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Revision of scene 4 of Sir Thomas More as a test of New Bibliographical principles

Recent bibliographical studies have questioned certain assumptions behind the set of principles known as New Bibliography¹. In a recent contribution to Early Modern Literary Studies (Werstine 1998) Paul Werstine advanced an argument against a key assumption of New Bibliography using evidence from scene 4 of The Book of Sir Thomas More², a scene which appears in two versions in the British Library manuscript (Harley 7368) that is our only source of the play. The "first version" (Werstine 1998, para. 8) of the scene, as Werstine called it, is in the hand of Anthony Munday and occupies lines 410 to 452 of folio 5b. The second version (which Werstine called the "theatrical version" (Werstine 1998, para. 15)) is in the hand that Greg designated B (and which he later decided was Thomas Heywood) occupying lines 1 to 64 of Addition II, on folio 7a. New Bibliographers expect documents used in the playhouse to be more regular in their stage directions and speech prefixes than documents fresh from the dramatist's hand, so Werstine attempted to show that the "theatrical version" of the scene is no tidier than Munday's "first version" in order to disprove their hypothesis.

In a response to Werstine's article (Egan 1999) I objected that Werstine nowhere justified his calling Hand B's reinscription of the scene a "theatrical version" and nowhere substantiated his claim that it is "closer . . . to the stage" (Werstine 1998, para. 9). Werstine's argument rested upon the simplistic assumption that the revision made the text more theatrical. As Eric Rasmussen observed:

Henslowe frequently refers to the task of revision as mending or altering: Chettle was paid for "for mendynge of the firste p<ar>t of Robart hoode" (101) and for "the altrynge of the boocke of carnowlle wollsey" (175); Dekker received four pounds "for mending the playe of tasso" (206).³

In a subsequent revival a play's original cast or venue might not be available and again 'mending' might be necessary, as it might if audience tastes had changed. Scott McMillin pointed out that if we have to assume anything at all about the revision of Sir Thomas More (which we do not) it should be that the adjustments fitted the play for revival, not that they followed hard on first composition (McMillin 1987, 76). The latter assumption is implicit in Werstine's statement that scene 4 of Sir Thomas More was reinscribed to bring it "closer . . . to the stage", which vague phrase should cause a reader to ask "in what way closer?"

I see now an even simpler objection to Werstine's argument: what he called the "theatrical version" is in fact no less consistent than the original. Werstine looked for discrepancy between the form of a character's name given in a stage direction and the form given in a speech prefix, and found that

such variation is not distinctive to Munday's [i.e. the "first"] version because it persists in the theatrical adaptation of the scene, where the same character still enters as "BETTS" or one of the "Betses" and still speaks as "gorge." Indeed the theatrical manuscript also introduces further variation in naming because the clown's proper name, as we learn in another scene, is also "Betts"; in the theatrical manuscript then the clown too enters as one of the Betses, but speaks as "clo[wn]." Confusion is further compounded in the theatrical version by the partial duplication of the initial entrance direction, for the theatrical version includes both Munday's version of the entrance and its own version. (Werstine 1998, para. 15, with my parenthetical clarification "i.e. the 'first'")

This appears convincing until one realizes that the "theatrical version" has no stage directions at all. Werstine compared Munday's undeleted stage direction from the "first version" (on folio 5b) with the speech prefixes of the "theatrical version" (on folio 7a). Only if a single stage direction is made do double duty as part of the original and as part of the revision does Werstine's discrepancy emerge. Werstine put together the original stage direction and the revised dialogue and gave the false impression that they coexist in something he called "the theatrical manuscript" which is supposed to begin thus:

ENTER LINCOLNE BETTS WILLIAMSON DOLL.*

Enter Lincolne, Betses, Williamson, Sherwin and other armed, doll in a shirt of Maile, a head piece, sword and Buckler, a crewe attending.

clo come come wele tickle ther turnips wele butter ther boxes (Werstine 1998, Appendix item labelled "MORE T 1")

The "textual example", as Werstine called it, was labelled "MORE T 1", as appropriate for the first in a series of quotations from a theatrical manuscript, and another series "MORE A 1" to "MORE A 3" purported to represent the authorial manuscript. In fact this "textual example" does not exist: the first part of the above quotation (the stage directions from "ENTER" to "attending") comes from folio 5b but the second part (the clown's speech prefix and his line) comes from folio 7a. By quoting them as though continuous, Werstine created (intentionally or not) the inconsistent 'theatrical manuscript' necessary to his argument. What Werstine called the "partial duplication" of stage directions (Werstine 1998, para. 15) belongs not to the "theatrical version" but to the writing on folio 5b where a third hand, Hand C, has rewritten Munday's original stage direction in the left margin. Werstine put an asterisk by this rewritten stage direction, leading to a note which stated that "This direction is crowded within rules into the left margin beside the other entrance direction" (Werstine 1998, Appendix item labelled "MORE T1"), but he did not mention that it is by a different writer (Hand C), nor did he discuss Hand C's contribution to the play, or give his opinion on where it fits into his hypothesized movement "closer . . . to the stage". With such omissions, the discrepancy between Hand C and the material under discussion can neither further nor hinder his argument.

Contrary to Werstine's claim, the "theatrical version" (Hand B's dialogue on 7a) of scene 4 of Sir Thomas More is entirely self-consistent, having the speech prefixes: "clo", "gorge", "doll", "lincol", and "sher" varying only minutely to "Geor", "Linco", "Lincol", and "Sher". The "theatrical version" is entirely free of stage directions ("MANETT CLOWNE" at the bottom of the page being a different hand) and not

"demonstrably erroneous" in its stage directions as Werstine claimed (Werstine 1998, para. 17-8).

Notes

¹Particularly effective examples are Long 1985; Werstine 1997; and Long 1999.

²Quotations of the play will be from Greg 1911, which also originates the scene designations and the distinction between the play's "Original Text" and the "Additions". Scott McMillin disagreed with Greg's categorization, thinking that what Greg identified as Addition I and Hand D's part of Addition II might have been part of the original composition (McMillin 1987, 135-59).

³Rasmussen 1997, 447. Rasmussen's quotations and page numbers are from R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

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