such as the hundreds of other spellings and variants found in both those sources and elsewhere in the canon) support that view. On any analysis it must be better to begin with known facts (not only spellings, but the type/token ratio for example) rather than hypotheses about the supposed behaviour of copyists or compositors. If then one hand suffices to explain those facts, then one hand it is: Shakespeare's.

NOTES

¹ in 26.12; 27.10; 35.8 (perhaps twice, though the second 'their' is sometimes accepted); 37.7; 43.11; 45.12; 46.3, 8, 13, 14; 69.5; 70.6; 128.11, 14.

² in lines 442, 761 and 1152, together with 'theyr' for 'thy' at line 556 (ed. E. Sams, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996, where Shakespeare's sole authorship is argued throughout, together with the corollary of printing from his manuscript).

³ in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Harvard University Press, 2/1997, 1732-1773, where the corresponding references are II.i.91, 404, III.i.105 and II.i.105, with the addition of V.i.235. An editorial note on pp.1770 blames these anomalies on a 'scribe', while accepting other unusual spellings from the same source (such as 'recompenc' III.iii.9) as authentically Shakespearean.

⁴ in *The Sonnets* ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 281.

⁵ as in note 3 above, pp. 1780-1794.

⁶ viz. a,e,h,i,k,l,m,p,r,s,S,W; see also E. Everitt, *The Young Shakespeare*, Copenhagen 1954, 43.

⁷ as set forth by E. Maunde Thompson in *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*, ed. A. Pollard, Cambridge University Press, 1923, pp. 57-112.

⁸ M. Spevack, *A Shakespeare Concordance*, Hildesheim, 1968, II 1255-87.

⁹ *A Concordance to the Shakespeare Apocrypha*, ed. L. Ule, Hildesheim, Zürich, New York, 1987, I. 195.

¹⁰ If so, the dozen spelling variants discussed by MacD. Jackson (out of many hundreds that remain unmentioned) in 'Punctuation and the compositors of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, 1609', *The Library*, 5th series, 30 (1975) can hardly be compositorial in origin, *pace* his own insistence that this theory is statistically sound, and its total acceptance by Evans (op. cit. at note 3 above, 276-278) and Kerrigan (in his *Sonnets* edition, *New Penguin Shakespeare*, 1986, 429-432).

¹¹ J. Dover Wilson, 'Bibliographical Links between the Three [Hand D] pages and the Good Quartos', in *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*, as at note 7 above.

¹² E. Honigsmann, *The Texts of 'Othello' and Shakespearian Revision*, London and New York 1996, Appendix C, "'Shakespearian" Spellings in *Q Othello*', pp. 158-161. These share with the *Sonnets* the specific spellings 'accumilate', 'approoue', 'becomming', 'beleeeue', 'controule', 'copp', 'deuided', 'extreame', 'grone', 'grones', 'grosely', 'Lyon', 'merrit', 'merrits', 'Mistris', 'pittiful', 'pitty', 'pittying', 'prooue', 'prooues', 'prophane', 'sences', 'shew', 'shewes', 'subbornd', 'tearme', 'vertue', 'vertuous', 'vnfolding', together with abundant examples of more general categories (such as terminal '-full' for modern '-ful'); the total tally of such *Q Othello* spellings in the *Sonnets* include more than 200 different words (types) and hence many more occurrences (tokens). The corresponding total for *Edward III* is c. 350, including some 25 actual words.

¹³ *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare, pp. 39-41.

¹⁴ H. Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1997, pp. xiii, 60, 72, 82, 84, 94, 95, 100, 115, 118, 122, 129, 131, 132, 137, 140, 195,

248, 251, 260, 277, 297, 304, 319, 323, 395, 408, 409, 423, 456, 464, 500, 513, 567, 605.

15 *Shakespeare's Sonnets* ed. Tucker Brooke, Oxford University Press, 1936, 61-65, which explains the 'their' misprint as a misreading of the MS spelling 'thie'.

16 *pace* the claims that Shakespeare was 'more thoroughly trained in classical rhetoric and Roman...literature than most present-day holders of a university degree in classics' (S. Wells, Oxford *Complete Works*, 1986, xiv), whose very earliest play was that sophisticated comedy of high life *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (ibid. 1).

17 like the penman of the manuscript play *Edmond Ironside*, c. 1588, *passim*.

18 namely in 31.8, where 'thee' is printed as 'there', presumably because it was read as 'ther', a common spelling of 'ther'; in 47.11, where 'no' is printed as 'nor', presumably because it was spelt as 'noe'; and in 99.9, where 'One' is printed as 'Our', where (whatever caused that middle letter, whether the compositor's type-inversion or the manuscript's misleading minim-formation) the final 'e' was presumably again misread as 'r', for the third time.