

A COMMENTARY ON FOUR COURTIER POETS' AUTOGRAPHS

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The following paper is basically a commentary on four autographs of some of the most important courtier poets of the English Renaissance. It is known that the courtier, a Renaissance ideal, was a man trained in many arts and his highest function is to give good counsel to his sovereign. Courtiers wrote poetry for several reasons. To begin with, says Robert M. Bender, it was expected of them; it was a means by which they could display their grace and wit, it was also a way of gaining favour at court¹. In fact, we know that Wyatt's early success was due to his skill at composing songs for Henry VIII, and Raleigh rose from obscurity to a position of great acclaim through his poetic compliments to Elizabeth. These poets follow the model of courtier proposed in *Il Cortegiano*, book translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1554 and edited a few years later by W. Raleigh as *The Book of the Courtier*.

All courtier poets wrote with a cursive *Secretary* handwriting or a cursive *Italic*, though in most cases there is a gradual fusion and admixture of the *Secretary* and *Italic* hands. We think that a knowledge of these scripts is interesting to all who study and read the literature of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century; because as it has been suggested the essential fascination of the cursives lies in their spontaneous revelation of the individual. They respond readily to the demands of the individual temperament and the pressures of the moment, so that each hand

¹ Robert, M. Bender. *Five Courtier Poets of the English Renaissance*, New York, 1967.

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has in a sense to be learned from within¹. We are here with a kind of script different from the disciplined work of the medieval scribes which constitutes the proper study of the palaeographer; in the Renaissance MSS. we can observe that the manner in which a writer, in this case the courtier poet, adapts and combines his forms, reveals his instinctive sense of rhythm.

Let us consider now a very brief survey of the two handwritings used by the courtier poets, the *Secretary* and the *Italic* handwritings.

The *Secretary* hand is the name applied by the writing-masters of the 16th century to the formal business hand which developed out of the free small hands of Henry VII's reign. Every country of northern Europe had, in general, a cursive handwriting from the 15th. century *Secretary*. The English variety was in fact called *Secretary hand* probably because it was the script employed by the amanuensis. It has been distinguished three periods: *Early Tudor Secretary*, *Mid-Tudor Secretary* and *Elizabethan*.

Early Tudor covers about fifty years, from Henry VII until the later years of Henry VIII. It derives from a version of *Secretary* in use from about the middle of the 15th. century with admixture from the more cursive form of *Anglicana*. There is a remarkable uniformity of style in the use of this handwriting as can be seen from examples as diverse as parish records, a poetry book of Thomas Wyatt, and the letters of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon.

Mid-Tudor Secretary seems to extend from the mid 1530's to about the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. It is best defined as an intermediate stage in which there is a gradual narrowing and angularity.

By about 1550 we find a third period of *Secretary* handwriting, it is a compact script written with a very fine nib held at a slightly oblique angle, it was very cursive and could be written at great speed. The most formal script of the *Elizabethan secretary* was the *engrosing hand*, often used for professional scribes and official documents.

¹ P. J. Croft. *Autograph Poetry in the English Language*, v. 1 London, 1973.

The *Italic* script, on the other hand, was the most important handwriting reform of the Renaissance. This script started in Italy in the last decades of the 14th. century and is usually ascribed to Petrarch and Coluccio Salutati, the chancellor of Florence. This handwriting was modelled on Carolingian script, so a round letter is now used rather than an angular type. The new *littera* was named *littera antiqua, romana, rotunda* or *tonda*. This script was used in three basic forms, *formata*, in which the letters were perfectly upright, exactly proportioned and usually unlinked, though it was so compact that the letter seemed to be joined. The next grade was called *cursiva*, and though still upright its letters were mainly linked; the third form was called *currens* and had a slight slope and distinctive diagonal links. Later, in the 16th century, larger and more rounded varieties of *cursiva littera antiqua* are also to be found, and all these varieties of cursive handwriting were known under the general heading of *Italic* or *Italian* since they originated in Italy¹

The *Littera antiqua* reached England around the middle of the 15th century and towards the end of the century this script was introduced, probably through the influence of Petrus Carmelianus of Brescia, who arrived in England around 1480 and became Latin secretary of Henry VII. Royal patronage gave this new letter additional prestige and the royal children were taught to write the hand. We know that queen Elizabeth wrote with one of the styles of this script from her early youth, and the nobility followed the example of royalty in learning the *Italic* hand. Generally speaking, the nobility used *Italic* for their own correspondence hands, while their secretaries would employ the more traditional *Secretary* hand. This is why most courtier poets wrote with *Italic* handwriting rather than *Secretary*, though very frequently there is a kind of fusion and hybrid style as we can see in the following lines.

