Shakespeare at the Dawn of the Postal System

Poco Indo

I

In 1635, a royal proclamation was issued 'For the settling of the Letter Office of England and Scotland' whereby the service of the royal post was officially opened to all members of the British public.[1] Although Shakespeare did not live to hear the proclamation, he was writing in an age when communication in written form acquired great popularity, and as Mark Taylor remarks, 'One reason for the profusion of letters in Shakespeare's plays might be the abiding popularity of letter-writing in his time, a popularity attested. . . by the publication of many guides to letter-writing'.[2]

On the other hand, the steady growth of the postal service in operation is attested by the fact that the 1635 proclamation was less a service for the public than a new source of revenue for King Charles I, the charges being relatively high. The postal service by then was operated on a scale large enough to seek means for raising revenue, or in other words, a flurry of other carriers was threatening the royal post's revenues. It may be said, therefore, that the profusion of letters in Shakespeare's plays reflects a society anticipating the monopoly of the postal system. The purpose of this paper is to examine the institution of the postal service at the dawn of the postal system and some of its resonance in Shakespeare's plays.

II

Although there were various carriers and delivery services in operation long before King Henry VIII's reign, he was in fact the first English monarch to take the letter-carrying service seriously. He paved the way for the national network of the postal system. In 1512, he recruited twenty horsemen to serve the state as royal messengers and appointed Sir Brian Tuke as the Master of the Posts, the first recorded use of this title. Tuke instructed efficient operation of the post-houses, mainly inns and taverns, where royal messengers could change over in comfort, and by Queen Elizabeth I's reign the workforce was boosted to one hundred.

However, the Tudor state never considered providing the postal service for private individuals, and the service had a limited clientele: the monarch and those with special permission. The royal messengers at times took private letters, but this was done without official approval. Nevertheless, such unapproved act steadily expanded. The 1583 and 1584 proclamations refer to the delivery of private letters being made after those from the sovereign, and finally in 1602 an order was made that the royal messengers should carry only state dispatches.

Apart from the royal messengers, there were various means of communication between people separated by any distance. While merchants and universities had their own couriers, private individuals could use carriers, who were usually employed, and the town posts. The carriers travelled in troupes and when they neared the destination, one of them went ahead to deliver the letters. Most places had a weekly carrier to London. The town posts, on the other had, took a bundle of letters to a nearby town from which the letters were passed on from one postman, usually an innkeeper, to another. Local innkeepers paid the town post, while the town authorities

raised rates to subsidise their posts. The royal messengers and the common carriers co-existed without any attempt to coordinate the organisation until the 1635 proclamation that began their amalgamation. Distinct from the common carriers was the private carriers that had the advantage of speed and of being able to deliver directly to the recipient.

Most of the letters floating around in Shakespeare's plays are carried by private carriers, namely servants, relatives, and friends. Otherwise reliable travellers or anyone trustworthy enough may be employed as private carriers. Payment was normally made before they set out and a further reward would be made on arrival. It was also customary to pay more for those who brought important news. Such temporary private carriers can be seen in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Hamlet employs sailors to carry the letters for Horatio, the King, and the Queen. The term he applies for these sailors, 'thieves of mercy' (IV. vi. 21)[3], may well express Hamlet's gratitude for their service. Since they are to carry very important news, it is natural that they should expect to be rewarded well. Although there is no specific command for a reward to be made on arrival, nor any indication that Hamlet has paid them, his line, 'I am to do a [good] turn for them' (IV. ii. 22) implies a reward.

Kent, on the other hand, entrusts a gentleman with a letter to Cordelia together with a ring. The reason Kent gives for bestowing the gentleman with a ring seems rather vague, if not superfluous:

> For confirmation that I am much more
> Than my out-wall, open this purse and take
> What it contains. If you shall see Cordelia
> (As fear not but you shall), show her this ring,
> And she will tell you who that fellow is
> That yet you do not know.
>
> (III. i. 44-49)

In 1596, a proclamation was issued 'Against Counterfeit Messengers', for there were people presenting false documents and extracting fees for their labour and travel. Shakespeare may have had this proclamation in mind, in which case the ring is intended more as a token to prove the authenticity of the messenger and the information he brings than as a proof of Kent's identity. The ring may also have been meant as a reward.

