

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

Warren Hope's article on "Lear's Cordelia, Oxford's Susan, and Manningham's Diary" (ER 5:2) brought *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth* to mind (Josephine A. Roberts, ed. Louisiana University Press, 1983).

Lady Mary was a good friend of Susan Vere, Countess Montgomery. One of the poems is called "The Countesse of Montgomery's Urania." In the preface of the book, there is a little epitaph written at the time of Lady Susan's death in 1629 by William Browne of Tavistock (the Dowager Countess of Pembroke was his patroness):

Though we trust the earth with thee,
We will not thy memory.
Mines of brass or marble shall
Speak nought of thy funeral,
They are verier dust than thee
And do beg a history.
In thy name there is a tomb
If the world can give it room,
 For a Vere and Herbert's wife
 Outspeaks all tombs, outlives all
 life.

Sincerely,
Isabel Holden
Northampton, Massachusetts

To the Editor:

I read with interest Dr. John Baker's comment (see ER 5:2) on my suggestion that the celebrated Monteagle letter, which gave the first official intimation to the English government of the Gunpowder Plot, "was almost certainly written by the Earl of Salisbury." As he says, Dr. Mark Nicholls "suspects that Thomas Percy wrote the letter," but Nicholls, a careful scholar, admits, "It was widely believed at the time that Percy had written the letter to Monteagle. Just why the conviction was so strong is now a little difficult to say, but we have seen how in King's Book, Monteagle no sooner heard Thomas Percy's name mentioned in connection with the Westminster vault than he suspected, by reason of Percy's 'backwardness in religion' and their old friendship that the letter had come from him" (*Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, p. 175).

There is no good reason for supposing that Percy wrote the letter; not if we take the handwriting of the letter into account, which is still extant in the Public Record Office in London, like most of the records in the case which have survived, or more correctly, been allowed to survive. The most lucid treatment of this subject first appeared on page 17 of the *Observer* magazine, a London-based Sunday newspaper, in its issue of November 5, 1967. The late Colin

Cross, the journalist primarily responsible, took along to the Record Office Joan Cambridge, a leading graphologist whose expertise is in the solution of legal problems arising from disputed handwriting and signatures. He insisted on my absence lest the conclusions of the lady be in any way prejudiced. Having no personal interest in the settlement of the problem, she was asked to compare the hands of the principal suspects as writers of the letter--Francis Tresham, Henry Garnet and Robert Cecil, all of whose hands bear a certain resemblance. Examples of the hands were given in the article together with an enlargement of two words, "frend" and "friends," taken from Cecil's normal writings and the Monteagle letter, respectively. One cannot reproduce here all her reasons, but Ms. Cambridge concluded, "examination of original documents written and signed by Robert Cecil shows that his natural graphic movement, normal pressure pattern and character of stroke allow of the possibility that he wrote the Monteagle letter. Further to this, examination of his spontaneous letter-forms, particularly "h," "s," and "e," indicate definite similarities with those in the Monteagle letter... So on aggregate there is sufficient evidence to support an opinion that in all probability Cecil himself wrote the Monteagle warning."

Nicholls indicated further candidates on page 214 of his book but does not take the evidence given here into consideration. When Cecil wrote his dispatch of November 9 to Sir Thomas Parry, English ambassador in

Paris, he admitted in what could only have been a moment of inadvertence that Monteagle's letter was written "in a hand disguised" (see F. Edwards, *Guy Fawkes, the Real Story of the Gunpowder Plot?*, London, 1969, 188; quoting from Winwood's *Memorials*, II, 171). So it was. But how could he know? There was no problem if he had written it himself. Cecil was very coy about references to whoever might have written it. When he gave the instructions to the Attorney General, Sir Edward Coke, as to how he should conduct the trial of the plotters, he warned him to stay away from any mention of the authorship of the letter. "Absolutely disclaim that any of these wrote it, though you leave the further judgement indefinite who else it should be" (*ibid*, 210; quoted from PRO, London, SP 14, vol. 19, f.222 r/v).

