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Thomas More and the Taking of William Tyndale

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ABSTRACT

The thesis that Thomas More (1478–1535) plotted and financed the capture of William Tyndale (c.1494–1536) in Antwerp in May 1535 despite being himself a prisoner in the Tower of London at the time was first advanced in a biography of Tyndale published by Brian Moynahan in 2002. That thesis came to immeasurably wider attention through being mentioned in each volume of the *Wolf Hall* trilogy by the late Dame Hilary Mantel (1952–2022). The wide circulation thus given to that claim, even though in a work of fiction rather than of scholarship, motivates this attempt to demonstrate that it is without any foundation. The consequent close scrutiny of the evidence about this episode indicates that the taking of Tyndale was planned by its protagonist, Henry Phillips, on his own initiative, and not, as has often been suggested, at the instigation of English ecclesiastical authorities.

KEYWORDS

English reformation; pursuit of heresy; betrayal; conspiracy; Thomas More; William Tyndale

It is a pity this article has to be written. The notion that Sir Thomas More, while a prisoner in the Tower of London, plotted and financed the capture of William Tyndale in Antwerp in May 1535 is, even at first sight, so implausible as scarcely to deserve formal refutation. Devoid of any direct evidence, and first advanced by Brian Moynahan in a biography of William Tyndale published twenty years ago, this caprice might have continued to languish in obscurity had it not been taken up by the late Dame Hilary Mantel for deployment in the hatchet job on Thomas More which played such a crucial part in the runaway success of her *Wolf Hall* trilogy.¹ In the first volume, she offers this somewhat melodramatic reflection as part of her rendering of Thomas Cromwell's mental processes:

More has a sticky web in Europe still, a web made of money; it is his [Cromwell's] belief that his [More's] men have followed Tyndale these many months, but all his ingenuity, and Stephen Vaughan's on the spot, have not been able to find out which of the Englishmen who pass through that busy town are More's agents.²

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¹Brian Moynahan, *If God Spare My Life: William Tyndale, the English Bible and Sir Thomas More – A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (London: Little, Brown, 2002). See in particular ch. 22, "The Paymaster", 329–54.

²Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), 590. This seems to be dated around November 1534. See also p. 627, set in late May 1535: "Tyndale has been, not just taken, but betrayed. Someone tempted him out of his haven, and More knows who".

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In *Bring Up the Bodies*, it is the London merchant Robert Packington who peddles the rumor that “More’s agents” were responsible, and in *The Mirror and the Light* this becomes a matter of common knowledge, repeated by Mercy Prior and the ex-friar Robert Barnes.³ Finally, the story of Tyndale’s end is expounded in full by Cromwell (c.1485–1540) himself, who explains away the implausibility of the whole tale in ways that echo the arguments of Moynahan:

“Thomas More paid for Tyndale’s death”, he says. “He vowed he would follow him to the world’s end. He planned it from his prison, and he had plenty of time, the king was patient with More and so was I. You must not think he was straitly confined. His friends sent his dinners in. He had good wine and good fires and good books. He had visitors. Letters came and went.”⁴

Thanks to her uncritical assimilation and recycling of Moynahan’s idea, and thanks also to the wide circulation of her books, there is a serious risk of this claim seeping into the store of general knowledge as some kind of established truth.⁵ Although the *Wolf Hall* saga is of course fiction, the author’s frequently expressed respect for “the historical facts”, and the respect widely accorded to the “research” that went into her books, heighten that risk. Dame Hilary, after all, insisted that the “novelist has a responsibility to adhere to the facts as closely as possible”.⁶ She was gratified by the notion that she made “a fetish of historical accuracy” and professed herself “shocked” by the “errors and prejudices” of many historians who had worked on Cromwell.⁷ Reviewers for a decade harped on the depth of her research and the exactness of her historical understanding.⁸ For reasons such as these, it is regrettable that Moynahan’s idiosyncratic speculation is endorsed in each volume of the *Wolf Hall* series, and indeed given extensive elaboration in the final instalment. Although Dame Hilary later tended to emphasize the fundamentally fictional character of her enterprise, insisting that she was presenting readers with her imagined version of how Thomas Cromwell saw the world, she never rowed back on such apodictic claims as this – “I don’t ever knowingly falsify a date or place or any item of information” – and she maintained that “You can’t speculate emptily about the personal reality of people’s lives”.⁹ As the entire novel sequence is seen through Cromwell’s eyes, then, readers may well in practice conclude that apparently

³Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 118: “More had men everywhere, all about Tyndale. It was More’s agents who betrayed him.” Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light* (London: Fourth Estate, 2021), 147: “I blame Thomas More for Tyndale, his nest of spies that lived on after he was dead ...”; and 381–2, “If Thomas More can reach out his hand to strike Tyndale himself, being himself dead ...”. The consistently melodramatic tone of all these comments, though offered by putatively distinct characters, is worthy of note.

