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New Historicists & Historical Advocates: The Continuing Controversy of *Sir Thomas More*

By Patrick Midgley

Abstract

In 2011, The Arden Shakespeare published an edition of *Sir Thomas More* as part of its Shakespeare series for the first time. John Jowett, professor at The Shakespeare Institute and editor of the Arden edition, argued in his introduction that *More* belongs in Shakespeare's canon by virtue of the new vision the play provides of both Shakespeare-as-collaborator and of the fluid processes of collaboration, revision, and censorship which early modern playwrights faced. But the story of its 21st-century inclusion in the canon also reveals an unprecedented modern phenomenon: the creation of a "new" Shakespeare role by a modern actor.

In this paper, I will investigate both Jowett's editorial project for the Arden series and McKellen's subsequent public appearances to argue that Jowett's edition of *Sir Thomas More* and McKellen's interpretation of the play are at odds: where Jowett stresses that a complex relationship between collaborators and a censor required Shakespeare to present *More* as an advocate for authority, McKellen presents the play as an example of Shakespeare's personal belief in the importance of tolerance and humanitarianism. In so doing, I will shed light on the dangers of speaking on behalf of Shakespeare's personal character or of using his plays to speak to current events. Additionally, I will argue that our relationship with Shakespeare is becoming more apocryphal as public figures use Shakespeare's character or plays as credentialing agents for their personal or political agendas, rather than seek a clear picture of the historical forces that shaped his works.

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By Patrick Midgley

When theatre historians approach Shakespeare and his plays, they face two massive challenges, which Thomas Postlewait elucidates in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*. The first challenge is that there are very few primary sources and records to turn to, and not just *reliable* sources – few sources, period. This is true regarding both Shakespeare’s life and his professional practices. George Bernard Shaw has neatly summed up this first challenge by stating, with typically incisive aplomb, “Everything that can be known about Shakespeare can be got into a half-hour sketch” (Shaw 202). But Shaw also allows for one other small detail of Shakespeare’s life: his plays. Much of what makes studying Shakespeare from a historical perspective so maddeningly challenging (and endlessly rewarding) is the almost infinite amount of analysis, speculation, and insight written about his plays in contrast to the “half-hour sketch” that sums up Shakespeare’s historical record. An intrepid historian confronts limitless conjecture, much of it carefully and convincingly triangulated by some of the best critical minds to ever approach literature, but only a few bare-bone facts by which to judge their validity. He is sailing without a compass. Postlewait encourages historians to “turn artifacts into facts” (Postlewait 1), but in the case of Shakespeare, the artifacts far outweigh the facts – so much so that the authorship theory remains a hot, if misguided and misunderstood, topic in Shakespeare studies even today.¹ There is almost nothing about

¹ For more on the formation, history, and frequent absurdity of the authorship question, as well as a masterful final word on the topic, see James Shapiro’s *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010)

Shakespeare that can be said with certainty, but nevertheless, so very much has been said.

The second challenge to approaching Shakespeare from a historical perspective is the tremendous complexity of the historical events and forces swirling around Shakespeare and his plays. Take *Hamlet* as an example: the play was written sometime between 1599 and 1601. Shakespeare's son Hamnet died in 1596, Shakespeare's father died in 1601, and during the decade preceding the publication of *Hamlet* in 1603, The Reformation was revolutionizing not just the political but also the social and spiritual lives of every citizen in England. The Reformation was nothing short of a governmentally mandated re-ordering of the cosmos and man's place within it. When a historian asks a synchronic question about *Hamlet*, the scarcity of the facts combined with this complexity of context creates a dizzying number of potential answers; when a historian asks a diachronic question about *Hamlet*, attempting to account for the way the play has become both more completely understood (as well as obfuscated) across time, it becomes nearly impossible to even frame an answerable question. Steven Greenblatt, the founder of the New Historicism and author of *The New York Times* Bestseller *Will in the World*, writes in the preface to that book that perhaps the best way to study Shakespeare from a historical perspective is to know his plays intimately (that is, the artifact), know his world as thoroughly as possible (the facts), and use your imagination to make the most reasonable and compelling connections you can (Greenblatt 17-19). Greenblatt himself is master of this technique, which stems from his encyclopedic knowledge of the plays. But even his theories, which are elegant, beautiful, and thoroughly convincing, are still mostly impossible to prove. We simply must embrace some uncertainty.

