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THE WISE CASE: A FLAW IN THE EVIDENCE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH to bibliographical research has never been more ably demonstrated than by John Carter and Graham Pollard in *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets*, published in 1934.¹ Thomas J. Wise, then accepted as the ultimate authority on bibliographical matters, was shown to have produced a variety of spurious literary 'rarities', which he had deviously marketed over a considerable period. The revelations in the *Enquiry* created a sensation at the time, and left the book world in a state of shocked disbelief.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century it was common practice for English authors to arrange a small pre-publication private printing of their works, to comply with American copyright regulations. These ephemeral productions were often inscribed to friends as souvenirs, and were prized by contemporary collectors as rare association items. During the early period of his collecting career, Wise conceived an ingenious plan for turning these preliminary printings to his financial advantage. He selected poems and essays from early works of popular authors, and had pamphlets fabricated bearing false imprints showing dates prior to those of the accepted first editions, thus creating high-priced 'rarities' which he sold to collectors indirectly, in a cunningly devised marketing exercise. Occasionally, over the years, the authenticity of some of these issues was disputed in specialist bibliographies, but generally they were not questioned because Wise, the acknowledged expert, had pronounced them genuine!

Carter and Pollard commenced their research by investigating the most sought after of all the Wise productions, the purported 1847 Reading edition of E.B. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. They proved conclusively that the typeface used was not designed until thirty years after the imprint date, and that constituents of the paper were not used until many years after 1847.

The typeface used for the *Sonnets* and many of the other forgeries was a fount introduced towards the end of the 1870s by P.M. Shanks & Co., a major supplier to the printing trade. An unusual feature of its design is that both f and j are kernless, meaning that no part of the end curve projects beyond its type-block onto the block of the adjoining letter. This was achieved by deflecting the termination of the vertical stroke of these letters, giving the effect of a broken-backed f and button hook j (see illustration).

Carter and Pollard were able to trace the printer of the forgeries, as the same fount had been used to print facsimile editions for literary societies under Wise's supervision

in the 1880s. The firm concerned, Richard Clay and Sons, having been conditioned by the legitimate facsimile printings to setting up other firms' imprints, did not question Wise's subsequent orders for his spurious productions. Carter and Pollard also noticed that this particular fount (called by Clays 'Long Primer No.3') was not exactly as advertised by Shanks, as the question mark used, an unusual slanting 'meat hook' with its full point too far to the left, was a substitution from the previously used Miller & Richards L.P.2. They argued that this typographic error must be unique to Clays, and could be used to categorically attribute printing to them.

f j

f j ?

"Meat hook"
Question mark

Full point too far to left

Kerned Letters

Clay's Long Primer No.3 (Kernless)

Thus whilst a purported rare pre-publication issue dated in the 1880s could not be condemned on the basis of paper or kernless type, it could still be denounced as forged if it featured the Clay meat hook question mark, but bore another firm's imprint.

Wise died in 1937, a discredited and broken man, protesting his innocence to the last. Over the years further bogus publications have been added to the substantial list in the *Enquiry*, and much has been written on Wise and his forgeries (not to mention the subsequent discovery of his depredations in the British Museum!). John Carter continued to tie loose ends in the story until his death in 1975, never suspecting that *one of the basic premises of the Enquiry was incorrect!*

Bibliopsychopathology (to coin a word) has always intrigued me, and I have gathered a modest collection on its manifestations in two famous sufferers, Sir Thomas Phillipps and Thomas J. Wise. My Wiseana is quite diverse, but regrettably I have only a couple of his original productions, which ironically, due to change in literary taste, have become more valuable than if they were genuinely what they pretend to be.

