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## Was *A Yorkshire Tragedy* written before the so-called "source" on which it is said to be based?

*A Yorkshire Tragedy* was entered in the Stationers' Register on May 2, 1608. The play is said to be based on a pamphlet entered three years earlier, on June 12, 1605, under the title *Two most unnaturall and bloodie Murthers: The one by Maister Caverley, A Yorkeshire Gentleman, practised upon his wife, and committed upon his two Children, the three and twentie of Aprill 1605: The other, by Mistris Browne, and her servant Peter, upon her husband, who were executed in Lent last past at Bury in Suffolke*. The fact that the play was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1608 is, of course, no evidence that it was written in that year and, in fact, Cawley and Gaines, in a recent study, conclude that internal and external evidence point to a date of composition no later than August, 1605, only three months after the entry of the pamphlet in the Stationers' Register (1-2). This article will examine the proposition that the play was in fact written *before* the pamphlet, and that the pamphlet is based on the play, rather than the reverse.

The first argument in favour of this proposition is grounded in common sense. The account in the pamphlet is sententious, melodramatic, and uninspiring, yet the play has been called one of the "few truly great domestic tragedies of its age" (16). It is inconceivable that the playwright could have created this moving drama by slavishly following the pamphlet, as he is alleged to have done; however, the quality of the pamphlet is such that it is perfectly credible that it could have been written by paraphras-

ing the play.

The second argument in favour of the proposition is the fact that the author of the pamphlet could have had no personal knowledge of much of what he retails as fact. The pamphleteer purports to recount word for word private quarrels between the Husband and Wife, as well as the Husband's thoughts. Two examples will suffice:

his wife was come from London, and the first greeting was given her by her husband, was, what? hast thou brought the money? Is the land sold? She answered, Sir I hope I have made a journey shall redound both to your comfort and mine: so acquainting him with the precedencie, which was his promised preferment by her kinsman, and expecting a loving acceptance, the first thanks he gave her was a spurn. And looking upon her as if his eies would have shot fire into her face: have you bin at London to make your complaint of me? you damnable strumpet, quoth hee, that the greatnesse of your friends might over-sway the weakness of my estate? and I that have lived in that ranke of will which I have doone, that freedom of pleasure should forsake it now, shal I being a Caverley of Caverley stoope my thoughts so low to attend on the countenance of your aliance, to order my life by their direction, and neither doe nor undoe any thing but what they list, which if I refuse to doe, your complaints have so wrought with them, and you have so possessed them of my estate, they will inforce mee forsoothe for your good, and the good of my children: was this your trick to save your dowrie the which I sware you should sell? Was this your going to London? (102-3)

Maister Caverley retires himselfe into a gallery, where being alone, he presently fell into a deepe consideration of his state, how his prodigall course of life, had wronged his brother, abused his wife, and undone his children. Then was presented before the eyes of his imagination, the wealth his father left him, and the misery hee should leave his children in: Then hee saw what an unnaturall part it was, his brother to lie in

prison for his debt, and he not able to deliver him: Then he saw that his wife being nobly descended, unlesse her owne friends tooke pittie ypon her, should with his children be driven to beg remorse of the world, which is composed all of flint: Then sawe hee the extirpation of his family, the ruine of his antient house, which hundreds of yeeres together had bin Gentlemen of the best reputation in Yorkshire, and every one of these out of their severall objects, did create a severall distraction in him: sometimes he would teare his haire, by and by the tears would flush into his eyes, strait breake out into this exclamation: O, I am the most wretched man that ever mother received the seede of, O would I had beene slaine in my wombe, and that my mother hadde been my sepulchre: I have begot my children to eate their bread in bitterness, made a wife to be nothing but lamentation, and a brother to die in care (105-6).

Since the pamphleteer could have had direct knowledge neither of the private quarrels between the Husband and Wife nor of the Husband's thoughts, the greatest part of the pamphlet is either pure fiction, or is copied from the play. The latter explanation seems the more reasonable of the two.

A third argument in favour of the proposition that the pamphlet is copied from the play is the fact that the pamphlet reveals that its author had little accurate information about the Calverleys. In the first place, Walter Calverley was not, as the pamphlet says "Warde to a most noble and worthy gentleman in this land" (96). As a letter from Lady Cobham to Robert Cecil indicates, Walter Calverley was, primarily, the ward of Lady Gargrave:

Good Sir. May it please you to understand that there is a marriage intended betwene my daughter Phillipe and Mr Coverley of Coverley and for that I am loath to deale in so waightie a cause without my Lord Cobhams advise and yours therein I have thought good to sende Mr. Lyly unto you who can particularley declare all his whole estate unto you. Likewise I have sent an other Gentleman unto my Lord Cobham to desire his Lordship to impart it unto you. Now I beseeche you good Sir (whom hath bene allways a father to my children) That you will in this so deale with Mr Lyly that if you shall finde it fitt it may be brought to passe (which gentleman is kynne to Mr. Lyls wyfe who is the firste welwisher of this matche towards my daughter). I understande by Mr. Lyly that he [Calverley] is in wardshippe till Aprill next to the Ladie Gargrave of yorke Shiere who hath tendered unto him her daughter and his [is?] wylinge to give xv Cll [£1500] in marriage with her. But it hath pleased God that he hath taken some likinge of my daughter that he is content to take her with a lesser portion. Thus

Referringe this cause to my Lord Cobham and your wise consideration I humbly take my leave beseeching god to increase you with much Honor. From Durham house this xxxth of May 99 (8-9).

