THE CAPITAL LETTERS IN ELIZABETHAN HANDWRITING

BY R. B. MCKERROW

In the excellent article on "Elizabethan Handwriting for Beginners" which Miss Byrne contributed to the issue of R.E.S. for April 1925, she very wisely confined her attention almost entirely to the small letters, or minuscules. To have dealt with the capitals would have lengthened and complicated a paper which was intended to be as simple as possible, and indeed the capitals may almost be ignored by the beginner in palæography. It will, however, not be long before he comes upon passages in reading which a familiarity with the commoner forms of these will be desirable or even necessary, and it seems therefore well to supplement Miss Byrne’s paper by a small collection of capitals taken from MSS. of the later years of the sixteenth century and the first third of the seventeenth.* The collection has of course no pretensions to completeness, for the possible variations are almost infinite, but I think that a student who is familiar with those here reproduced will seldom find much difficulty in identifying the capitals which he comes across in his work. A knowledge of the usual forms will also prevent him from mistaking the flourishes belonging to certain letters, which in some hands tend to be separated from the body of the letter, for other letters or signs.†

But although these outlines will, I hope, assist students to obtain a general idea of the appearance of the letters, a study of the MSS. themselves, or at least of collotype reproductions of them, and some practice in copying the forms found, cannot of course be dispensed

* I am indebted to my friend Dr. W. W. Greg for the loan of a collection of photographs of MSS. Many of the forms here given were taken from these and from his English Literary Autographs.

† For example, the little curl which belongs to one form of G is sometimes quite distant from the rest of the letter.
with. In the study of any form of handwriting the most important point to be understood is the method of writing the letters, the order and direction in which the strokes are made. To some extent this can be inferred from different forms met with, especially from a comparison of the formal and cursive varieties of the letters, but the order of the strokes is much better seen in an actual MS. or in a direct photograph of it than in such line-reproductions as are given here. Examination of any MS. will show that a pen-stroke which crosses another still wet will almost always take up a certain amount of ink from it, with the result that it becomes somewhat thicker and blacker immediately after the point of intersection.* Thus whenever two strokes cross one another it is generally possible to see which is the later and in which direction it was written. Careful attention to this point, and comparison of two or three examples in the same hand, will in very many cases enable one to decide exactly how the letter was formed.

The following general points may be noted:—

In some more formal, or less practised, hands the capitals imitate more or less closely the usual printed letters, either gothic ("black-letter") or roman. Such forms can offer no difficulty to the reader, and I have not as a rule thought it worth while to give examples.

Italian forms of capitals are frequently used with English minuscules. These are in general written much as present-day capitals of the so-called "copper-plate" hands. Only a few such forms are given here.

It is not uncommon to find a somewhat large letter of minuscule form used at the beginning of a word where we should expect a capital, and in transcribing a manuscript in which such forms occur it is often difficult to decide whether we should regard them as capitals or not. For example, in such a name as Philip Henslowe we may find the Christian name written with an unmistakable capital P, but the surname with an h of ordinary minuscule form though somewhat larger than usual.† In such a case it seems hardly reasonable to refuse to consider the h as a capital, especially if the writer is not found to use a capital H of the regular form. On the other hand, if we once admit that letters of minuscule form

* This thickening is not generally apparent in writing done with a modern fountain pen, the ink-flow of which is too well regulated; but practice in early hands is best done with a genuine goose-quill.
† See the fifth H in Plate I.
may be capitals, we land ourselves in the difficulty of deciding what is intended in words which might have a capital or might not, a difficulty which is accentuated in dealing with those not infrequent hands which show a tendency to begin each word with a slightly larger and more careful letter than those which follow.

