

ELIZABETHAN HANDWRITING FOR BEGINNERS

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THE research student who works on the literature of the Elizabethan age finds himself confronted sooner or later with the necessity of deciphering the English handwriting of the period ; and he realizes when faced, for example, with his first parish register, that Elizabethan palæography is something which has to be learnt. If he is fortunate enough to be working under supervision he may be sent to attend palæographical lectures or obtain other adequate help ; for the many who are compelled to work independently, however, and those who have no time to follow up the subject for its own sake, there is no one book which at present provides a ready and easy way to knowledge. The purpose of this article is therefore to attempt to gather together for such beginners a necessary minimum of information that will enable them to teach themselves how to read accurately in a reasonable amount of time.

Perhaps the most entertaining introduction to the subject that the beginner could find would be by way of the writing-book from which the first two full-page facsimiles in this article have been taken. Composed originally by Jean de Beau Chesne as a French writing-book it was adapted for English use by John Baildon, and appeared in England in 1571, under the title of *A Booke Containing Divers Sortes of hands, as well the English as French secretarie with the Italian, Roman, Chancelry and Court hands*. It contains a large number of plates of beautifully written alphabets and passages in the different hands, and it is rendered yet more attractive by the preliminary " Rules made by E. B. for his children to learn to write by." Some of E. B.'s hints are still of practical use to the young palæographer : he recommends one, for example, to trace over the letters of a copy with a dry pen when learning a strange hand. He expresses his disapproval of the " dish dash long tail " style of

writing, and gives us a delightful picture of the good Elizabethan child sitting down to his copy with his newly cut goose-quill :

Your thombe on your penne as hiest bestowe,
 The forefinger next, the middle belowe :
 And holding it thus in most comely wyse,
 Your Body vpryght, stoup not wyth your Heade :
 Your Breast from the borde if that you be wyse
 Least that ye take hurte, when ye haue well fed . . .
 Yncke alwayes good stoore on right hand to stand,
 Browne Paper for great hast, elles box with sand :
 Dypp Penne, and shake penne, and tooche Pennes for heare.

Baildon's book, however, is a rarity, to be come by only in such a collection as the British Museum. It is delightful to look at and helpful to the learner, but it is a luxury rather than a necessity. So far as the beginner is concerned its inaccessibility and its lack of commentary leaves him with his need still unsupplied—hence the following practical and elementary notes.

In literary research there are two main kinds of handwriting which the student of this period will encounter. With the beautiful "copper-plate" variety which he may find used consistently in some manuscripts and sporadically in others he will have no difficulty. It has more character and beauty than that old-fashioned copybook hand into which it degenerated and which one learnt at school before the time of the Graily Hewitt system, but it is of course substantially the same and is equally easy to read. This is the Italian hand which was introduced into England at the beginning of the sixteenth century. A fine specimen of such writing, taken from Baildon's book, may be studied in Plate I.

The other kind of handwriting which the student will meet in the majority of texts or private letters and even in certain kinds of records, is the one with which he will experience some trouble. This is the ordinary English current hand used by practically everybody for ordinary purposes until about the end of the century : after 1600 we begin to find it being at any rate partially superseded by the new Italian hand.

This English hand which was eventually completely ousted by the Italian characters is difficult for the novice to decipher for various reasons. In the first place it is often exceedingly minute and cramped, probably because the writer wished to be economical in his use of paper. Faded ink often adds to its difficulty, and a good magnifying glass will prove useful—even essential, perhaps—to the beginner. The intrinsic difficulty of this English script, however,



S talique bande

it is the part of a yonge man to reuerence his elders, and. of suche
to choose out the beste and moste commended whose counsayle
and auctoritie hee maye leane vnto. For the myskfulnesse of
tender yeares must by old mens experience. be ordered & gouerned.

A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. J. K. L. M. N. O. P. Q. R.

S. T. V. X. Y. Z.

D

PLATE I.—Italian Hand (from Baildon and de Beau Chesne).

lies in the fact that a certain number of its letters can in their normal forms present a completely different appearance from those in use to-day. When to this radical difference of form is added that constant factor in handwriting of personal idiosyncrasy it is evident that the Elizabethan current hand needs to be learnt, much as, perhaps, we would to-day learn the German national current hand.

Small letters are known to the palæographer as minuscules, capitals as majuscules. The minuscules in an ordinary Elizabethan hand which will normally differ completely from the modern forms are *c, e, h, k, p, r, s*, while *d, g*, and *n* may present slight but not as a rule troublesome differences. The remainder will be more or less "normal" and recognizable, and the difficulties which they may present to the learner, even after some practice, will be due not to an essential difference of form but to the personal peculiarity of the individual's hand. The drawings give a number of typical forms which the beginner would be well advised to copy for himself until he gets the "feel" of each letter, and begins to see how it is formed. Plate III. shows the letters in connected writing.

Majuscules may present considerable difficulty, and it will soon be realized that one writer may use two or more forms of the one letter. They may be as plain or as fanciful, or as indistinguishable from the minuscule form, as the writer wishes; they may be as frequent or as rare, as consistent or as inconsistent, as pleases the taste of the individual. Those which in some of their forms are apt to present an especially eccentric appearance to the modern eye are *C, D, E, H, P, S, V*: all, however, may give some difficulty at first, as will be evident from a study of the alphabet in Plate II., taken from Baildon's book.