As for overseas letters that gradually began to increase during the Elizabethan period, the letters went via messengers or carriers to British ports from where they were carried by Dutch or Spanish merchant vessels. The continent had a similar but better postal service with larger network, though British documents were frequently intercepted. In 1591, a proclamation was issued setting out strict regulations for overseas post. The proclamation authorised the searching of all messengers and suspected persons.

III

A letter completes its purpose in the act of being delivered to the right destination and being read by the intended recipient in due time. Hence when the postal system was devised, the letter writer's main concern—the certainty of its arrival, the security of its content, and reasonable speed—naturally claimed first consideration.

Although many attempts were being made to improve the service during Queen Elizabeth I's reign, the performance was still relatively slow. For example, a letter in 1566 delivered by town posts took 40 hours to travel 63 miles, even though the town posts in theory provided a service day and night. One recipient in 1594 complains that a letter sent from The Strand to Hampton Court took 10 hours for delivery. The fastest post then was perhaps

the letter informing the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 which took three days and two nights to cover over 400 miles from the Council to Edinburgh, achieving an average of about 7 miles per hour. However, this was an exception, for the messenger must have taken as little a rest as possible at post-houses. An average speed for a private carrier taking regular rests would be 3 or 4 miles an hour, covering 25 to 30 miles a day. A royal messenger or a merchant's courier handing over his letters to another who would set off immediately with a fresh horse may have gained a slightly better speed. In order to improve the service, the sign of a gallows was drawn alongside the address to threaten the messenger with severe punishment should he fail to make a speedy delivery. But this seems to have had little effect.

Such being the case, the arrival of a letter should naturally denote lapse of time for Elizabethan audience, if the letter was witnessed to be written or to be dispatched. At this distance from Shakespeare's time, we must remind ourselves of the slow transmission of letters, especially when seeing plays with letters travelling long distance.

Apart from speed, surviving documents indicate that the certainty of arrival was not always satisfactorily ensured. Miscarriage or non-delivery was caused by negligent carriers, the difficulty to obtain horses, and assaults. Although royal messengers appear to have been treated with respect, they too were at times endangered. There survives a record that a certain merchant family living in London often sent a copy of a letter by another carrier in order to be certain of its arrival.

An even more serious problem concerning the posts was the opening of letters en route. People would pay messengers to have the letters opened, and such bribery was customary. Matters deteriorated to the extent that even the Master of the Posts felt letters in cypher were the only means to secure

secrecy. Letters were far more likely to have been opened when coming from abroad. An incident is recorded whereby letters were being concealed in a staff or cudgel to escape the eyes of searchers. Such corruption prevailed in public as well as in court. Queen Elizabeth I herself ordered all letters sent to and from Mary, Queen of Scots, to be opened. The letters were later used as evidence at the trial, which led to her execution for treason in 1587. It is worth noting that the said letters were inserted into the bungholes of barrels. One of Queen Elizabeth I's letters written before she came to the throne manifests that she was well aware of the dangers of letter spying: the blank portion was carefully crossed with lines to prevent additions.

Shakespeare makes much use of such accidents of the post, and that in various ways. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo suffers non-delivery:

> The letter was not nice but full of charge,
> Of dear import, and the neglecting it
> May do much danger.
>
> (V. ii. 18-20)

And so it does. The whole tragedy might have been avoided had the letter not failed to arrive at its intended destination. Friar John explains how an unlucky mischance prevented him from delivering the letter:

> Going to find a barefoot brother out,
> One of our order, to associate me,
> Here in this city visiting the sick,
> And finding him, the searchers of the town,
> Suspecting that we both were in a house
> Where the infectious pestilence did reign,
> Seal'd up the doors and would not let us forth,

So that my speed to Mantua there was stay'd.

. . . . . .

I could not send it—here it is again—
Nor get a messenger to bring it thee,

(V. ii. 5-15)

The added excuse is worth a comment. It was perhaps made in order to make the matters convincing. But it had not occurred to Friar John to 'get a messenger to send it forth' which seems more natural. It may be that Shakespeare avoided implication of foreign carriers, which were perhaps beyond his knowledge.