When the capital letter and minuscule have clearly distinct forms it seems on the whole more convenient to regard the minuscule form, wherever occurring and however large, as a minuscule and so to transcribe it, but a few letters present special difficulties. For example, in certain hands there is no constant difference between the capital L and the minuscule, or rather, though at the extreme ends of the series of forms used there may be an indubitable capital and an indubitable minuscule, there is an unbroken series of intermediate forms. How then shall we decide whether in any particular case we should transcribe as L or l? A similar difficulty occurs with F, which is frequently represented by a form indistinguishable from the minuscule ff of the same hand. Should we write "France" or "ffrance"? My own feeling is that in such cases there is something to be said for following, so far as we can, the practice of the contemporary printer, who finding in his copy such forms at the beginning of sentences or of proper names would undoubtedly have printed them as capitals; but this rule does not, of course, cover all doubtful cases, and the practice of several very experienced palæographers is to prefer the use of the minuscule.

Lastly, certain points should be noted with regard to the drawings of letters here given. Though I have copied them as carefully as I could from the originals, they are not, and do not pretend to be, exact facsimiles. My purpose was not to reproduce the forms as they actually appear in the MSS., but as they were evidently intended to appear. To a certain extent therefore they have been "edited," that is to say, I have, where it seemed advisable for the sake of clearness, eliminated blotches and thickenings due to the letters being crossed by strokes belonging to other neighbouring letters, and I have occasionally touched up, or completed, portions of strokes where owing to defects in the paper or other causes the pen has failed to mark properly, always, I believe, having made certain that the stroke was intended and that traces of it exist. Further, it should be understood that the order in which the forms are here arranged is without significance, I have simply attempted to group
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together such as have some resemblance, without regard to their
dates or the history of their development.*

For most of the letters I have given an example, in a few cases
two examples, from John Baildon's plate of the "Secretarie Alpha-
bete" † in order to show the writing-master's ideal. No example
from Baildon is, however, given in the case of A, H, O, P, and T,
either because his forms seemed unusual or because they were
sufficiently well represented among the forms copied from actual
MSS.

I add some brief notes on the separate capitals. “Right-hand”
curves are those made in the direction in which the hands of a
clock move; “left-hand,” those in the opposite direction.

A. This letter is fairly constant in construction, but different
proportions of the parts cause the appearance to vary. It normally
begins with a left-hand sweep of which the first portion forms the
cross-bar, if there is one. The last two examples shown appear to
be influenced by the roman A and have a cross-bar added last.

B. The first example is a formal one from Baildon. Those
which follow represent common forms of this somewhat variable
letter, in which the only constant part seems to be the double bow
with which it ends. The last example but one is apparently formed
on the model of the one which precedes it, the second upstroke
being, however, incomplete. At first sight the lower part of the
double bow seems to be formed by a downward hook at the end
of the incomplete upstroke, the upper half of the bow being added
later, but this is not, I think, the case. The final example is
curious, and the order of the strokes is not easy to determine.

C. The first is from Baildon and the three which follow exemplify
the same general type, a plain left-hand curve with one or more
small auxiliary ones meeting or crossing the ends of it. The nextive are examples of a quite different type, the origin of which seems
somewhat obscure. This is generally made as a left-hand curve
amounting to three-quarters of a circle or more, the end of this
curve being brought down more or less vertically, then up to the left
and horizontally across to the right. It is always, I think, made in
one movement, though the pen is commonly lifted between the
downstroke and the horizontal one. It often appears as a complete

* The interesting question of the development and relation of the various
forms of the capitals will no doubt be fully dealt with in a work on Elizabethan
Handwriting which Mr. Hilary Jenkinson now has in preparation.
† See the reproduction in R.E.S. i. 201.
PLATE I.
 Plate II.
circle enclosing a cross, but the construction, when apparent, is as the third example of this form given, where the stroke begins with the small point to right of the downward stroke, the pen being carried round the circle before the downstroke is made. The last example but one is apparently a derivative of the printed "black-letter" C, and the last more or less Italian in character.

D. The first is from Baildon, and though itself unusual explains the formation of the second. The sixth is also Baildon's and is an elaborate form of the one resembling a Greek δ which follows—the more usual type.

E. This is essentially a C-like curve with a certain amount of elaboration in the centre ending in a horizontal point. The illustrations show various ways of forming this. The final one is properly Italian, but is common in conjunction with English minuscules.