The clue of the hybrid fount has fascinated me to such an extent that I notice it when reading quite unrelated works that happen to have been printed by Clay and Sons during the period of its use (up to about 1895). Recently I was dipping into my copy of a rare early illustrated detective story, *My First Crime* by Gustave Macé, published by Vizetelly & Co. in 1886. Whether the title stimulated a subconscious Wise association I don't know, but there in the text was a profusion of very clear meat hook question marks, and f and j were the kernless variety. Naturally I turned to the end of

the volume to examine the Clay colophon. Imagine my utter astonishment to find that the book was 'PRINTED BY | CHAS. STRAKER AND SONS, LONDON, AND REDHILL'.

MY FIRST CRIME.

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"I am told you are the aunt of a person named Désiré?"

"Yes, I have a nephew, Désiré Bodasse, older than I am; he is, however, only a nephew by marriage, on my husband's side."

"What occupation does he follow?"

"He used to be a journeyman upholsterer; now he has sufficient to live on, and no longer works."

"Where does he live?"

(X 1½)

PRINTED BY

CHAS. STRAKER AND SONS, LONDON, AND REDHILL.

This means that Clay's Long Primer No. 3 was not unique to that establishment, and that the question mark anomaly must have occurred before delivery from Shanks. Consequently, pamphlets denounced as Wise forgeries purely on the assumption that the fount was restricted to Clays will need to be reassessed. A typical case is Tennyson's *Child-Songs*, 1880, which is discussed in the following excerpts from the *Enquiry*:

It was necessary, in order to secure copyright, that poems contributed to American periodicals should be technically published in England. *Early Spring*, 1883, and *The Throstle*, 1889, are instances of this. Examination of the letter books and publication records of Messrs. Macmillan & Co. has shown that all the privately printed pamphlets which bear their imprint — the two mentioned above, *Carmen Sæculare*, 1887, and *The Silent Voices*, 1892 — are perfectly genuine; and this need for technical publication might also account for *England and America*, Strahan, 1872, and *Child Songs*, Kegan Paul, 1880 (but see p.379).²

Lord Tennyson's *Child Songs*, 1880 (see p.341), has on the title-page the publisher's imprint of Kegan Paul, and at the foot of p.8 the printer's imprint of Spottiswoode & Co. Its text type is Clay's Long Primer No.3. We have already

shown (p.65) that this particular type, while not impossible at the date, was peculiar to R. Clay and Sons, and it therefore follows that the printer's imprint is false. *Child Songs*, then, with a false imprint and set up in the same type as that used for sixteen other forgeries, must also be a forgery.³

It is possible that Spottiswoode & Co., like Chas. Straker and Sons, also acquired the alleged 'hybrid' fount from Shanks with a question mark similar to M & R.L.P.28, and *Child-Songs* is genuine after all! Naturally I shall now search for the fount in other Spottiswoode-printed material of the period, to confirm this possibility. Unlike most of the forgeries, which were sold in multiples to E.H. Gorfin (Wise's bookseller outlet), *Child-Songs* was sold through Gorfin on only one occasion (on commission) and there is no evidence of many copies being associated with Wise. The copy sold at Sotheby's Carter Sale in 1967 was described as soiled, which lends weight to the theory that it does not belong among the usually pristine forgeries. If this is the case, paradoxically, it will almost certainly reduce its value, and perhaps bring a smirk to the face of a certain notorious collector, as he browses through that Great Library in the Sky (or the Other Place!).

Of course I am aware of the very remote possibility that in some emergency situation Chas. Straker and Sons could have subcontracted some of their work to Clays, with the request that this should not be disclosed in the printer's colophon. Had such subcontracts existed, it is likely that they would have surfaced during Carter and Pollard's researches at Clays. Nicolas Barker in correspondence suggests *The First Crime* type is probably a different fount despite exhibiting all the accepted criteria for establishing Clay's Long Primer No.3.

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NOTES

1. John Carter and Graham Pollard, *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets* (London: Constable, 1934); see also Nicolas Barker and John Collins, *A Sequel to An Enquiry . . .* (London: Scolar Press, 1983).
2. Carter and Pollard (1934), p.341.
3. Carter and Pollard (1934), pp.379-80.

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