A miscarried letter that brings forth a dire effect is in *Henry VIII*. Suffolk explains how Cardinal Wolsey has forfeited King Henry VIII's favour:

The Cardinal's letter to the Pope miscarried,
And came to th' eye o' th' King, wherein was read
How that the Cardinal did entreat his Holiness
To stay the judgement o' th' divorce;

(III. ii. 30-33)

Soon the King enters with the secret inventory of Wolsey's material wealth and the miscarried letter. He commands that the inventory should be read first and the letter afterwards. The first paper distresses him; the second paper destroys him:

Is there no way to cure this?
No new device to beat this from his brains?
I know 'twill stir him strongly; yet I know
A way, if it take right, in spite of fortune
Will bring me off again. What's this? "To th' Pope" ?
The letter, as I live, with all the business

I writ to 's Holiness. Nay then, farewell!

(III. ii. 216-22)

It is important to note that no reference is made in Holinshed about a letter being miscarried. It only says, 'the cardinall required the pope by letters and secret messengers, that in anie wise he should defer the iudgement of the diuorse, till he might frame the kings mind to his purpose. Howbeit he went about nothing so secretlie, but that the same came to the kings knowledge'.[4] It does not explain how the King came to know of Wosley's plan, nor is the said letter listed in 'the booke of articles, which the lords had put the king against the cardinall'.[5] Shakespeare perhaps associated the given statement with the prevailing corruption of intercepting letters, and shaped it into a dramatic incident. It is also not surprising if the statement recalled his memory of the Scottish queen's trial. Whatever the case, both Wolsey and Mary could not escape the dangers of letter spying. The bitter irony here is that, though perhaps unknown to Shakespeare, 'letters in cypher' mentioned earlier was actually suggested by Tuke in his letter to Wolsey. Had he followed Tuke's advice, English history might have been different.

King Lear displays another variation. This time the miscarriage is caused by assault. Goneril entrusts her letter to Oswald who on his mission meets Edgar and is killed. Oswald makes a dying request to have the letter delivered to Edmund. However, having read the letter, Edgar decides to deliver it to Albany to 'strike the sight / Of the death-practic'd Duke' (IV. vi. 276-77). Hence the letter is miscarried with good cause.

A letter may even be miscarried by the writer himself. Such is the case with the petitioner in *Henry VI* Part 2, though it must be admitted that he could not have written the petition himself. He summits his petition to

Suffolk mistaking him for Gloucester.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the miscarriage is caused by the negligence of the carrier, namely Costard. The miscarried letters here paint a rosier picture. Two letters—one from Berowne to Rosaline and the other from Armado to Jaquenetta—travel through various hands generating merriment each time before they reach their destination.

As with miscarried letters, letter spying is displayed in various manners. The most crucial letter spying found in Shakespeare's plays is perhaps Hamlet's, which ironically is not acted out. Shakespeare spares Hamlet the act of breaching a social moral code in front of the audience. Shakespeare makes him give an oral report instead whereby the immoral act of intercepting a stately document is moderated:

> Up from my cabin,
> My sea-gown scarf'd about me, in the dark
> Grop'd I to find out them, had my desire,
> Finger'd their packet, and in fine withdrew
> To my own room again, making so bold,
> My fears forgetting manners, to [unseal]
> Their grand commission; where I found, Horatio—
> Ah, royal knavery!
>
> (V. ii. 12-19)

Another important letter spying brings forth one of the greatest comic moments in Shakespeare's plays. Strictly speaking it is not letter spying in its true sense, for Maria's brilliantly forged letter in *Twelfth Night* is meant for Malvolio's eyes. Yet, from Malvolio's point of view, his act is nothing but letter spying. He is well aware, or well deceived to be precise, that the letter is in Olivia's hand, and it is only after he breaks the seal and reads the letter that he convinces himself to be the addressee. Her privacy is not honoured,

for he shows no hesitation in breaking the seal:

> By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus she makes she her great P's. It is, in contempt of question, her hand. . . . "To the unknown belov'd, this, and my good wishes":—her very phrases! By your leave, wax. Soft! And the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal. 'Tis my lady. To whom should this be?
>
> (II. v. 86-94)

If Malvolio is punished for anything, he is punished for reading other people's letter without permission.