⁴Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 427–30, esp. 429.

⁵It is of course possible that the late Dame Hilary Mantel came up with the idea that More was responsible for Tyndale’s betrayal entirely independently of Moynahan. But this seems unlikely in view of her comment that “some people have seen the novel [*Wolf Hall*] as an outrageous attack on the reputation of Thomas More and as a travesty of the facts. But the truth is I have not discovered anything new about More”. Dame Hilary Mantel, interview with Jasper Rees, *thearts-desk.com*, January 19, 2015, reposted September 23, 2022.

⁶Interview with Anne Munday, “Living with Cromwell”, *The Boston Globe*, October 18, 2009.

⁷Dame Hilary Mantel, interview with Tim Adams, *The Guardian*, April 26, 2014; and “You ask the questions: Hilary Mantel”, *The Observer*, October 4, 2020.

⁸Mia Levitin, *Irish Times*, Ticket, February 29, 2020, noted that Mantel “takes great pride in respecting historical facts”; Robbie Millen, *The Times*, February 29, 2020, “her historical understanding is worn lightly”. See also Thomas Penn on her “phenomenal historical rigour”, *Daily Telegraph*, February 29, 2020, 23; or Sophie Elmirst on her “unimpeachable accuracy”, “The unquiet mind of Hilary Mantel”, *New Statesman*, October 3, 2012. These instances could be multiplied.

⁹Interview with Rob Attar, “*Wolf Hall*: Hilary Mantel talks Tudors”, *Historyextra*, January 20, 2015.

factual information conveyed within that perspective, and repeated in other contexts, is being presented as an “item of information”.

It is worth pausing to recall what is known about the taking of Tyndale on May 21, 1535. In the early months of that year an expatriate Englishman named Henry or Harry Phillips turned up in Antwerp, where Tyndale had been based for a few years as he pursued his life’s work of translating the Bible into English. Phillips had registered as a student at the university of Leuven (or Louvain) not long before, on December 14, 1534. Having come to Antwerp he wormed his way into Tyndale’s confidence by representing himself as a religious sympathizer. After a while he departed for Brussels, where he came to an understanding with a high government official, the “Procureur-Generaal” of Brabant (henceforth Procurator-General, a figure akin to the Attorney General in England¹⁰), regarding a plan to capture Tyndale and hand him over to ecclesiastical justice as a suspected heretic. Phillips returned to Antwerp with a sort of posse and, on May 21, having called on Tyndale in his lodgings and arranged to go out to dinner with him, came back later to keep the appointment and led him out into the hands of the Procurator-General’s agents. To add insult to injury, he had managed to borrow forty shillings from his unsuspecting victim before betraying him. (One doubts this money was ever repaid.) A few weeks later, Phillips was boasting to another English expatriate, Thomas Theobald (who was or had been a student at Leuven), that he had a “commission” to capture Tyndale, a commission which also targeted two other prominent religious refugees from England, Robert Barnes and George Joye.

Our main sources for these events are two Englishmen, both of them sympathetic to Tyndale. The more important of the two was Tyndale’s host in Antwerp, Thomas Poyntz, the owner of the house where he lodged, and a younger brother in a family of minor English gentry.¹¹ Some 25 years later Poyntz furnished John Foxe (1516–87), the great Elizabethan martyrologist, with a detailed account of the events and aftermath of Tyndale’s arrest, which Foxe included in the first edition of his famous “Book of Martyrs” in 1563.¹² Poyntz had also made a few brief comments about the arrest in a letter to his elder brother John, back in England, in August 1535.¹³ The other main source is the aforesaid Thomas Theobald, a connection of Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556, Archbishop of Canterbury) and Thomas Cromwell (Henry VIII’s chief minister in the 1530s), who was passing through Antwerp in summer 1535 and made a brief report about these events in a letter to Cranmer of July 31.¹⁴

There is no suggestion in these sources, nor in any other sources even tangentially connected with the case, that Thomas More had, or could have had, any active role in

¹⁰The Procurator-General at this time was one Pierre Dufief, a man notoriously zealous in the prosecution of heretics. See David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 374.