Sir Thomas Wyatt: This courtier poet was born in Kent in 1503, and was educated at St. John College, Cambridge, he was a courtier and diplomat whose travels to Italy and France in 1526 and 1527 acquainted him with the High Renaissance abroad as pointed out Hollander². Wyatt

¹ A. G. Petti. *English Literary hands from Chaucer to Dryden*. London, 1977.

² J. Hollander. *The Literature of the Renaissance England. The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*. London 1973, v. 2 p. 116.

served Henry VIII in Spain in 1537, later he was charged with treason and acquitted a year before his death in 1542.

Tagus fare well y(t) westward w(t) thy strems
torns vp the grayns off gold alre dy tryd
w(t) spurr and sayle for I go seke the tems
gaynward the sonne (wych) y(t) brutus sowght by drems
like bendyd mone doth lend her lusty syd.
My kyng my Contry (alone) for whome I lyve
of myghty love the winge for this me give

This facsimile belongs to the Egerton MS 2711 Brit. Library, London. The earlier part of the MS. was apparently copied before Wyatt left for Spain in 1537, but the later pages contain poems written both during his residence in Spain, where he remained for two years as Henry VIII's ambassador, and after his return home.

This poem was composed shortly before he left in early June 1539 for London. The handwriting is *Secretary* though it has been influenced by the *Italic* hands which were reaching England from the continent in the latter part of the 15th century. This Italic influence is revealed in the following formations: the initial capitals of *Spayn* and *Contry*, simplified *y* with open top and straight descender, though Wyatt still follows the medieval practice of dotting the letter; the type of *r* exemplified in *fare*, besides the Gothic 2-form, and especially in the presence of simple unlooped ascenders as in *d*, *h*, *b*, and *l* as in *only*, l. 7.

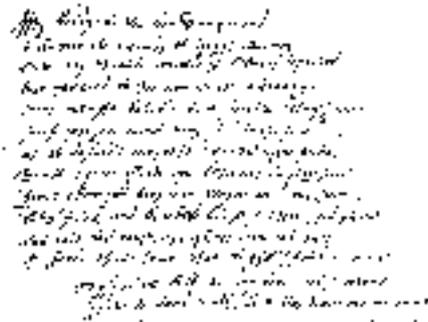
¹ The Best edition is *Poems* ed. Kenneth Muir. London 1949.

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The poet signed his autograph poems in this MS. with a symbol which is probably to be interpreted as *Y.T.* monogram. Summing up, we can see that this poem was written in a *Secretary* script with some *Italic* features.

Sir Walter Raleigh: This poet was born in Devon in 1552, his careers were many, soldier, sailor, founder of colonies in America, lover, intellectual and obviously courtier. After being the Queen's protegee for a decade he was dropped and finally he was beheaded at Westminster in 1618

1



My boddy in the walls captived
feels not the wounds of spighfull envy,
butt my thralde minde, of liberty deprived,
fast fettered in her auntient memory,
douth nought beholde butt sorrowes diing face,
such prison earst was so delightfull
as it desirde no other dwellinge place,
Butt tymes effects, and destines despightfull
haue changed both my keeper and my fare,
loves fire, and bewtis light I then had store,
butt now closs kept, as captives wounted are
y(t) food, that heat, that light I find no more,
Dyspaire bolts vp my dores, and I alone
speake to dead walls, butt thos heare not my mone.

¹ Agnes M. C. Latham's edition of the poems is standard. London, rev. ed. 1951.

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This facsimile belongs to a MS. which now occupies folios 238-247 of a volume of miscellaneous papers and is called Cecil Papers 144, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire. These lines shows the sonnet on folio 239 which proves that Raleigh was writing in prison. John Hannah believed from internal evidence that it was written during Raleigh's last imprisonment, under James I, between 1603 and 1616; but later, Edmund Gosse rejected this dating and suggested that the MS. must belong to the period Raleigh's first imprisonment in 1592¹. Recently, however, K. Duncan-Jones has argued in favour of the later date², when Raleigh is reviewing his own past life from the standpoint of a man who, following his trial and condemnation in 1603, is himself *dead* in the eyes of the law.