This letter from Anne Brooke, Lady Cobham, makes it clear that Lady Gargrave hoped to marry her ward Walter Calverley to her daughter, but that Walter himself, because of his affection for her, preferred to marry Lady Cobham's daughter, Philippa Brooke, even with a lesser dowry. That he married Philippa some time within the next year is attested to by a further letter from Lady Cobham to Robert Cecil of April 20th, 1600:

Right honorable: pardon I humbly pray you this my presumption and peruse with your honorable pleasure this inclosed peticon preferred in the behalfe of one Mr. Calverley (an unstayed younge man) her Maiesties warde who hath married my daughter. And accordinge to the said peticon give me leave humbly to desire your honors favor and furtheraunce therein. And so with all humble dutie I leave further to trouble your honor (9).

The author of *Two Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers* seems, however, to be completely unaware of these facts, and further compounds the confusion by stating that Walter Calverley's wife was the niece of his (Walter's) former guardian:

but Time, mother of alterations, had not fanned over many daies, but hee [Walter] had made a new bargaine, knit a new marriage knot, and was husband by all matrimoniall rites, to a curteous Gentlewoman, and neere by marriage to that honourable Personage to whom he was Ward (97).

Mistresse Calverley going forward with this intent to sell away her dowrie, was sent for up to London by that honorable friend whose neece she was, and whose ward he [Walter] had beene (100).

These remarks are clearly inconsistent with historical fact. Walter Calverley had rejected the opportunity to marry his guardian Lady Gargrave's daughter, and the woman he did marry, Philippa Brooke, was not Lady Gargrave's niece. The author of the pamphlet appears to have picked up this erroneous impression of the relationship between Philippa Calverley and her husband's former guardian from Scene iii of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, in which the Wife refers to the relative she has visited in London as "my uncle" (70).

The author of the pamphlet further muddles matters by stating that Walter Calverley had made a marriage contract with another young woman before his marriage to Philippa Brooke. This other young woman is not named, but is said to be the daughter of a country gentleman:

Among which number it happened, [Walter Calverley] being once invited for such a purpose, (a welcome guest) to an antient Gentleman of cheefe note in his Country, (hee came) where in short time was such an interchangeable affection, shot in by two paire of eies, to one paire of heartes, that this Gentlemans best beloved daughter, was by private assurance made Maister *Caverleys* best beloved wife; nor could it bee kept so close betweene the paire of lovers, (for love will discover it selfe in loving looks.) But it came to the fathers knowledge, who with a natural joy, was contented with the contract; yet in regard Maister *Caverleys* yeeres could not discharge the charge his honourable gardian had over him: the father thought it meete, (though the lovers could have wished it otherwaies,) to lengthen their desired haste, till time should finish a fit howre to solemnize their happy wedlocke. Maister *Caverley* having spent some time there in decent recreation, much abroad, and more at home with his new Mistresse; at last he bethought himselfe, that his long stay made him long looked for at London: And having published his intended departure, the father thought it convenient, though the vertuous Gentlewoman danced a Loth to depart upon his contracted lips. Maister *Caverley* came to London, and whether concealing his late contract from his honourable gardian, or forgetting his private and publicke vowes, or both I know not, but Time, mother of alterations, had not fanned over many daies, but hee had made a new bargaine, knit a new marriage knot, and was husband by all matrimoniall rites, to a curteous Gentlewoman, and neere by marriage to that honourable Personage to whom he was Ward (96-7).

If this tale be true, Walter Calverley was an inconstant lover indeed. When the facts in Lady Cobham's letter are combined with the account in the pamphlet, it appears that Walter was first promised to Lady Gargrave's daughter, subsequently made a marriage contract with the daughter of a country gentleman ("concealing [it] from his honourable guardian"), and then rejected this latter young lady to marry Philippa Brooke (incorrectly stated in the pamphlet to have been his guardian's niece).

The author of the pamphlet is also quite mistaken about Walter's attitude toward Philippa. If Lady Cobham's letter to Robert Cecil can be credited, Walter loved Philippa sufficiently to take her to wife

with a lesser dowry than he would have received from Lady Gargrave's daughter yet, in the pamphlet, Walter is made to say that Philippa is someone "whom thogh I married I never loved" (99). Again, this detail merely repeats the sentiments expressed by the Husband in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* ("Whom, though for fashion sake I married/ I never could abide!") (61), and shows a complete lack of knowledge of the early relationship between Walter Calverley and his bride.