As for the assurance, "there is no need to accuse Salisbury of hypocrisy in these letters," I agree that hypocrisy is not perhaps the best or most precise word to use as a simple judgment in connection with the activity of either Cecil, William the father or Robert the son. The Cecils were completely and utterly sincere in their determination to keep their political ascendancy, and while they made a good thing for themselves out of this, it would be unjust to suppose they did not believe they were serving the country's interests as well. But to get rival influences out of the way, they would stop at nothing. So William Cecil got rid of the good Anglican Thomas Howard, fourth Duke of Norfolk, by implicating him in the Ridolfi Plot (see my *The Marvellous Chance*, London, 1968)

and son Robert did as much for Henry Percy, the ninth Earl of Northumberland, not as convinced in his Anglicanism as Howard, but certainly not a papist. (The sincerity of the Cecils was proved at its most savage, of course, in their treatment of papists, especially priests.)

On this and the whole subject, the work of an American scholar, George Blacker Morgan, deserves to be better known. Unfortunately for its wider dissemination, *The Great English Treason...* was printed privately in a limited edition at Oxford in two volumes in 1931 and 1932. Morgan thought the plot was genuine but his book was by no means a whitewash job. He comments on Robert Cecil, "although Salisbury completely suppressed that information about [Thomas] Percy's embezzlement, yet he made a most cleverly unscrupulous and deadly use of that letter and of others which the earl wrote to his steward, in regard to the money, so that they formed, without being produced in any court, the earl's chief condemnation in the Star Chamber: though Salisbury knew that the weak earl was as innocent as a child in the plot" (*op. cit.*, II, p. 34; cf. Stow, *Annals*, p. 884). And again, "Salisbury even brought it against the earl that he had a footman in his employment who had served Francis Tresham; although the earl showed that the man had left Tresham's service two years before the plot" (*ibid.*, footnote 2).

The subject is vast and complicated and I am not satisfied with my own work on the subject so far, although the Tesimond narrative pub-

lished by the Folio Society can stand as a scholarly aid in its own right. Both Nicholls and Fraser made use of it. I have in preparation a larger work on the subject since nothing published so far is adequate, although I am not naive enough to suppose that anything I shall write will end all controversy. Too much of the evidence is missing for anyone ever to be able to claim absolute certainty—unless some dramatic discovery is made in the cellars of the solicitors or behind the paneling somewhere, as in the case of the Clarke-Thornhill manuscripts. This is sufficiently unlikely but the unlikely can happen. Nevertheless, many of the difficulties not resolved by Dr. Nicholls's book, or for that matter the latest work on the subject by the Lady Antonia Fraser, have already been taken up in my article published in *Recusant History*, "Still Investigating The Gunpowder Plot" (vol. 21, pp. 305-346). Perhaps I should add by way of footnote that I enjoy good personal relations with both scholars, for nothing is more foolish or unprofessional than to entertain animosity toward those who disagree with one.

Joan Cambridge, I am sure, would hardly agree with Dr. Baker that "handwriting analysis is an art, not a science. It is not used forensically in the identification of persons, as are fingerprints." But surely it is. To attempt to establish identity in the case of characters involved in the Gunpowder Plot does not entail dealing "with all the hands in Elizabethan England." Nevertheless, it would be unfair to say that the objicant does not have a point.

The identification of hands is something of a minefield. I made a mistake myself in attempting to identify the writer of one letter in the course of *Guy Fawkes, the Real Story...?* This mistake has been acknowledged since in two or three places in print. But even after the caution acquired, one hopes, after another thirty years study of this and related problems, I am convinced that this is a fruitful and necessary field of endeavor. One can understand the reluctance of those who uphold the traditional story of the plot to make much of the importance of handwriting investigations. If we take the documents at their face value and presume that, if the author did not sign himself, or did not always sign himself the same way on every occasion, then we do not know whose it was from the handwriting, then it is much easier to believe the traditional account. But if we do keep our eyes open for resemblances and identity, then serious difficulties arise for those who accept the claim, for example, that Francis Tresham died of a strangury in the Tower. The indications are that, like Monteagle, Robert Catesby and Thomas Percy, he had a well-defined role to play, a role of which Robert Cecil was only too well aware. The man who wrote from the English embassy in Valladolid as Matthew Bruninge in 1606 and 1607, was beyond reasonable doubt, taken with other evidence, Francis Tresham. Joan Cambridge did a similar investigation for the Folio Society, when it contracted to publish the Tesimond narrative in translation from the manuscript kept at Stonyhurst. Once again,

I was not present when she made her examination of the Tresham and Bruninge letters in the Public Record Office. She published her findings in Appendix 3 to *The Gunpowder Plot*, Folio Society, London 1973, 250-254. The first appendix dealt with my thesis that Tresham escaped from the Tower (231-246). The second (247-249) dealt with the handwriting analysis of the Monteagle letter as it was published originally in the *Observer*.