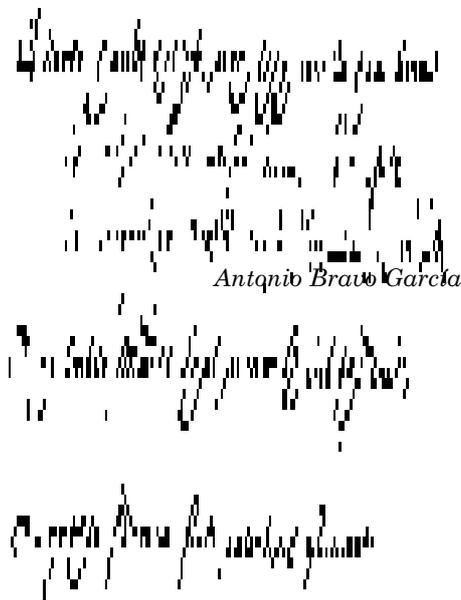
In this sonnet Raleigh is writing in a formal way with *Italic* hand, but despite its essentially *Italic* character, this hand is technically an idiosyncratic example of the hybrid hands which begin to be common towards the end of the 16th century. In Raleigh's case the most consistent *Secretary* letter is *c*, while like many other writers he uses the *Secretary e* alongside the *Italic* form. A clear example of *secretary h* occurs in *dispiightfull*, l. 8, and the final *s* of *bewtis*, l. 10 is of the *Secretary* type, the same as the word *to* l. 14. A *Secretary* feature to which Raleigh is prone is the tendency to conclude certain final letters *g*, *l*, *t*, and *Secretary e* with and upward curving flourish. Generally speaking, we can say that this sonnet reflects an *Italic* script, but quite influenced by the *Secretary* hand.

Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke: He was born at Beauchamp Court, Warwickshire in 1554. He worked at court as Treasurer of the Navy, the Chancellor of the Exchequer under James. He became Sidney's close friend and shared his literary and political interest, finally he was murdered at Brooke House, Holborn, London in 1628³

¹ John Hannah, *The Courtly Poets*. London, 1870.

² Edmund Gosse, see "The Athenaeum", 2.Jan, 1886

³ G. Bullough edited *Poems and Dramas* 2 vols. 1939.



Men that delight to multiplie desire,
Like Tellors are that take coyne but to paie;
Still tempted to be false, wth little hire,
Blake hands except wch they would haue awaie.
for where powr wysly audytes her estate
the checquere mens bst recompence is hate
The little Maide that weareth out the daie,
To gather flowers, still covetous of more,

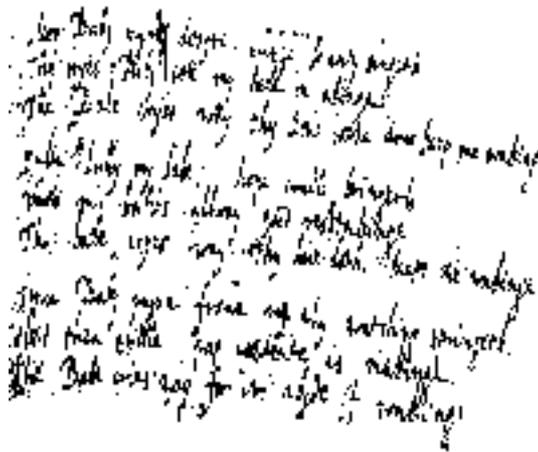
The lines here commented come from the volume containing the *Caelica* sequence and shows the poet revising the third line and adding the final couplet to the first stanza of sonnet 93. The rest of this text was copied by a professional scribe who employed for the main text a sloped *Secretary* handwriting widely practised by these amanuenses during the first half of the 17th century. The essentially *Gothic* character of this *Secretary* hand is expressed in its interplay of light and heavy strokes, a feature consciously emphasized in the enlarged capitals. On the other hand, Greville's own handwriting is an *Italic* cursive which is one of the most eccentric hands written by any English poet. Greville had already evolved his mature cursive by the summer of 1580, when he wrote to Walsingham four letters which are the earliest in his hand known to survive¹. But there was little development of his handwriting thereafter, and Greville's script is a hybrid one like many writings of his period; in fact, it may be classified mainly as *Italic* with some influence of *Secretary* forms, e.g. *c*, *p* in *recompence* and *clockwise*; final *s*, as in *mens* and *is*. Some original peculiarities are *e*, which slants down below the line, and the frequent headlong of *m* and *n*, as we