The following notes on the letters should be studied in conjunction with the illustrations. They are in no sense comprehensive, but they attempt to call the student's attention to a few not entirely obvious points which may aid him in his first efforts or when in difficulties with a peculiarly crabbed hand. When not otherwise stated, it may be assumed that letters in cursive script normally link with both preceding and following letters.

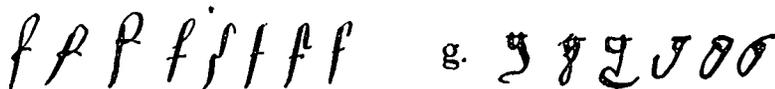
a. *a a u a* b. *b b b b* c. *t t r r r r e e*

a: as well as normal form there is an open-topped one which might be confused with *u* or an open *o*.

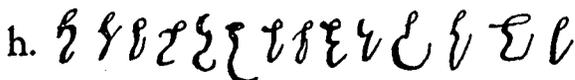
- b : initial loop often left open : could be confused with *k* in some hands : is not linked to following letter.
- c : fundamentally different from modern form : should be made in two strokes, the first a slightly curved upright, and the second a straight and thinner horizontal : in some Elizabethan hands the Italian (modern) *c* will be found consistently used.

d. 

- d : looped form if written small can be confused with *e*.
- e : the lower curve is always formed before the upper one, the last three specimens being formed in the same way as the earlier ones, but with the pen lifted during the up-stroke.

f. 

- f : doubled for capital : majuscule forms when occurring are borrowed from the Italian : in the looped form the down stroke is made first, and the loop, which finishes in a cross piece, is then added. Both *f* and long *s* are sometimes doubled merely by the addition of a second tail.
- g : a squarer-shaped letter than the modern : has an open v-shaped head, which should be closed by a horizontal stroke. "The variety of ways in which the descending limb of letter *g* is treated in examples of the English 'Secretary' hand of this period may justify us in regarding it as a letter in which we might find, from its style, a clue to the identity of the writer."*

h. 

- h : "the most sinuous letter in the Elizabethan cursive alphabet, and invites a great variety of manipulation without essentially altering its character."* It evolves naturally from older forms. (See first three specimens.)

* Both quotations are taken from Sir E. Maunde Thompson's chapter on Shakespeare's handwriting in *Shakespeare's Hand in Sir Thomas More*, ed. A. W. Pollard.

i. *i i i i*k. *k k k k k k k k k k*i : commonly used throughout for *j*.

k : in formal writing is made in two strokes : the first is practically modern *l*, only with a left-hand spur at the foot, which is then continued to the right to form a horizontal base : the second stroke is like a small *z* or *z* made across the middle of the upright. In its more cursive form (see last three specimens) the whole letter is made without lifting the pen, the spur being omitted and the down stroke curved round and carried up to form the "z," which now may or may not touch or cross the upright.

l. *l l l l l l* m. *m m m m m*

l : starting as a more formal letter with a slightly spurred base (see first specimen), *l* becomes in most cursive hands practically indistinguishable from the modern letter.

m : one minim (*i.e.* single down stroke of pen) easily omitted, therefore confusion with *n* or *u* possible.

n. *n n n n n n* o. *o o o o o*n : can be confused with *u* in an angular hand.

o : closed and open forms used : is never joined to following letter : is joined to preceding letters, however, by link from them, except when it follows *b*, *v*, and *w*, which cannot link to following letters.

p. *p p p p p p p* q. *q q q*

p : in small hand could be confused with *x*, or in certain writings with *h*.

q : last specimen might possibly be confused with *y*.

r. *r r r r r r r*

r : the more formal letter, with or without a preliminary up-stroke,

is very like a small modern *w*: in more cursive hands it develops into a form practically equivalent to modern *v*: the last two specimens given, though resembling modern *z*, could not be confused with Elizabethan *z* which is always tailed.

s. 

s: has two forms, long *s*, used initially and medially, small *s* used finally: long form can be confused with *f*, although in well-written hands *f* should be distinguishable by its cross-piece: the shaft of long *s* is made before the head curve, and is as a rule a plain down-stroke: it is occasionally ornamented with what appears to be a minute preliminary up-stroke (see Baildon's *st*'s). The method of forming the combination *st* can be seen from Baildon and the specimens—a down-stroke followed by a connecting head-curve. The final *t* in this combination can be confused with *e*.

t.  u. 

t: in looped form can be confused with *b* in some hands: the third specimen given can be confused with *c*.

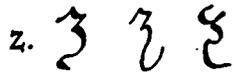
u: used medially for *u* and *v*: never used initially, and has no majuscule. A few writers use *v* medially as in modern caligraphy. Can sometimes be confused with *n* (see last specimen).

v.  w.  x. 

v: only used initially, where it stands for *u* and *v*: is always used for *U* in majuscule form: does not link with following letter, as, like *b* and *w*, its terminal curve turns back to the left.

w: never joined to following letter.

x: can be confused with *p*.

y.  z. 

y: used finally is often little more than a tail.