Malvolio is not alone. There are a number of other people violating the social moral code. In *King Lear*, we have Edmund who is most notorious. He steals the dangerous letter from Gloucester, which circulates around in the play. From Edmund it goes to Cornwall, then to Goneril, and lastly to Albany. The letter plays a crucial part in the Gloucester story, and had not the letter been stolen the Gloucester story would not have survived. But, of course, had not Gloucester mentioned the letter it would not have been stolen. That Gloucester should believe the letter forged by Edmund is understandable to a certain extent as will be seen in the next section. We can also understand him confining his secret plan to Edmund whom he believes to be his ally. But it is difficult to understand why he should tell him not only about the letter but also its whereabouts:

> I have receiv'd a letter this night—'tis dangerous to be spoken; I have lock'd the letter in my closet. These injuries the King now bears will be reveng'd home; there is part of a power already footed: we must incline to the

King. I will look him and privily relieve him.
(III. iii. 9-15)

If it is dangerous to be spoken, why speak about it at all? The speech costs Gloucester his eyes. He will not be able read letters anymore, at least not alone. But he will have Edgar read them out for him.

The first letter Edgar reads for Gloucester is Goneril's letter to Edmund. As has been mentioned previously, it is retrieved from Oswald. Unlike Malvolio, Edgar shows respect to other people's privacy before he breaks the seal:

Let's see these pockets; the letters that he speaks of
May be my friends. He's dead; I am only sorry
He had no other deathsman. Let us see.
Leave, gentle wax, and, manners, blame us not:
To know our enemies' minds, we rip their hearts,
Their papers is more lawful.
(IV. vi. 256-61)

In addition to Edgar's excuse, Shakespeare carefully manipulates the audience so as to moderate his immoral act. The letter has been taken up in a manner to arouse the audience's curiosity in the previous scene, and the audience is made to be as eager as Edgar to know what is written in it. After reading it to Gloucester who has lost his sight, Edgar passes it to Albany to strike his sight. Unlike the father, the son interprets the letter correctly.

People may happen to read a written document without knowing it is actually a letter that should not have been read. Shakespeare demonstrates such a case comically in *The Two Gentleman of Verona*. After making Speed prove that he can read, Launce curses him for his act: 'Now will he be

swing'd for reading my letter—an unmannerly slave, that will thrust himself into secrets' (III. i. 382-84). Now indeed, may 'Saint Nicholas be thy speed!' (III. i. 300). We can also see the danger of reading embodied here, for Speed is cursed for his literacy.

Before closing this section, credit must be given to two letter carriers that perform their mission dutifully—namely Oswald and Feste. Oswald is approached by Regan who would love him much should he let her unseal Goneril's letter. Oswald strenuously resists the bribe. Shakespeare makes this point clear. Although Edgar does not honour Oswald's dying request, he has some kind words for him:

> I know thee well; a serviceable villain,
> As duteous to the vices of thy mistress
> As badness would desire.
>
> (IV. vi. 252-54)

Feste is approached by Fabian who desires to see Malvolio's letter. As with Oswald, Feste resists and Malvolio's privacy is honoured by one he calls a 'barren rascal' (I. v. 83). It must be mentioned that Fabian's request is granted later.

IV

Today we expect our domestic letters to arrive safely within a day or two at a reasonable cost, but in the early Modern England as we have briefly seen, the transmission of letters was a more tedious, costly, and unreliable business than it is today. Therefore receiving a letter must have been a rare treat and often a source of great excitement.

Such being the case, the content of a letter perhaps bred little suspicion

once the authenticity of the letter carrier, the signature, or the seal that mattered more, was verified. *All's Well that Ends Well* affords an excellent example of such tendency. The Second Lord being asked to justify his story about Helena's outcome refers to her letter: 'The stronger part of it by her own letters, which makes her story true, even to the point of her death' (IV. iii. 55-57).

A similar case can be noted in *Cymberline* where Posthumus believes Pisanio's letter informing the death of Imogen: 'I'll write to my lord she's dead' (III. v. 104). Although Pisanio sends Posthumus the 'bloody sign' (III. iv. 125) of her death, Posthumus' letter instructing the murder does not specifically command that a token should be sent. The bloody cloth is employed more as a hand prop to illuminate the remorse of Posthumus than as a proof of the deed, for the audience knows too well that it is not so. The deep grief is intended to convince the audience of a hero who has written a beguiling letter to Imogen. Pisanio's beguiling letter makes Posthumus reap the fruits of his action—tit for tat.