Dr. David Kathman's letter in answer to mine (see ER 5:2) made some undoubtedly good points. However, some doubt remains about the earlier education of some of the playwrights mentioned as to whether they were at university or not. There seems to be no doubt that Henry Chettle and John Webster missed the Oxbridge experience. Chettle, in any case, was more successful as a printer than a playwright, although he put himself in the center of controversy by printing *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, which he tried to ward off in his preface to *Kind-Heart's Dream*. As a playwright he had rather less than genius since he produced no less than 48 plays in five years, but none of them brought him success or much money.

According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Ben Jonson was certainly educated at Westminster School at William Camden's expense. It admits "the evidence is rather against his having attended either university," but Fuller, no mean authority, claimed that he was at St. John's College, Cambridge, for a time. As for George Chapman, "Wood is confident that Chapman was educated at Oxford, but

he gives no precise information. It is usually assumed that he spent some time at Oxford, and afterwards proceeded to Cambridge." This would account for his proficiency in Latin and Greek but since he did not, it seems, study logic or philosophy, this would also account for the fact that he took no degree.

There is less likelihood concerning Thomas Kyd, although he had the beginning in Merchant Taylors' School which might have taken him on to university. But perhaps what Nashe referred to as "the swelling bombast of bragging blank verse" and his addition to "tragedy of blood" which characterized his work and that of other populist playwrights, put him firmly in the second division, as it were; all in the time "before Shakespeare revolutionized public taste." Admittedly, no one, and certainly not Kyd himself, it seems, made any claim that he ever went to university. As for Michael Dayton, "there is no evidence to show whether he was a member of either university," although he himself claimed he was "nobly bred" and "well allied" and if so might have been expected to attend one of the universities. Thomas Dekker is something of a mystery man: like Melchisedech of old, he turned up rather suddenly and nobody knows where he came from. The fact that names of students do not always appear in the official list is not of course proof that they were never in attendance. It will be interesting to see what *The New Dictionary of National Biography* has to say about these worthies when it is reissued in the

early 2000's.

As to where the young Shakespeare of popular tradition could have gained his knowledge of the many things necessary for his plays, we emerge in our speculation from the relatively safety of port for the uncertainty of the high seas. There were certainly good libraries in London—Lord Montagu for example had one of them—but none were public or of easy accessibility in a modern sense, and it seems doubtful that anyone would have made his books—valuable items—available to someone up from the country and with the smell of horses still clinging to him from his day's work. But Richard Field is a good possibility. The more serious difficulty arises about the books that the young Shakespeare could have borrowed, especially for his first play or plays—he could hardly have afforded to buy them on the wages of a horse holder! It seems to be generally agreed that *Love's Labour's Lost* was the writer's earliest play. A. Gray says of it, "the play has all the marks of a first exercise in comedy. It has no progress or plot... In structural skill it is as inferior to the *Two Gentlemen* as it surpasses it in poetical fancy" (*A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare*, Cambridge 1926, p. 50). But as I. Wilson noted, the play refers not only to recognizable characters in French court circles of the time—the King of Navarre, Berowne, Longaville and the Duke of Mayence recall names of known courtiers (*Shakespeare the Evidence*, London 1993, p 160)—but it also shows a knowledge of the court etiquette of the time which could not

have been lifted from a book before the early 19th century.

Although Ben Jonson against all likelihood seems to have passed through various trades and occupations he surely did not “become the greatest classical scholar in England while working as a bricklayer’s apprentice, soldier, and actor” while he was actually engaged in them? Shakespeare’s genius doubtless allowed him to make better and fuller use of his talents than most, and in these days of unemployment subsidized by state benefits, numerous free libraries and plentiful opportunities of bursaries and scholarships even in the present straitened times of England, William of Stratford might conceivably have risen above the disad-

vantages of his surroundings and circumstances, but it is difficult to believe that he could have done this in the world of the 16th century. Without at least a modicum of real evidence, which we do not have, it seems at least unlikely. So in the absence of real evidence on so much, we will all continue to speculate on what we take to be the strength of the probabilities supporting our own position and the unlikelihood of what is taken to uphold our adversaries.

Sincerely,
Francis Edwards, SJ
Fellow, Royal Historical Society
London