The author of the pamphlet is similarly unaware that Philippa's dowry of £1000 was in money, not lands, and that Philippa Brooke did not possess lands which could be sold to meet her husband's financial needs. Several lines in the pamphlet illustrate the author's misconception in this regard:

Mistresse Calverley going forward with this intent to sell away her dowry (100).

hast thou brought the money? Is the land sold? (102).

The true state of affairs with regard to Philippa Brooke's dowry is indicated in a letter of June 20, 1600 from Anne Brooke to Robert Cecil. This letter indicates that Walter Calverley had already received at least half of Philippa Brooke's dowry of £1000 by June, 1600 and that there were no lands involved:

Sir. I married my Daughter tow yeares [months?] past unto one Mr Walter Cauverle a Yorke Sheare Gentellman who was not of age at his marriage and therfor not able to make my Daughter a Joynter. And at this present he beinge about to doe it was arrested by on Allin uppon an execution and since his imprisonment in the Fleete he is fallen in to an extreame borninge ague and in truth his life is now much doubtted. Sir, I did give with my Daughter a thousand poundes which he truly receved of me, and I protest befor god I owe five hundred of it yet therfor I besheech your honor in the respect of my portion and of my Daughters necessitie yf he now should die that you would stand our honorable good frinde soe much as to bestowe the wardshipp of his brother uppon my Daughter soe noe doubt the pervayer [prayer?] of the widdows and fatherlesse will reach upp into the eares of the Lord for your honorable and prosperous estate. Thus Comittinge you to the Allmightie, from my Lodging at Cherwin Crosse the xxth of June, 1600 (9-10).

The pamphleteer's confused belief that Philippa Calverley had lands to sell can be traced to the com-

ments which the Wife in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* makes with respect to her dowry:

Wife. By this good means I shall preserve my lands  
And free my husband out of usurers' hands (69).

The author of the pamphlet has also drawn from the play the notion that Walter Calverley gambled away a vast landed inheritance. The Calverleys were an old Yorkshire family (6-7), but there is no independent evidence that Walter Calverley's lands ever "showed like a full moon about [him]" (as did those of the Husband in the play) or that Walter Calverley was ever a profligate gambler who gambled away "thrice three thousand acres" (76), as did the Husband. These details bespeak a far wealthier individual than Walter Calverley. What historical evidence there is regarding Walter Calverley's financial situation shows that in 1602 certain manors belonging to him were transferred to the trusteeship of several individuals including Philippa Brooke's uncle, Sir John Brooke. What this indicates is not entirely clear: as Cawley suggests, it may have "guaranteed that the lands could not be seized because of Walter's Catholic religion", or it may have been that Walter was already showing signs of a mental instability which rendered him unfit to manage his own affairs (9-10). These historical facts are no justification for the pamphleteer's contention that Calverley:

continued his expence in such exceeding riot, that he was forced to morgage his lands, run in great debts, [and] entangle his friends by being bound for him (98).

Walter Calverley's own evidence, given in his examination before Sir John Savile on April 24, 1605, also clearly contradicts the pamphleteer's version of financial desperation as a motive for the Calverley murders. According to the pamphlet, Calverley told Sir John Saville that he killed his children because:

I had brought them to beggery, and am resolved I could not have pleased God better, then by freeing them from it (109).

Again, this detail is borrowed from *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. In his examination before Saville, Calverley himself gave two motives quite different from the motive cited in the pamphlet:

And being likewise examined whether at any time he had any intention to kill his said children, to that he said, that he hath had an intention to kill them for the whole space of two years past, and the reasons that moved him thereunto was, for that his said wife had many times therefore uttered speeches and given signes and tokens unto him, whereby he mighte easily percieve and conjecture, that the said children were not by him begotten, and that he hath found himself to be in danger of his life sundry times by his wife (11).

Although it should not be made too much of, there is perhaps some support for the first of these motives in a story which Steevens recorded as still being told in Yorkshire in his day:

Mr. Calverly . . . struck one of his children in the presence of his wife, who pertly told him, *to correct children of his own, when he could produce any* (43).

The second motive offered by Calverley appears to support the theory that he was subject to paranoid delusions (and thus a vastly different personality from the Husband depicted in either the play or the pamphlet). In any event, Calverley's own evidence indicates that the murders were not committed on the impulse of the moment. Once again, the "facts" recounted in the pamphlet are seen to be derived from *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, rather than from independent sources.

From the foregoing material, it is clear that the author of the pamphlet possessed no independent factual information regarding either Walter Calverley's guardianship, marriage and financial affairs, or the circumstances surrounding the murder of two of his children. The information retailed in the pamphlet on these subjects is all found in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and it is quite evident that the author of the pamphlet made use of the play rather than of independent sources. Since the pamphlet so clearly plagiarizes the play, the composition of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* can be fixed prior to June 12, 1605, the date on which *Two Most Unnatural and Bloodie Murthers* was entered in the Stationers' Register.

## Works Cited

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