¹ Place Office: S. P. 63/74, fol. 4-5, 6, 32; S. P. 63/75 f. 3

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can see again in *recompance*. That Greville himself realized the strangeness of his hand is indicated by his letter to Michael Hicks of 18 January 1600-1 for which he employed an amanuensis and explained in the postscript *I write in another mans hande for feare my owne will not be vnderstood*¹

Sir Philip Sidney: This poet was born to an aristocratic family in 1554, and was almost the perfect courtier. He travelled extensively abroad assisting in diplomatic missions; fought in Ireland and in Holland where he was killed fighting the Spanish forces in 1586.²



Sleep Baby myne desyre, nurse beauty singeth
Thy cryes o Baby sett my hedd on akinge
To Babe cryes way loue dothe keep me waking

Lully lully my babe, hope cradle bringeth

¹ Brit. Lib. Lansdowne MS. 88, art. 1

² The complete works were edited in four volumes by Albert Feuillerat, 1912-16; but the standard text of the poems is that of William A. Ringler *Sidney's Poems*. Oxford 1962.

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vnto my babies allway good rest takinge
the babe cryes way Thy loue doth keepe me wakinge

since Baby myne frome me thy watching springeth
sleep then a little pap contente is makinge
The Babe cries nay for it abyde I wakinge

This poem was first printed as number six of the section *Certain Sonnets* in the 1598 *Arcadia*, which is in effect the first collected edition of Sidney's writings. The heading of the published text describes it as written to the tune of *Basciani vita mia* and the two verbal changes found therein, viz. *children* for *babies* l. 5 and *that* for *it* l. 9 probably represent subsequent revisions by the poet. The thirty two poems published under the general title *Certain Sonnets* appear to be Sidney's own collection of the miscellaneous poems he composed during the years 1577-81 in the intervals of his labour on the original version of his *Arcadia*¹. The image of Desire as a baby seeking the breast of Beauty was used by Sidney again in lines 201-3 of his unfinished poem beginning *A Shepheard's tale no height of style desires* and in sonnet 71 of *Astrophil and Stella*.

William A. Ringler Jr. wrote in the *Introduction* to his great edition of Sidney's Poem: "*No manuscript of Sidney's verse in his own hand survives*", though we know that a certain amount of prose, mainly personal letters, survives in Sidney's hand from the years when he was writing poetry, however there is an autograph poem which has hitherto escaped the attention of Sidney scholars and which owes its unique survival to the fact that the poet wrote it at the end of a folio, a copy of the edition printed at Poitiers in 1557 of Jean Bouchet's *Les Annales d'Aquitaine...* This book itself reminds us that Sidney's primary interests were political.

This poem was written in an *Italic* script with some personal characteristics and influenced by some *Secretary* features. *Italic* handwriting includes the occasional clubbed and slightly sinuous ascender, *beauty* l. 1; the curved *f* for l. 9; the *g* with curving descender; *t*, with short stem and long stroke, *it*, l. 9 is quite distinctive. Some letters as *p* and *r* are personal characteristics; for example, the final *p* of *pap*, l. 8, and *r* in *nurse*,

¹ A. Ringler op. cit. pp. 423-4.

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l. 1. Summing up, this poem shows an *Italic* handwriting though rather personal and clumsy.

To finish with, we have seen the autograph of some famous courtier poets: Wyatt, Raleigh, Greville and Sidney, and all these autographs and the poetry which survives in MSS of the Renaissance period, while naturally it is sometimes in a condition that the poet himself would not have authorized for publication, abounds with insights of a kind not always to be gained from the “official” published versions, (in a similar way, an artist’s preliminary sketch can be more revealing than the finish portrait), and as Croft says:

Any text in the author’s handwriting, in fact, possesses a validity of its own, while experience soon teaches that there can be no simple and all-embracing definition of the ideal text ¹

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¹ P. J. Croft, *Autograph Poetry in the English Language*, vol. 1 London, 1973.p. 2.