There are also cases where Shakespeare makes comic use of the readers' inclination to immediately believe what the letter says. Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a typical comic victim. It all begins with his identical letters to Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page. In view of the fact that letter-writing guides were popular, Mrs. Page's comment may have been a warning against beautifully composed letters whose phrases may have been borrowed from elsewhere with a few alterations to suit the writers. Though far from beautiful, she assures that Falstaff 'hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names' (II. i. 74-75), and he like Posthumus must take the consequences of his deed—a letter for a letter. However, the letter that invites him to the park at midnight is but slightly mentioned: 'Here is a letter

will say somewhat' (IV. v. 123-24). The Arden editor explains that 'Shakespeare does not attempt the particularly difficult task of showing how Falstaff could have been persuaded to risk a third meeting with Mistress Ford; he is content to indicate the direction that Quickly's lies might have taken'.[6] It may have been difficult to persuade the audience, but not Falstaff. Shakespeare relies on his observation that people tend to believe what they read. Falstaff without any doubt believes what the letters says: 'This is the third time; I hope good luck lies in odd numbers. . . . They say there is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death' (V. i. 2-4). He might be repeating what the letter said.

Apart from such beguiling letters whose author is authentic but the content false, there are letters whose author and accordingly the content false. Such are the forged letters, sometimes treacherous and sometimes mischievous, intended to exercise power over others. Edmund's letter in *King Lear* and Maria's letter in *Twelfth Night* are typical examples, both of which lead the readers to their tragic outcome.

Hamlet is also a forger. In his case it is a stately document and therefore has to be forged properly. Shakespeare is careful to make it convincing. He allows Hamlet a long speech with minute details:

> I sat me down,
> Devis'd a new commission, wrote it fair.
> I once did hold it, as our statists do,
> A baseness to write fair, and labor'd much
> How to forget that learning, but, sir, now
> It did me yeman's service.
> . . . . . .
> I had my father's signet in my purse,
> Which was the model of that Danish seal;
> Folded the writ up in the form of th' other,

> [Subscrib'd] it, gave't th' impression, plac'd it safely,
> The changeling never known.
>
> (V. ii. 31-53)

With all the letters in this section, we are left with the impression of Shakespeare's scepticism towards letters. As for the postal service discussed in the previous section, the matter seems no better. Shakespeare anticipates the dangers of non-arrival and non-delivery, and the privacy being at risk. His warning against naïve reading and writing is summarised in Imogen's words: 'To write, and read / Be henceforth treacherous!' (IV. ii. 316-17). Her words echo strongly in this electronic age with technology enabling the transmission of information without identifiable handwriting or seals. In addition, information may come or go instantaneously to an unintended recipient with a single miss-stroke on the keys or buttons. If the matter is important or requires secrecy, it seems better not to write at all but to go in person. In fact Cade in *Henry VI*, Part 2 proposes to give up writing altogether: 'Is not this a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment? that parchment, being, scribbled o'er, should undo a man? Some say the bee stings, but I say, 'tis the bee's wax' (IV. ii. 78-82). There is a touch of stinging irony here. If we were to view all written documents with utter scepticism, Shakespeare plays can be no exception.

Fortunately however, in Shakespeare's plays there are more sincere letters than otherwise. There are also numerous letters that reach their destination safely. It seems reasonable to conclude that Shakespeare at the dawn of the postal system quietly directs our attention to the problems attending information exchange.

NOTES

1. The information on the postal service in this paper is obtained from the following two books: Philip Beale, *A History of the Post in England from the Romans to the Stuarts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); Christopher Browne, *Getting the Message: The Story of the British Post Office* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1993).
2. Mark Taylor, "Letters and Readers in *Macbeth, King Lear,* and *Twelfth Night,*" *Philological Quarterly,* 69 (1990): 48.
3. Unless otherwise stated, all the quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare,* ed. C. Blakemore Evan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).
4. B. G. Boswell-Stone ed., *Shakespeare's Holinshed: The Chronicle and the Historical Plays Compared,* vol. 4 (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1896) 470.
5. Boswell-Stone, 476.
6. William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* ed. H. J. Oliver (London: Methuen, 1973) 128.