Common contractions used by many writers are the following : \wp = pro : p = per : ρ (at end of word) = -is, -es or -s : straight line over vowel or *m* or *n* denotes omission of following *m* or *n*. *and* has various contractions : in early manuscripts the sign 7 is sometimes found : the writing masters give the elaborate z-shaped symbol which follows *z* in Baildon's alphabet (see p. 201) : the ordinary cursive hand generally reduces this letter to something like ρ .

The name given to the writing which has just been described is "Secretary" hand. For most literary manuscripts a knowledge of Secretary is all that the student will require. To avail oneself fully, however, of the vast mass of historical documents at the disposal of research workers, in such public repositories as the Public Record Office and the British Museum, a knowledge of what are generally described as the old law hands is also essential. Some records are written in an ordinary Secretary hand : the average parish register would be a typical example. Records under the Great Seal, however, and documents concerning the Courts of the King's Bench and the Common Pleas are written in what are known respectively as Chancery and Court hand. Both are ugly writings, the former exaggeratedly upright and angular, the latter equally cramped and narrow and flattened. They can be most easily learnt from a study of the excellent plates in Wright's *Court Hand Restored*, and should not be tackled by the ordinary literary student until the Secretary hand has first been mastered.

The average student will not "commence palæographer" until he wishes to read a certain text or perhaps certain letters. After accustoming himself to the specimens in these illustrations, his best plan, if he wishes to learn to read that text accurately, is to procure a manuscript in a hand as nearly as possible resembling it, provided a reliable printed text of this second manuscript is also available. If the hand is a fairly normal one an ordinary and not too difficult specimen to practise upon might conveniently be found in the writing of Anthony Munday the dramatist. An excellent facsimile of his manuscript play *John a Kent and John a Cumber* will be found among the *Tudor Facsimile Texts*, edited by J. S. Farmer : the corresponding printed text was issued by the Malone Society in 1923. If the learner will take the trouble to transcribe a portion of this manuscript, comparing it at first word by word, then line by line, then speech by speech with the Malone text, he will find that after a few pages he will know the hand well enough to read a

clearly written passage aloud without much stumbling. As such close work is at first extremely trying to the eyes, it is as well not to attempt to read too much at a time, until the idiosyncrasies of the hand and the different letters become more familiar. After having transcribed a portion of some manuscript in his own handwriting, the student can help himself most by then rewriting passages from his own version in an Elizabethan hand, comparing his efforts afterwards with the original.

Having practised upon an edited manuscript, the beginner would then probably profit most by working through a few specimens of somewhat different hands, such as those which will soon be available in *English Literary Autographs 1550-1650*, edited by Dr. W. W. Greg. After this he should be able to embark upon the text for the sake of which he has undertaken this brief preliminary labour, with the hope of producing a reasonably accurate first transcript. If he is producing a text for a printed edition, he will find that he can probably save himself the fatigue of making a final fair copy if he prepares his original transcript in a neat hand on loose leaves, writing only on one side of the paper and leaving ample space between each line for eventual corrections. Such a transcript should be page for page, and all notes on the handwriting, etc., should be made separately, also page for page.

Books on the subject of palæography abound, but the majority of them either stop short of the Elizabethan period or else devote but little attention to it. A good introduction to the study of handwriting in general is to be found in Falconer Madan's *Books in Manuscript*, and the student who is anxious to learn something of the history and origins of the letters should refer either to the last three chapters of Sir E. Maunde Thompson's *Handbook of Greek and Latin Palæography*, or else to the same authority's "History of English Handwriting" in volume v. of the *Bibliographical Society's Transactions*. For the detailed history of current writing in general till 1500 and particularly of the law hands Johnson and Jenkinson's *English Court Hand 1066-1500* is the standard work.

All literary students should be acquainted with Sir E. Maunde Thompson's work on this period: in *Shakespeare's England* (vol. i., chap. 10) he deals with "Handwriting" generally: in his *Shakespeare's Handwriting* and in "The Handwriting of the Three Pages attributed to Shakespeare" (chap. iii. of *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*) he deals with Shakespeare's hand in

particular, but also provides the learner with a great deal of miscellaneous information on Elizabethan hands in general. A student who has got beyond the more elementary stage of his palæographical education should also profit by H. Jenkinson's article on "Elizabethan Handwritings" in vol. iii. (New Series) of the Bibliographical Society's *Transactions*. The number of excellent facsimiles which accompany this last should prove very useful.

Of the various reference books available A. Wright's *Court Hand Restored* (10th edn.) is probably the most helpful for general purposes. It contains a set of very useful plates, giving good alphabets and specimens of the old law hands. For abbreviations and contractions *The Record Interpreter*, by C. T. Martin, can be consulted: while for the same purpose and for alphabets and a good range of specimens of all the letters the student can profitably use A. Chassant's *Dictionnaire des Abréviations Latines et Françaises* and his *Paléographie des Chartes et des Manuscrits du XI^e au XVII^e siècle*.