Robert Sidney and the Italic Hand

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On 13 September 1599 Rowland Whyte, Robert Sidney’s agent at court, wrote to his master, who was Queen Elizabeth’s governor in Flushing, reporting that “the Queen read all your letter you writ to my Lady Warwick, only stayed at 3 words which my Lady was fain to help her in.”¹ Not everyone, however, had a monarch’s skill and confidence at reading Sidney’s hand.² Five years earlier Whyte, that unacknowledged epistolary dramatist, had recreated a more vivid scene involving a less successful attempt to read a letter from his master:

I will begin with Mr. Roger Manners: when I delivered him your Lordship’s letter, he broke it up and went to his window and from one corner to the other for more light. At last he called me unto him and said that he would not take 100l. to read this letter. I was fain to read it for him.³

Lord Burghley complained about Sidney’s handwriting more than once; in September 1596 Whyte wrote:

¹ Centre for Kentish Studies (CKS), Maidstone, MS U1475 C12/159. Quotations from the correspondence are from a transcription for a projected edition of Rowland Whyte’s letters by Margaret Hanney, Michael Brennan, and Noel Kinnamon. We are grateful to Philip, Viscount De L’Isle, for permission to quote from the Sidney family papers on deposit in the Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone, and Gavin Alexander, Roger Kuin and Rivkah Zim for much useful information that helped us prepare this article, and to the staff of the Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone. We take full responsibility for the final conclusions.
² Whyte to Sidney, 22 September 1596, CKS MS U1475 C12/31.
³ Whyte to Sidney, 29 November 1595, CKS MS U1475 C12/31.
My Lord Treasurer says that you have no reason to put him to such pains as you do to read your ciphers; he knows you can write a better hand, and desires you to use it unto him or to let some other write them for you. Mr. Hix⁴ tells me that he was angry because he could not read it, and cast it off from him. Your Lordship may do very well to have a care to please him if you mean to have your letters read.…⁵

Sidney once tried to mollify Burghley by having someone else do the writing, as he explains in the autograph postscript to a letter of 1595, “For your Lordship’s ease to read, I have used my servant’s hand and not to spare mine own labour. I beseech you to like of it.”⁶

Robert’s elder brother Philip had already called his attention to the need for better penmanship: “I would by the way your Worship would learn a better hand. You write worse than I, and I write evil enough.”⁷ Philip was being tactful; the extant examples show that throughout his life he wrote an easy italic cursive hand. But the illegibility of Robert’s handwriting is legendary among modern Sidney scholars,⁸ a problem well exemplified in his letter to Sir Henry Howard, 2 January 1596/7, now in Lambeth Palace Library⁹ (Figure 1, p. 91 below). An Elizabethan reader would have been expecting a letter written in the Tudor secretary hand, or perhaps the more formal italic.

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⁴ Michael Hickes, Burghley’s secretary.
⁵ Whyte to Sidney, [18 or 20 September 1596?], inner bifolium of CKS MS U1475 C12/67. The outer bifolium is a dated letter of 4 March 1596/7, but as the contents demonstrate, the two letters are conflated in Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the Manuscripts of Lord De L’Isle & Dudley Preserved at Penshurst Place, 6 vols. (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1925-66), 2:243-5 (hereafter, HMC).
⁶ Robert Sidney to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, 6 December 1595, The National Archives (TNA), SP 84/51/268, f.268v. His apology also illustrates the long-standing English social expectation that a letter in one’s own hand is more courteous than one in a servant’s (or, in more recent years, typewritten).
⁷ Philip Sidney to Robert Sidney, 18 October 1580, CKS MS U1475, C7/8.
⁹ Robert Sidney to Sir Henry Howard, 2 January 1596/7. Lambeth Palace Library MS 655, ff. 11-12.
Sidney's hand shows little if any influence of Tudor secretary, and it certainly does not seem to be italic in character—or is it? 10

There are many examples of Robert Sidney's handwriting to frustrate us. Still extant are more than 1000 autograph letters, in repositories ranging from the family papers deposited in the Centre for Kentish Studies, to the British Library, the National Archives at Kew, Lambeth Palace, and elsewhere. In addition there are his four commonplace books in the CKS, his autograph book of poems (BL Add. 58435), and the annotations in some of the books he owned. All feature that rapid, sprawling cursive, easy to recognize but just as challenging to read today as it was for Roger Manners in 1594. The postscript cited above shows that Sidney occasionally had others write for him, an amanuensis or a scribe; in fact, there are several apparently scribal letters from him in Britain's National Archive. Others are in the same hand as that of the letter to Burghley (SP 84/51/268). Several Sidney letters among the Anthony Bacon papers in Lambeth Palace Library are in a very readable italic cursive hand, but they appear to be copies. 11

