

Thomas Watson, Poet (c1556-1592)

Even today, much that is written about Watson is inaccurate and misleading, and still repeats mistakes from nineteenth century accounts, although modern research has been regularly published. Marlowe scholars generally know him as the man who came to the playwright's aid in Hog Lane, Finsbury, in September 1589 when he had been set upon by William Bradley, an innkeeper's son, over an unpaid debt. Watson killed Bradley and was in prison for it for six months. He is often considered to have been a minor player on the literary scene, and there is usually more interest (particularly amongst Marlowe enthusiasts) in his possible work as one of Walsingham's spies, than of his professional standing as the best known and most prolific poet of this early generation, with a pioneering educational spirit.

The first thing to notice is that the work by which he is known to scholars of literature, the *Hekatompathia* (a series of a hundred connected sonnets in imitation of Petrarch's 'Laura poems and showing a knowledge of the work of about fifty classical and renaissance authors in their original languages), was printed in 1582. This was nine years before the next set, Sidney's, published in 1591 (although written much earlier), which began the great outpouring of sonnet sequences of the 90s. Also noteworthy is the influence of this work, and another set later (unpublished), on the development of the English sonnet-form, as used later by many other poets — Daniel and Shakespeare especially.

Another of his poems in English, the *Eclogue* on Walsingham's death, is both polished and moving, and shows that he had known the Walsingham family very well for ten or more years, and had cause to be grateful to them. Included is Tom Walsingham (Marlowe's patron) with whom he had developed a youthful friendship around 1580, the *Eclogue* being in the form of a pastoral conversation between the two of them. Walsingham's death happened the month after Watson had been freed from Newgate following the Marlowe affair, and a set of Italian madrigals (and two by William Byrd) on which he had been working for the music publisher Thomas Este, providing English lyrics for them, was rapidly redesigned to include several bemoaning Walsingham's demise. This publication in turn, by demonstrating the nature of the relationship of the madrigalist's music to the words, can now be seen to have been absolutely vital to the subsequent development of the English Madrigal School and to madrigal poetry.

So, remembering that this was all in the decade of the 80s before the great explosion of creative talent there is no question about Watson's importance, nor his standing in the literary scene, for he was mentioned in print by no fewer than twelve authors of repute including Spenser, and quoted by others including Kyd and Shakespeare. His activity went on for only two years of the next decade, and his last Latin epic was published posthumously, seen through the press by Marlowe in November 1592.

One shadowy aspect of his life is his apparent involvement with the theatre, and this, coupled with the fact that no plays by him are extant, provides us with a problem. His employer William Cornwallis spoke of him as 'one that could devise twenty fictions and knaveryes in a play which was his daily practyse and his living.' Later in 1607 Dekker refers to the actor John Bentley as having been moulded out of the pens of Watson and Kyd, and links them in turn with Marlowe, Greene and Peele. Certainly Watson lived near Marlowe and Kyd in Norton Folgate, and knew all the other theatre people including George Bucke and John Lyly. Still later in 1635 Thomas Heywood included him in a poem about playwrights' names. His two main involvements with Marlowe have already been referred to, but what do we make of references in his works to poets disguised by pastoral names, as in 1590 to 'Mopsus, Daphnis, Faustus, and the rest,' and in the posthumous work to 'Faustulus and Corydon, both born of affluent families, both happily sturdy, both distinguished by various good qualities and both fired with the same loves' (*translation*).

The Cornwallis Household

It is certainly true that there are some vague indications that he may have spied for Walsingham, but vague they remain. He knew the Walsingham family well, he carried letters from Paris to England in 1580, and he worked in the Cornwallis household at the time that old Sir Thomas was being investigated for recusancy. But that is all, and in any case it was the household of Cornwallis's son he was employed in, and both he and his wife had already been cleared of any Catholic involvement.

But there is another mystery too. In 1592, the year before Christopher Marlowe was killed (or wasn't), Thomas Watson was buried (or wasn't). Watson's burial is entered into the records of St Bartholomew-the-Less for 26 September. A fortnight later, on 6 October, in the same place, the burial of his brother-in-law, the attorney Hugh Swift was also recorded. They were both about to be in very hot water. Watson was married to Ann, Swift's sister, and her other brother, Thomas, was involved at this time in blackmailing his employer, whom he saw as a miser. Thomas Swift had been a lutenist and singer in the retinue of William Cornwallis since boyhood, and was now working at his London house, Fisher's Folly opposite the White Hart just outside Bishopsgate. Watson was also employed there to teach the Cornwallis teenage heir, John.

In 1591 Cornwallis had found out that Thomas Swift had pulled a trick on the eldest and favourite daughter Frances (then aged fourteen, almost marriageable), by getting her to sign an IOU contract for some money he had lent her, but (unknown to her) the contract actually gave Swift possession of her as a ward, and therefore the right to marry her, for he loved her. It came out later that Watson had conceived the plot, and Hugh had drawn up the contract; it was signed and witnessed hurriedly in the schoolroom before morning lessons began and as far as these two contrivers were concerned it

was all meant to be a jape; but not for the lutenist, who soon began using it to threaten Cornwallis for money. An enormous fuss ensued, everybody of any importance was drawn in, and Cornwallis's East Anglian friend Edward Coke, the Solicitor General, sanctioned the case to go to the Star Chamber, on the basis that if the servants of grand houses could get away with this sort of thing, then the end of Elizabeth's safe state was nigh. After the fuss had died down and Swift had suffered the various punishments meted out to him, Frances married, and Cornwallis went off with Essex to fight in Ireland; and a Hugh Swift, attorney, appears again in the records. But there is no more trace of Watson.

I can understand why Watson has had such an erratic assessment over the years. For one thing Sidney Lee's account in the old *Dictionary of National Biography* has stood there in all its incompleteness and inaccuracy for a hundred years, and been a source for most subsequent encyclopaedia articles. For another, much of Watson's work has remained unknown, his Latin poetry for instance (about 2,500 lines) untranslated until recently, his contribution to the development of English verse-forms and the iambic pentameter line hardly looked at, his madrigal set without a scholarly edition until mine, and his life only sketchily looked at from time to time.

The major breakthrough here was Mark Eccles' book *Christopher Marlowe in London* (1934), in which the Hog Lane duel and its implications were exhaustively examined. Thomas Watson was hardly a great writer, especially when viewed from the dizzy heights of the achievements of the following generation. But he was a professional writer and an original force, fiercely interested in England and English verse and knowledgeable about it, and intensely well-read in the classical authors, Petrarch, and the main (and not so main) authors of France and Italy in his own century. Moreover he was a man of many experiences of the different facets of life, known to (and sometimes friendly with) the rich and famous, and well-travelled, and his work is pervaded by great humility and irony, as well as with a certain analytical flair. I hope he will one day get the consideration he deserves.

For those who wish for further reading:

1. I have dealt with the Cornwallis case fully in 'Two sixteenth-century East Anglian families at the Court of Star Chamber' *Norfolk Archaeology* XLIV part I, 2003 pp119-128.
2. My account 'Thomas Watson: works, contemporary references and reprints can be found in *Notes and Queries* 246, 3 Sept. 2001, 239-249.
3. A copy of my *Thomas Watson: English poems, transcribed from original prints and edited with introduction and notes* (Limited Edition 2003) can be obtained by enquiry via email to marion.hopkins@britishlibrary.net. *Latin poems* is still in preparation.
4. A substantial biography of Watson will appear in the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* to be published in September 2004.
5. My edition of *Thomas Watson: Italian Madrigals Englished* appeared in 1999 as vol. 74 of the series *Musica Britannica* (Stainer and Bell, music publishers).

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