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[*Shakespeare's Handwriting in the British Library's Lansdowne MS 71*]

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In pursuing a theory of my own about Shakespeare's sonnets I had (like many other enquirers, if not for the same reasons) identified the year 1592 as their inception and the young Earl of Southampton as their inspiration.

In the British Library's Lansdowne MS 71 at f.180 (a xerox, somewhat reduced, is enclosed) is a letter of 26 June 1592 signed H. Southampton.

But *only* signed. Its English hand looks wholly unlike the Earl's elegant Italic. It looks however *very* like Shakespeare's Hand D in *Sir Thomas More* (also BL, Marley MS 7386 ff 8, 9) especially 8v. There are the same basic alphabet, pen lift and -links, and there, conspicuously, are the same unusual *s f* and *p* descenders slashing two or three lines of writing to taper off in a fine-drawn stroke ending in a sharp point.

Quite a coincidence. That exceptional look of Hand D's descenders is stressed by the only two Shakespeareans ever to have published an analysis of his handwriting, namely Sir Edward Thompson (in a pioneering monograph of 1916 and a contribution to the 1923 symposium *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*) and Professor E. B. Everitt (in *The Young Shakespeare*, 1954).

But the clearest of clues to Shakespeare's hand, they both claim, are the delicate upstrokes of certain letters (*i*, *m*, *n*, *r*, *v*, *w*, if at all). Such upstrokes, Thompson explains, are generally infrequent among English hands of the period. In their Shakespearean form they are apparently unprecedented.

Shakespeare's "personal usage", as it is called, is defined thus: his upstrokes often begin with *downstrokes*, or downward movement. Sometimes the latter is barely perceptible; the questing quill-point just leaves a tell-tale dot or mark. More often, the pen moves down and then up again, without being lifted from the page. If that movement retraces the same line, it leaves a thickened end. If the ascent takes a slight different angle from the original downstroke, the result is a hook or barb to left or right. Very occasionally (once in the signatures, once in Addition D) the divergence leads to a needle-eye formation, so far found only in Shakespeare's hand. Such effects, say both our authorities, identify the writer.

If so, that makes Lans.71 f.180 even more interesting. Its obviously habitual upstrokes (occurring on *i*, *m*, *n*, *v* and *w*) reveals dots ("my", line 6; "in", line 15), thickenings ("wheras", 1; "my", 2, etc.), hooks ("wante", 4; "me", 10) and loops, with needle-eyes both long ("whearby", 12) and short ("maye", 13).

This close conformity continues. Shakespeare's upstrokes are also, according to our experts, strikingly variable in length but mainly constant in slant (at 30° - 35°). Some are curved or bent. They are "of a hair-fine before they are attached"; this contrasts with a stronger downstroke when the initial letter itself begins. If that initial is *i*, then the upstrokes are very frequent in the following letter is *n* but rare if it is not.

The writer of Lansdowne 71 f.180 offers several straight upstrokes. Some are very short ("in", line 15); others ("inheritance", line 3) traverse the next line of writing. Their slant however is constant, at 30° - 35°. One ("in", line 16) is a curved flourish; another ("my", line 7) is slightly bent. Many are indeed hair-fine before attachment ("with", line 2; "in", line 13, etc) thus contrasting notably with the bolder beginnings of the following *w* or *i*. Further, every "in", whether word or syllable (lines 3, 10, 13, 15, 16) has an upstroke; but the initial *i* of "it" (line 9) has none.

But these features, pronounced though they are, are by no means the only "personal peculiarity". Another, and one which "provides us with one of the keys for the identification of the poet's handwriting", also described as "one of the personal usages which point to identify", is Shakespeare's equally exceptional use of a long Italian *s* (in signatures, and once in Addition D) as his only non-English letter. Lans.71 f.180 also has a writer whose single long Italian *s* (at the end of line 2) is his only non-English letter.

A "further important testimony" in support of the contention that "in the Addition we have indeed an example of Shakespeare's handwriting" is a special engrossing form of the letter *p*, also found in one of

the authentic signatures. It is also used, again just once, by the writer of Lans. 71 f.180, to begin "please", line 9.

That letter *p* was found in Shakespeare's handwriting in conjunction with a special rare form of *e*, with its middle stroke somewhat elongated. This too appears in the hand of the writer of Lans.71 f.180, in "*parcells*", line 2.

Another "consistent and unquestionable" characteristic (Everitt, elaborating on Thompson) is that ordinary *e* and *s*, and only those letters, are tagged in a certain way, when they are flourished (horizontally and vertically respectively) at the end of words. The writer of Lans.71 f.180 also likes doing this, as at the end of "inheritance", or "lyke", both line 3. In Shakespeare's hand, the typical *s* tag "may be exaggerated into an extended upstroke in the air". The writer of f.180 likes this effect too, e.g. "his", lines 10 and 14, "this", line 16.