How did Robert Sidney learn to write? Apparently he was not sent to Shrewsbury School like his brother Philip, but began his education nearer to home, perhaps in a petty school or with the younger Sidney children. 12 The accounts of Robert Mantle or Mantell "for Mistress Mary and Mr. Robert, Christmas to Michaelmas, 1573" note, in addition to payments for various articles of clothing, the purchase for 1s. 4d. of "A paper book to writ in Latyn at the Skole," and there is a payment recorded for the year ending Michaelmas, 1574, to Mr. Thornton, a "skolemastre." 13 It is not evident what hand Sidney was taught, but as Herbert Schultz shows, writing masters (whether independent or sometimes in the schools) were equipped to teach their pupils several different hands. 14 Martin Billingsley's The Pen's

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10 For a recent overview of problems in discussing handwriting, from the differing vantage points of the forensic expert and the palaeographer, see Tom Davis, "The Practice of Handwriting Identification," The Library, ser. 7, 8 (2007): 251-76.
11 See for example Lambeth Palace Library MS 652, f. 143 (to Burghley) and f. 168 (letters to J. Segrave).
13 HMC 1: 257, 267. Mr. Thornton is not likely the same man as the Thomas Thornton who tutored Philip Sidney at Oxford, for whom see Malcolm Wallace, The Life of Sir Philip Sidney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), passim.
Excellencie (1618), for example, offers models of Secretary, Bastard Secretary or Text, Roman, Italian, Court, and Chancery. Sidney went up to Oxford in June, 1575, and already on 20 July 1575 Robert Dorsett’s account for his expenses at Oxford records, “To Sr. Dowe, for teaching him to write, 5s.” This was Robert Dow, of whom Henry Woudhuysen has given the fullest account. Dow was a civil lawyer, a fellow of All Souls, and the copyist of an important collection of the music of William Byrd. He wrote an excellent italic as well as the usual secretary hand. The scrawl Robert Sidney customarily wrote in later life seems, however, a highly individual, indeed near-modern script, in many features a precursor of the personal hands which later in the seventeenth century would begin to overtake the traditional set hands of the scribes and writing-masters, and whose many variations we write today.

There exist, however, at least two documents showing that at age 17 Robert Sidney could certainly write a better hand than he did in later life. On 12 December 1580 Sidney wrote to Joachim Camerarius the younger (1534-98), friend of both Sidney brothers. His letter is in the Huntington Library (HM 20028), and is written in a clear, if slightly laboured, italic cursive hand (Figure 2, p. 92 below); it has been sealed and addressed, and is thus the original that he sent, and not the rough copy he would probably have retained. Is this letter another case of Sidney employing a servant’s hand? We think it unlikely, for just over a month earlier Sidney had written to his father, Sir Henry, using the same hand (CKS U1475 C7/9, dated 1 November 1580). As we will see, the palaeographic evidence supports the identification in both cases. But it also casts some light on the nature of Robert’s hand, suggesting ways of deciphering it that partly unlock its secrets for a modern scholar, though it seems they did not do so for the hapless Elizabethan reader.

As many studies have demonstrated, the italic hand of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (both its “set” and cursive forms) had evolved from the revolution in handwriting brought

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15 Martin Billingsley, The Pen’s Excellencie, or the Secretarie’s Delight (London, 1618, STC 3062.2), C2’.
16 HMC 1: 269.
18 Camerarius seems to have kept in touch with Robert Sidney, as two letters among the family papers show; see J. Camerarius to Robert Sidney, 28 March [1582], and May 23 [1582], HMC 2: 99-100.
about by the development of humanistic script in the fifteenth century. England was slow to take up italic, Sir Hilary Jenkinson writes:

It was in fact for a considerable time the special property of the learned or traveled. Probably by about 1550, but not much before, it had progressed so far that the well-educated—men of University standing, for example—and the professional writers could learn it (even learn several varieties of it) as well as the Secretary Hand ... but for another century it remained, even for scholars, the writing of ceremony; writing at their ease, the majority would choose a Secretary Hand, perhaps signing in the Italic.  

A letter to the “Clarissimo et Doctissimo viro” Joachim Camerarius would require just such ceremony, as would a dutiful letter to one’s father. The same sense of occasion is reflected in the fact that in several books he bought during the 1580s and 90s, Sidney, mindful perhaps of the serious responsibilities of book ownership, used the italic hand to inscribe various versions of his motto, “Inveniam viam aut faciam.”

The palaeographical evidence linking the two letters is considerable. Among the letter-forms that are identical are the footed t and p, the almost calligraphic g, the letters b, and f, and particularly the capitals A, I, M, N and R. The only important variation in letter-forms is the frequent use of Greek e in the letter to Sir Henry; in the letter to Camerarius, a much more self-conscious exercise in writing, for some reason it appears only twice. Most important however is what palaeographers call the ductus—not just the slant of the script, but the energy with which it leads the eye; both letters share the same ductus, with its regularity and strong rightward direction. Philip Sidney also corresponded with Joachim Camerarius and his brother Philippus;

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his well-known letter, likewise sealed and sent, is also in the Huntington (HM 20027). Like Robert’s, it is in an italic hand, but one much freer and more casual, with more rounded forms and a slightly more upright ducus. Some of the letter-forms are the same as Robert’s, particularly the capitals, but that calligraphic g was not part of Philip’s repertoire.