Perhaps nowhere in the pantheon of scholarly inquiries into Shakespeare and his plays is this historiographical murkiness more apparent than in the case of the controversies surrounding *Sir Thomas More*, authored primarily by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle in 1600, with additions and revisions authored by Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, and William Shakespeare.² Several hands originally wrote *Sir Thomas More* before it was carefully edited by a censor named Edmund Tilney and liberally revised by several more hands. Already we face three events in the formation of this artifact: the initial authorship, the censor's comments, and the revisions. Next we must add in the complexity of the political, religious, and social consequences of dramatizing the life of an English Catholic martyr one hundred years after his death and during the height of The Reformation. And finally, we must consider the play's forgotten-ness: for nearly three hundred years, the play was mostly neglected by historians, theatre artists, and critics. Only in the twentieth century, after a paleographic study concluded that the play's extant manuscript contained the handwriting of William Shakespeare, did the play attract critical attention, at which point one of the most heated controversies in the history of Shakespearean scholarship emerged. The battle rages on today in the battleground of footnotes and editorial materials for competing editions of the play.

This paper focuses primarily on that controversy. Did Shakespeare contribute to *Sir Thomas More*? In answering this question, I will do three things: first, I will present a clear history of the authorship controversy which centers around Shakespeare's hand in *Sir Thomas More*. This will reveal both the historical methods by which scholars have concluded that Shakespeare likely contributed to this play, as well as the agendas those

² This reflects the latest scholarship on the topic, included in the editorial material for Shakespeare, William and Anthony Munday, John Jowett, ed. *Sir Thomas More*. Arden Shakespeare, 2011. Hereafter referred to as "Jowett."

scholars had in advocating either for or against Shakespeare's involvement. Next, I will present the efforts of the two "leading men" of the *Sir Thomas More* controversy: John Jowett, editor of the Arden edition of *More* which officially included the play in the canon in 2011, and Sir Ian McKellen, the internationally-recognized stage and screen actor whose career began with one of the first professional performances of the titular role. Both these men are advocates for the play's inclusion in the canon, but for very different and conflicting reasons. I will investigate the rhetorical strategies and audiences involved in both Jowett and McKellen's arguments, and reveal the ways both men have spoken about and for Shakespeare in the twenty-first century. Finally, I will shed light on the dangers of using the historical record of Shakespeare's life, already noted for its historiographical murkiness, to speak to current events. More than any other play, *Sir Thomas More* can help twenty-first century historians better understand the difficulties and complexities of locating Shakespeare in the historical record, as well as both the dangers and rewards of presuming to speak for the perennially elusive playwright.

THE CONTROVERSIAL *SIR THOMAS MORE*

The first scholars to attribute any part of *Sir Thomas More* to William Shakespeare were Richard Simpson in 1871 and James Spedding in 1872 (Hays 182). Simpson was the manager of the Park Theatre and an independent scholar; Spedding was widely considered the leading scholar on Sir Francis Bacon of his day and an anti-Stratfordian. Both men analyzed the surviving signatures of William Shakespeare and concluded that Shakespeare's penmanship, if not his imagination, was present in the surviving copies of the script. In 1911, W.W. Greg published an edition of the play which delineated seven hands present in the manuscript, and identified one of those hands as belonging to a censor, Edmund Tilney.

Greg more carefully outlined the authorship of the original, concluding that the original manuscript was written sometime between 1592-1595, at which point Tilney added in his notes (Jowett 5). After the publication of Greg's text, he subsequently proposed authors for the remaining hands: Anthony Munday was credited as the original author (Hand S), and then the following hands were included in the play's revisions: Hand A (Henry Chettle), Hand B (Thomas Heywood), Hand C (a playhouse scribe, likely not a creative contributor), Hand D (at the time unknown and not attributed to Shakespeare), and Hand E (Thomas Dekker). Hand C can perhaps best be thought of as a sort of literary manager who oversaw and combined the creative additions of the many playwrights involved in the play.³ It is worth mentioning that the manuscript attracted the imaginations of the playwrights only after Tilney made suggestions for revision, as if the rules and restrictions he imposed upon the play encouraged more creative activity. In that sense, the censor can almost be seen as a collaborator. Whether this can be said of other plays of the time is a topic for further study, but it certainly seems to be true for *More*. Regardless, Simpson and Spedding assumed Shakespeare's penmanship, at least, was likely present as Hand D, but came short of announcing him as a contributor.