F. The first two forms are Baildon's, and are somewhat unusual in ordinary writing, where the letter usually is similar to ff (double small f) of the same hand. When a definite capital F is used, it is generally either Italian or on the lines of a printed roman F.

G. It is in this letter that writers seem most inclined to indulge their fancy. The most usual form seems to have been a C with the addition of some sort of little curl at the upper and lower ends. In some hands the upper curl is prolonged downwards either in a left-hand sweep (as in Nos. 9-10), or straight as in No. 8. In the latter case the form may be not unlike one of the forms of O, from which, however, it may be distinguished by the downstroke being headed, whereas in O it seems always to be plain.

H. The general form of this letter seems to be fairly constant, though it may differ in the proportion of its parts. It was generally made without lifting the pen, but in Example 3, and perhaps 4, the basal part is a separate stroke. Example 5 is really a minuscule written large; and the last example seems to be derived from the printed form.

I, J. There is, of course, no separate form of J in the period with which we are dealing. The letter is commonly written in a single stroke, but occasionally the cross-bar is separate. In the last two examples the thin vertical stroke seen in the first (Baildon's) and generally only present in quite formal hands, has been preserved as a sort of tail.

K. In most hands this is an L with a 2-like curl across the
middle. It is occasionally written in one stroke by bringing the base of the L upwards to link on to the middle curl.

L. When carelessly written this letter varies much in form, but the method of writing is apparently always the same.

M. The commonest forms resemble the modern script M, but occasionally, as in Examples 3 and 4, the first limb is a separate stroke. The last two examples seem to be based on the printed form.

N. The general form is fairly constant. It is usually written without lifting the pen, but occasionally a fresh start is made for the lower portion as seen in Example 3. In careless hands the first part of the letter may be mistaken for V. The last two examples are of course not English hand, but such forms are frequent with English minuscules.

O. There are several ways of writing this letter, but the result is generally much the same. The first two examples show a single left-hand curl, the third and the last a left-hand curl met by a right-hand one. In the form resembling the Greek letter φ the circle usually appears to consist of two separate curves, as in the third example, but occasionally, as in Example 5, the curve seems to be written in a single stroke ending in a forward link. In such cases I suppose that the straight stroke would be written first.

P. Generally a downstroke, a horizontal stroke, and a right-handed bow, the horizontal stroke being omitted in more cursive forms and the bow being sometimes formed over the head of the downstroke instead of to the right of it. The last example seems to be an elaboration of the minuscule.

Q. The first and fourth are Baildon's. All forms are essentially tailed O's (compare the first and third O).

R. The typical form is a right-hand sweep ending in a vertical downstroke, often with a foot; across the middle of the upright is a 2-shaped stroke ending in a forward point similar to that in the E. The whole may be written without lifting the pen. The last two are more or less Italian.

S. The usual form is essentially the double curve of the roman S with the lower part continued round to form a sort of cover over the top. In the fourth example the letter is, I think, begun from the right hand (thinner) point, the first half of the curve, instead of being continued downwards, being brought up so that the letter is, as it were, folded on itself. The last but one is curious, and I do not know how it is written. It resembles one of the forms of E.
T. Normally a right-hand curve, or sometimes a horizontal stroke, with a left-hand curve below it. Occasionally there is a vertical stroke in addition as in the gothic printed form. The last three examples show a common form of, presumably, Italian origin, which may be very similar to an I. In the last the small sloping stroke is the head of the downstroke, which is written separately.

U, V. There is no separate U. The general form is a vertical stroke, introduced by some sort of flourish, and followed by a lefthand upward curve. The first two examples are from Baildon and represent the more usual types. The method of forming the third is not quite clear. There are also forms in which the "black-letter" V is more or less closely imitated.

W. Written as V but with an additional up-and-down stroke. There are also forms similar to M or Italian N, but with the addition of a small curl or loop.

X. I can offer no example of this letter save Baildon's, and I have had to modify the exuberant tail which he gives it. It is simply a minuscule written large. The letter of course hardly occurs save in proper names, and is then generally written in an Italian form.

Y. This also is as a rule only the minuscule written large.

Z. Again I can offer no example save Baildon's, and for the same reason as in the case of X.