Furthermore, the italic letter-forms of his youth remained part of Robert’s repertoire, as we can see even in the 1596 letter to Sir Henry Howard mentioned earlier. Certain letter forms—p, initial t, capital I—persist, and the ducus is the same. Most interesting is that the graphic energy of the calligraphic g—now only alluded to in Sidney’s capital G—is replicated in the descenders of his vigorous, right-leaning g and y. This is not the rounded, slightly upright italic cursive of his brother, nor the angular, compressed, and vertical italic of Sidney’s son Robert, the second Earl of Leicester (1595-1677). Nor is it the regular, clear cursive with its occasional abbreviations of Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, who shared Robert Sidney’s early education, nor the hand of his daughter, Lady Mary Wroth which resembles her aunt’s in some details but is the most graceful of the family hands. Rather, Robert Sidney’s later scrawl seems to involve a metamorphosis from the control exerted by the humanistic italic cursive he may have been taught by Dow, towards a personal cursive haunted by similar characteristics, but buoyant, speedy, and careless. To read his hand effectively today, we therefore need to be alert to the presence of decayed italic features beneath its near-modern individuality. Philip Sidney’s late hand was moving in the same direction, as was that of the Earl of Essex, who interestingly, Whyte tells Robert, was alone among “all to whom you have lately writ” in not desiring that Sidney use a different hand. Robert Sidney’s hand is an extreme case of such drift, and one whose idiosyncrasies are worth unlocking because of the historical trove represented by the large number of extant examples of his writing. But those examples also suggest some intriguing new possibilities.

22 See for instance the Countess’s hand (which suggests she used a thicker-cut quill) in a letter to Cecil, 3 August 1603 (Hatfield House, Cecil Papers 94/106), and the examples of Lady Mary Wroth’s hand illustrated in Josephine Roberts’ edition of The Second Part of the Countess of Montgomery’s Urania (Renaissance English Text Society, 1999).
23 Rowland Whyte to Robert Sidney, 22 September 1596, CKS MS U1475 C12/51.
First, the prevailing italic features in Sidney's hand, however decayed, would suggest that the italic was his hand of choice, whatever the circumstances. Yet another document, however, suggests that he had an even wider graphic repertoire. There exists an early letter (12 September, c. 1575) from Robert Sidney to “Mr. [Robert] Walker” (CKS MS U1475 A57); see Figure 3, p. 93 below). Despite the annotation in the HMC transcription of this letter we believe that the entire document is in the same hand. The slight differences in the signature noted in the HMC Report probably result from haste, and its discoloration and folding patterns, with the address written in the expected panel, verso, and the remnants of a seal indicate that it was sent to Walker and was thus not a copy retained for record-keeping. The letter is undoubtedly holograph, and is in a small, slightly cramped, but perfectly readable Tudor secretary hand, with a noticeable rightward dextrus. It was written by the youthful Sidney in Oxford to a family servant at Penshurst requesting curtains and a carpet (among other things) for his digs. As the Sidney family papers of the period abundantly demonstrate, Tudor secretary was the customary hand of the household's servants; it was what they would have expected in a letter from one of their masters.

If Sidney could write an italic hand in 1580, why did he not do so when he was writing to Burghley fifteen years later, when he might be expected to feel the cultural pressure exerted on men of his status to write the legible formal hand afforded by italic models? If he could write an adequate Tudor secretary in 1575, why are there not more examples of it among his copious correspondence? The answer is likely to be found in the chronology of a crowded administrative and familial life, one full of hastily-written letters and memoranda. The italic “set” hand was slow, as ceremony required. But italic cursive was not, and it was often adopted because it could be written faster than Tudor secretary with its special letter-forms and abbreviations. Even in his brother Philip’s later cursive, signs of looseness and flow appear.

In maturity Robert Sidney chose the italic as his preferred hand, as a person of his station might be expected to do, but in its cursive version, and what he wrote simply carried the process of deliquescence to an extreme, leaving later readers, like Lord Burghley, to struggle with the results. Whatever the case, the existence of these two italic letters as well as the early motto inscriptions in his books compels us to ask whether Robert Sidney

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24 HMC 2: 99.
continued in some circumstances to attempt the italic hand. Does there perhaps exist unattributed manuscript material from this period, either in the same careful italic as the letter to Camerarius or the looser hand of the letter to Sir Henry, for which he was responsible? Furthermore, if we are right about the letter to Robert Walker, does there also exist material by Robert Sidney in the Tudor secretary hand that is yet unidentified?
1) Robert Sidney to Sir Henry Howard, 2 January 1596/7. London: Lambeth Palace Library MS 655, f.1r. By permission of Lambeth Palace Library.
2) Robert Sidney to Joachim Camerarius, 12 December 1580. San Marino: Huntington Library MS HM 20028. This item is reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
3) Robert Sidney to Robert Walker, 12 September c. 1575. De
L’Isle Papers, Centre for Kentish Studies CKS MS U1475 A57.
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