Another, equally "consistent and unquestionable" feature of Shakespeare's hand (Everitt again, following Thompson) is the "long tapering extension" of final *h* and final *y*, above the line of writing. This is yet another characteristic shared with the writer of Lans.71 f.180, as at the end of "my", lines 3, 6, and 16, "with", line 2, and "herewith", line 9.

A further feature of Shakespeare's hand (Prof. Everitt's discovery) is the way in which it habitually dots its *i* too far to the right, an idiosyncrasy which also distinguishes the writer of Lans.71, f.180, notably at "inheritance" and "in", line 3, "wardship", line 6, "according", line 8, "his", line 10, "in" and "doing", line 13, "his", line 14, "in", line 15, "lodging", "in" and "this", line 16.

Yet another Shakespearean feature (Everitt again) is the formation of initial *m* after an upstroke with the first minim slightly higher than the second two. This is yet another characteristic of the writer of Lans.71 f.180, as at "my", line 2, and 3, "meanes", line 5, "my", line 6, "move" and "my", line 7, "mayer", line 9, "me", line 10, "mayer", line 13, "most", line 14, "mayer", and "my", line 16.

The extreme rarity, not to say uniqueness, of such features, is doubly guaranteed: (a) they have been identified by specialists as being peculiar to Shakespeare's hand, and (b) they have never been reported in any other hand by any other commentator.

The latter point carries especial conviction when applied to the fingerprints first identified by Maunde Thompson 65 years ago, thus inaugurating a period (the 1920s) when Shakespeare's handwriting was a topic of intense interest and controversy. It is to some extent confirmed by my own recent search through 1500 representative hands c.1580-1600, when I found no such upstroke anywhere, no trace of the Italian long *s* in any English hand, no sign of an engrossing *p* in any secretary hand; and so on.

Both points can be further reinforced. Thompson's identifications must have been made from deep knowledge and long experience. The most famous of them, the so-called spurred *a*, has never been seen by anyone anywhere except in one Shakespeare signature and in one word of Addition D, despite the most assiduous search and research.

That spurred *a*, as both our authorities explain, is a side-effect of the supralinear *h*-*a* conjoining. But then (by inference from effect to cause) that join itself must also be rare; and this too is to some extent confirmed by its presence in less than 3% of my own sample survey. Yet it is the norm in f.180 as it is in Hand D. And so is their (also rare) form of open *a* as initial or after a non-postlinked letter (as in "manor" or "at", line 2 of f.180).

Further shared features include several others that are in some degree unusual or even (according to Thompson or Everitt) typically Shakespearean. Thus the writer of f.180 not only uses the same basic alphabet and observes the same general rules of linkage and penlift (after *b*, *o*, *v*, *w*) as Hand D; he also exhibits similar thickness of downstroke on certain letters (*c*, *t*, *v*, *w*) together with other individual letter-forms, some of which also recur in the signatures.

There are also in Hand D such Shakespearean pointers (according to Thompson) as a long crossbar on terminal *t* (cf. f.180 "that", line 9; "rest", line 14, "what", line 15); a long headstroke on terminal *g* (cf. f.180, "taking", line 10); the writing of double *l* as significantly smaller than single *l* (cf. f.180 *ll* in "*parcells*", line 2, compared with "lyke", line 3).

Both hands have more general though still Shakespearean characteristics shared with other hands of the time, such as the bending of *d* backwards through preceding *l* (as in "yealde", line 10) or *d* (as in "wisdome", line 12); or the use of capital *C* for minuscule ("course", line 11); or the writing of terminal *d* and *e* in such a way as to cause confusion (compare the *d* in "and", line 4, with the final *e* in "curtesye", line 15); and so on.

Even these can make a positive contribution, on the mathematical system advocated by Everitt for handwriting identification. And even discounting all such general features, the cumulative tally already vastly exceeds chance expectation.

In the circumstances then the admitted occasional differences between f.180 and Hand D may perhaps be explained as superficial variations understandable and indeed predictable in two specimens so obviously different in style, function and (perhaps) the age of the writer.

But all hypotheses must benefit from cogent critique and counter-argument; and there may well be specialists in Shakespearean handwriting or palaeography who would wish to modify or challenge either the experts I have cited or the conclusions I have drawn from them. Independent investigation and comment would of course be most welcome.

The question has after all much potential interest. For if it could be shown that the penman of Lans.71 f.180 was probably Shakespeare, there are several significant inferences to be drawn, not least from the parallels between that letter ("my manor house at Beaulieu.. fall in greate decaye") and the famous image of sonnets x and xii, also found in plays (C. of E., T.G. of V) also often ascribed to 1592 and linked with the Earl of Southampton.