Hand D was first attributed to Shakespeare in 1916, after the publication of *Shakespeare's Handwriting: A Study* by Sir Edmund Maunde Thompson. Thompson's book begins by explaining that prior to its publication, only five signatures had been attributed to Shakespeare on various legal documents, two of which were likely signed when Shakespeare was ill. Thompson acknowledged that the sketchiness, so to speak, of this evidence was considerable and that any conjectures made about Shakespeare's handwriting based upon those five signatures "might have been justly regarded as a presumptuous undertaking which could

³ For more background information on the individual playwrights, Tilney, and Hand C, see Jowett 8-29.

only prove barren in results and a futile waste of time” (Thompson 22). A grim assessment, indeed. However, Thompson celebrates the discovery of a sixth signature discovered in 1910 by Dr. C.W. Wallace in the Public Record Office, from which Thompson concluded that some general assumptions about Shakespeare’s handwriting could be made. With an astonishing nose for details and forceful certainty, Thompson studied each of the six signatures and noted discrepancies and similarities between each one, including, for example, Shakespeare’s tendency to “struggle with the embracing semicircle of [of an ‘S’] by forming it in two sections, with a gap between them, instead of attempting to execute it in a continuous curve” (40). Thompson’s book concludes this equally relentless and unscientific study by attributing Hand D to Shakespeare, but solely on the basis of handwriting samples. In other words, Thompson proved what Shakespeare’s handwriting looked like, but he did not take the opportunity to consider the consequences of adding this play to the canon, or to investigating how Shakespeare’s contribution to *More* could aid our understanding of Shakespeare as a dramatist.

Jowett, however, seized this opportunity. He wrote in his editorial material for the Arden edition that Shakespeare wrote both *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* around the time of his likely contribution to *More*. He notes that *Measure* deals with civic responsibility and the role of the government in providing for its citizens, while *Othello* explores, in part, the concept of being a foreigner, and that both of these concepts are present in Hand D’s additions to *More* (Jowett 18). This is an example of Greenblatt’s New Historicism at work: an intimate awareness and careful consideration of the artifacts allows for a convincing argument about the facts. Thompson’s book represents the contributions of an adventurer in the archives, whereas Jowett’s observation shows a combination of historical knowledge and thematic considerations.

As one might expect from any expression of certitude regarding the historical presence of Shakespeare, Thompson's book was controversial and prompted a swift response from the scholarly community. Alfred William Pollard was the most vocal of the skeptics, noting that the evidence of signatures alone, be they five or six, was insufficient to express either the likelihood of Shakespeare's involvement with the play, or even any generalizations about Shakespeare's handwriting with certainty (Pollard 222). However, Pollard was nevertheless committed to proving that Shakespeare was indeed the author of the passage in *More* which was attributed to Hand D. Pollard wanted desperately to win the war against anti-Stratfordians who pointed to Shakespeare's limited education⁴ and relatively low social status to argue that Shakespeare could not have been the author of his plays. While Shakespeare's handwriting may seem at first glance to provide compelling proof that Shakespeare did indeed author his plays, the anti-Stratfordians were using Thompson's work to argue that Shakespeare only copied the works of others and did not write his own work (Werstine 126). Pollard was aware of this, and of the weakness of Thompson's handwriting argument. He attempted to combine a wide assortment of evidence, none of which alone could substantively prove Shakespeare's involvement in the play, but which taken together could at least prove more convincing than the arguments of the anti-Stratfordians. Pollard used what Werstine has termed "the rhetoric of accumulation" (Werstine 130) to construct his argument for Shakespeare's creative involvement in *More*. He included paleographic (handwriting) evidence assembled by Thompson, orthographic (spelling) evidence collected from

⁴ This is an anti-Stratfordian claim and not my own. Greenblatt has convincingly demonstrated that Shakespeare's rigorous grammar school education was equivalent to a modern-day master's degree in Classics from a prestigious liberal arts institution. For the most thorough account of Shakespeare's education, see Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare* (Random House, 2009). In Section II, Bate carefully constructs the education Shakespeare was likely to have received, and even uses Shakespeare's plays to re-construct a trunk of books Shakespeare was likely to have read. The imagined trunk is quite heavy, indeed.

the work of J. Dover Wilson, and finally and most interestingly, a broader and more inclusive stylistic view of the passage. That method may indeed be considered the origin of the New Historicism in Shakespeare studies. It is too complex to outline entirely in this paper, but Pollard's argument involved referring to passages in *Troilus & Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Richard II*, and *Lear*, as well as Shakespeare's use of crowds and of the metaphor of a mob as a cannibal which eats itself. New Historicists would vigorously nod with approval at Pollard's diligent and deep readings of Shakespeare's plays to present a compelling and logical, if ultimately unprovable, case for Shakespeare's involvement. This technique helped Pollard find psychological and literary consistencies, along with paleographic and orthographic consistencies, which when combined together created a compelling argument for Shakespeare as Hand D.

