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AN UNPUBLISHED HARDY LETTER TO MILLAY

By JOHN PATTON

WHEN *The King's Henchman* was published in February 1927, by Harpers, Edna St. Vincent Millay sent a copy to Thomas Hardy at Max Gate. We can assume, from the evidence of the letter below,<sup>1</sup> that this is the same copy which was exhibited by the Colby College Library in its Hardy exhibition in 1940. According to the catalogue of this exhibition the book was "No. 5 of eight copies for private distribution." This copy was actually one of 158 copies in a limited edition on Tuscany hand-made paper, eight of which were reserved for private distribution by the author. Millay inscribed the book as follows: "To Thomas Hardy, with the admiration and love of many years. Edna St. Vincent Millay. Austerlitz, New York, February 1927."<sup>2</sup>

Within a few weeks Hardy replied from Max Gate, acknowledging the gift and commenting upon it:

4 April: 1927

Dear Miss Millay:

I found myself one morning in possession of your beautiful gift of "The King's Henchman", & if I had been a young man instead of an old man I should have read it straight off & written to you forthwith. But age makes us laggards, & what I would have done I do somewhat later, but no less heartily.

An opinion, from a reading, on a play meant for acting, is not worth much, & I do not attempt to write one: indeed I have not formed one. I have simply let you carry me back to those old times outshadowed, & enjoyed the experience.

I think that I was among the early readers on this side of the Atlantic to be struck by your lyrics: & I am not sure that I do not like you better in that form than in the dramatic. But if you like exercising your hand — I mean fair hand — on drama I suppose you must. Believe me

Sincerely yours  
Thomas Hardy

<sup>1</sup> The letter was brought to my attention by Norma Millay Ellis, the poet's sister and literary executor, who kindly gave me permission to use it. Permission to publish the letter was granted by Irene Cooper Willis and Lloyd's Bank.

<sup>2</sup> The book is Item No. 100 in *A Century of Thomas Hardy: Catalogue of a Centennial Exhibition*, Colby College Library (Waterville, Maine, 1940).

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Hardy's modest disclaimer over judging the play provides an interesting contrast to the high critical and popular acclaim which greeted its publication in this country. The book was put into a fourth edition within twenty days after its initial appearance. Notices to this effect appeared in many places, e.g., the New York *Evening Post* of March 8, 1927, and the New York *Times* and New York *Telegram* of March 9. The almost phenomenal demand for the book was widely reported at the time too, as, for instance, in the Toledo *News Bee* of March 9 and the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* of March 3, among numerous others.

The genuine interest of Hardy in Millay is evidenced by another item in the Colby catalogue, a copy of *The Lamp and The Bell* which he presumably purchased for himself.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in a letter to Millay in 1932 Sydney Cockerell states that Hardy spoke to him of Millay's poetry with a degree of approval which he found uncommon for Hardy.<sup>4</sup> That Hardy intended both *The Lamp and The Bell* and *The King's Henchman* to be permanent additions to his private library is borne out by the presence of his bookplate in both books.

<sup>3</sup> New York, Harpers, 1923; Item No. 98 in the Centennial catalogue, with the notation which quotes a Hardy letter to Amy Lowell referring to Millay in 1923 as a "most promising" one of the younger poets.

<sup>4</sup> Letter in Millay's files, dated January 14, 1932, from Cambridge, where Cockerell was Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum. At one time he was executor for Hardy himself.