However, as Werstine notes in his article on Pollard, each of the arguments (paleographic, orthographic, and literary) are individually insufficient and endlessly loop back upon the other: "as each kind of argument is abandoned, the advocates gesture toward the other disciplines for the conclusiveness that the now-abandoned field cannot provide. So the demonstration comes to rest nowhere, and can be maintained only in so far as it can play among the disciplines" (Werstine 137-8). Werstine additionally notes that in more modern edits of Shakespeare's plays, several scholars have cited Hand D in *More* in order to argue for how Shakespeare wrote, when as we have seen here, Hand D has never conclusively been proven to be either a product of Shakespeare's imagination, which it very likely is, or of his hand, which it likely is (Werstine 140-1). The signs all point to Shakespeare's authorship, but it seems impossible to say for sure.

This ambiguous and inconclusive summary remained mostly accepted until Jowett published his edition of *Sir Thomas More* through

the Arden Shakespeare Series in 2011, which officially included the play within Shakespeare's canon for the first time. As we will see, no new evidence was collected to spark this publication, and no new event occurred to inspire it. Jowett's edition admittedly rests on anecdote and sentiment, both convincing, but just as with Pollard's argument, Jowett's edition ultimately rests on faith and recognition of something "Shakespearean" present in Hand D's writing.

JOHN JOWETT, ED.

John Jowett is a professor of Shakespeare Studies at the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham. The Arden Shakespeare Series selected him to prepare their first edition of *Sir Thomas More* in 2011. Jowett's edition makes several new observations about the authorship of the play and about its Shakespearean "feel," although he stops short of using such an unscientific term. He begins by acknowledging the artifact's fundamental brokenness. In other words, he acknowledges that the play as a whole is almost impossible to construct, given the number of variances between Munday's original copy, Tilney's comments and suggestions, and the third version of the play, which includes Hands A, B, C, D, and E. He compares the play to Sir Thomas More himself: both the man and the play "stand at a threshold" (Jowett 14), and while More frustrated attempts of Protestant authorities to represent a new and upright virtue in English politics, *Sir Thomas More* frustrates our modern tendency to view Shakespeare as a solitary genius, writing in isolation and removed from the theatre of his time (Jowett 7-8). In other words, Jowett's editorial project humanized Shakespeare and revealed the complexity of theatrical practice in the same way Shakespeare's play humanized and complicated the life of Sir Thomas More. Both men, Jowett and Shakespeare, are in the business of bringing a historical figure back to

life and in the reconstruction of historical events. Jowett is attempting to show us a playwright who is neither canonized saint nor postmodern construction; Shakespeare is showing us a man who is neither saint nor villain.

Jowett devotes considerable time to an analysis of the selection attributed to Hand D, and includes audience response to the play as a whole in his own rhetoric of accumulation. In describing how Hand D's section of the play works onstage, he writes that: "Compared with the rest of the play, the passage is exceptionally dynamic, poetically resonant, and vividly etched. Even audience members who are unaware of the authorship issue find that the play speaks with more urgency here" (Jowett 21). Jowett goes on to admit, in a footnote, that this claim is entirely anecdotal and that the unaware audience members were students attending the RSC's production of the play in 2005-6. Jowett does not specify what their comments were, or if and how the students were prepared before seeing the production. This observation of the section's literary qualities does not add to the question of whether the section was written by Shakespeare or not; in fact, the only claim they seem to be making is that this particular section is good, at least in production, and that therefore it must be written by Shakespeare.

This, of course, is not the entire thrust of Jowett's argument, although it does constitute a substantial part of it. Jowett's real task is to complicate the contemporary vision of Shakespeare as a solitary genius, and to help us see that the process of writing a play in Shakespeare's time was even messier than originally thought. He carefully and thoroughly outlines the scholastic controversies surrounding the play (previously discussed). But most interestingly, and most importantly to my discussion here, are Jowett's comments on Hand D's (Shakespeare's) handling of the themes of populism, privilege, and prejudice in the varying versions of the

play. It seems that Hand D, in a typical move of Shakespeare's, transformed "the strangers" in the play from a one-dimensional and bestial mob to victims of England's intolerance and predatory laws. Jowett is cautious of over-generalizing from this trend, however:

The fracture line between different authorial viewpoints is visible here, yet is not to be over-emphasized. That Shakespeare wrote eloquently and convincingly about tolerance because he believed in it is likely enough, but not entirely the point. It is More who advocates tolerance, and this is wholly consistent with the demands of the plot, his characterization as a humanist and the pragmatics of the situation he is dealing with. (Jowett 47)

His distinction here is critical. He is cautioning against assigning virtues of a dramatic character to the author of the artifact, which would actually detract from appreciating him as a playwright by confining him to a particular moral or ethical point-of-view. Shakespeare wrote good stories and complex, believable characters. Rarely, if ever, do scholars assume that because Shakespeare wrote *Richard III*, he was a power-hungry, lustful, calculatingly malevolent psychopath with no regard for morality, religion, or law. But in this case, Jowett is acknowledging and advising against the tendency to assume that because a character espouses a virtue like tolerance, Shakespeare himself must have felt the same way. It's a forgivable and understandable impulse: who doesn't want to catch a glimpse of Shakespeare from within his plays, whether it's through More before the mob, Prospero delivering his final epilogue, or Falstaff in an Eastcheap tavern? But these are personal and anecdotal observations which cannot count as evidence in the construction of an historical argument.

That Shakespeare contributed to and improved the play is likely, given the rhetoric of accumulation summarized by Jowett, but it cannot be

stated with certainty. That Shakespeare felt the same way as Sir Thomas is irrelevant to the discussion of both the artifact and of the limited facts the historical record provides about Shakespeare. It represents a contemporary tendency to see what we want to see in Shakespeare, given his distance from us, our limited knowledge of his life, and the deserved reputation of Shakespeare as the world's greatest literary genius and playwright. He is a powerful ally in the construction of arguments, and as such, his reputation is likely to be appropriated for any number of political or social causes about which his point-of-view is entirely conjectural. Historians have an obligation to carefully delineate what is factual about Shakespeare from what is not.

SIR IAN AND/AS SIR THOMAS

Sir Ian McKellen's acting career is inextricably linked to the performance history of *Sir Thomas More*, having originated the role of Sir Thomas in the 1964 Nottingham Playhouse production directed by Frank Dunlop. This production is still believed to be the first professional staging of the play. The titular role propelled McKellen to fame in London, and as McKellen's career developed, he incorporated anecdotes and memories surrounding this production, mostly sentimental, into his one-man shows *Acting Shakespeare* and *A Knight Out*. But in the years following the 2011 Arden publication, McKellen has re-positioned the play as a piece of political theatre far ahead of its time which preaches equality, tolerance, and acceptance. In recent years, he has included his views on the play in publicity work and in speeches to human rights and political interest groups, both in England and abroad.

McKellen describes the 1964 production of *Sir Thomas More* on his website: "1964 was Shakespeare's quattrocentenary and Nottingham Playhouse's contribution was to un-earth this play containing a scene

indisputably by Shakespeare. The hand-written manuscript survives in the British Museum” (Ian McKellen official website). McKellen’s statement here includes a number of factual errors: Nottingham Playhouse did not un-earth the play, nor is the scene indisputably by Shakespeare, as this paper has shown. But after this production closed, McKellen’s career skyrocketed. From September of 1964 to February of 1968, McKellen acted in twelve professional productions in London, as well as made his Broadway debut in 1967 in *The Promise*. The origins of McKellen’s career are closely connected to his twentieth-century creation of a new Shakespeare role: that of the Catholic martyr. McKellen has acknowledged in public appearances that he is the last living actor to be able to say that he originated a role in a play by William Shakespeare.⁵

In his 2015 appearance before The Cambridge Union, McKellen contextualizes Hand D’s speech in *Sir Thomas More*. The Cambridge Union is the oldest debating society in the world, promotes free speech across the globe, and has hosted speakers such as Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, and the current Dalai Lama.⁶ In a surprising but careful re-contextualization, McKellen first credentials himself alongside Shakespeare with his claim to be the last person on earth to have originated a Shakespearean role. This, combined with his social cache as a movie star constitutes his own rhetoric of accumulation. Next, he compares the strangers in the speech to what he calls the strangers of the twenty-first century, including immigrants and “queers.”⁷ This statement is both poetically true – Hand D’s speech is inclusive and does indeed preach tolerance, sympathy, and compassion in a general sense – and it is also in

5. McKellen makes this statement in his speech to The Cambridge Union in an event sponsored by Deloitte in August of 2015. The content of this speech may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffCl8jPTgmQ>. The statement regarding originating the role occurs at 0:25. The occasion for the speech was in celebration of “200 Years of Free Speech.”

⁶ <https://www.cus.org/>

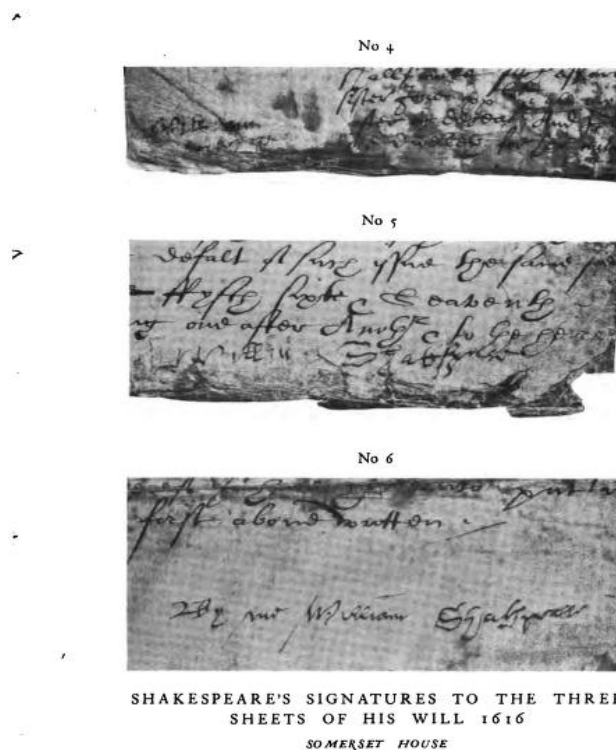
⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffCl8jPTgmQ>

line with McKellen's well-known stance as a social activist and advocate. His argument is compelling and convincing, and his performance of Hand D's speech is beautiful. But his remarks are not factually true from an historical perspective.

CONCLUSION: NEW HISTORICISM VERSUS ADVOCACY

In Shakespeare studies, it is tempting to combine poetic truth with a rhetoric of accumulation in order to use Shakespeare, a powerful credentialing agent, to make a point about contemporary society. This is different from what the New Historicists do when they study both events and contexts in order to make arguments about what likely occurred in the past while allowing for some degree of ambiguity. What Sir Ian did with his statements about *More* is to have made positivist statements about figures of the past as they relate to the present today: to use a figure of speech for this case, it is to have put words in Shakespeare's mouth. He is positioning Shakespeare as an advocate for social change in contemporary society. I am not arguing here that, for instance, Sir Ian is "just an actor" and should limit his discourse to matters relating to how to play characters. Quite the contrary: I share Sir Ian's activist commitments and admire his use of celebrity to create social change. Similarly, I am not objecting to allowing Shakespeare's plays to speak to our current situations. Shakespeare will always have something say to us about our governments, our relationships, our dreams, and our souls. But he was writing about *his* society, and while his literary genius is by no means confined to an era, he can be most clearly understood when, as the New Historicists insist, we rely on both an intimate knowledge of his plays and an equally deep understanding of his context. So as an historian, I am forced to object to McKellen's use of Shakespeare's celebrity to speak to contemporary issues. In today's culture of practice-as-research and the

valuation of conviction above accuracy, historians face a daunting task. They must be committed to the facts as well as the artifacts, and never allow sentimentality, emotion, feelings about the present, or worst of all, vague generalizations about either artifacts or historical facts to affect the way we speak or write about the past. They must toe the line between acceptable ambiguity about the past and certainty about the present, remain committed to the facts, and never stop learning about the artifacts. In the case of *Sir Thomas More*, it seems that this battle is crawling out from the footnotes into the forefront of the social issues contemporary society faces. This battle is far from over, and historians will play a leading role in shaping its discourse.



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1 - Three of Shakespeare's Signatures (Source: Thompson, *Shakespeare's Handwriting: A Study* [1916])



2 - Sir Ian (Top) and/as Sir Thomas (Bottom) (Source: IanMcKellen.com)

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