¹¹For Thomas Poyntz, see Brian Buxton, *At the House of Thomas Poyntz: The Betrayal of William Tyndale with the Consequences for an English Merchant and his Family* (Lavenham: Brian Buxton, 2013), esp. 3–15 for his family background. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of this Journal for bringing this work to my attention.

¹²John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1563), 513–22 (renumbered 569–78 in the online edition found at *John Foxe’s The Acts and Monuments Online* (<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/>)). It is likely that Poyntz, who died in 1562, provided his narrative to Foxe after the latter’s return to England in 1559.

¹³Thomas Poyntz to John Poyntz, August 25, 1535, British Library MS Cotton Galba B. x. fols 66r–67v, summarised at *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie (21 vols. London: HMSO, 1862–1932), vol. 9, no. 182 (henceforth cited as LP, by volume and item number: e.g. LP 9.182).

¹⁴Thomas Theobald (or Tebolde) to Cranmer, Antwerp, July 31, 1535, British Library MS Cotton Galba B. x. fols 119r–120v (summarised at LP 8.1151).

conceiving, instigating, planning, financing or in any way aiding or abetting Tyndale's arrest. More is not so much as named in passing in them. This complete silence is in itself a weighty piece of evidence. Had there been even a whisper at the time – let alone the common knowledge imagined in Mantel's fiction – that he had played a part in Tyndale's destruction, then his friends would have been as eager to credit him with this coup against a notorious heretic as his enemies would have been to denounce him for this crime against a venerated martyr.

The tortuous path that led to Moynahan's curious conclusion begins only in 1937, in a major biography of Tyndale written by J. F. Mozley.¹⁵ For it was Mozley, building upon one or two hints in early sources that English bishops were behind Henry Phillips's enterprise, who made a case for identifying one of them, John Stokesley, Bishop of London (1475–1539), as the hidden hand pulling the secret strings in Tyndale's arrest.

The point of origin for the Mozley Conjecture was the explicit claim made by Phillips, as reported by Theobald, that he had received some kind of "commission" to capture Tyndale. In Mozley's view, "the natural meaning of this is a commission from England", and he went on, as we shall see, to conclude that it had emanated from a bishop.¹⁶ However, his interpretation of this reference to a commission is far from natural. English people at that time often used the term "commission" to denote an official instruction issued in proper form by a legitimate public authority.¹⁷ But it would be "natural" to infer that, when doing so, they meant an order emanating from an appropriate authority within the relevant jurisdiction (though this inference, in its turn, can hardly be deemed irresistible).

However, this alternative inference is fortified by observation. For Theobald's letter to Cranmer reports Phillips as stating that "he had a commission out also for to have taken Dr Barnes and George Joye with other",¹⁸ while a stray surviving letter from another member of the English community in Antwerp, one George Collyns, not only records the existence of just such a commission but also identifies its originating authority. Writing to a friend back in England at the beginning of May 1535, Collyns reported that "there is commission come from the Procurer General of Brussels to take three Englishmen, whereof one is Doctor Barnes".¹⁹ The chances of the commission boasted of by Phillips and the commission of which Collyns heard tell being anything other than one and the same are extremely remote. One specified three targets, the other at

¹⁵J. F. Mozley, *William Tyndale* (London: SPCK, 1937). Brian Buxton notes that two earlier historians had raised the possibility that Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester (c.1495–1555), was Phillips's backer. See *House of Thomas Poyntz*, 69–70, referring to Christopher Anderson, *The Annals of the English Bible* (London: William Pickering, 1845) and Robert Demaus (though he voices scepticism about Gardiner's alleged role). See Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1871), 424. George Townsend, the Victorian editor of John Foxe, had earlier conjectured that both Gardiner and Bishop Nix of Norwich were behind Phillips's enterprise, on the grounds that one Gabriel Dunne, with whom Phillips had some connection at Leuven, had been a student at Trinity Hall in Cambridge, of which Gardiner had been Master, and to which Nix was a benefactor. See John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. G. Townsend (8 vols. London: Seeley and Burnside, 1843–49), V:812.

¹⁶Mozley, *William Tyndale*, 300, footnote.

¹⁷See *OED* (www.oed.com), "commission, n.1".

¹⁸British Library MS Cotton Galba B. x. fol. 119r: "he had a comyssion owt also for to have taken D Barnes & george Joye with other". Quotations from early modern manuscripts are given in modernised spelling in the text of this article, with original spelling in the notes. Quotations from early printed books are given as printed. In all cases, standard abbreviations and contractions are expanded.

¹⁹George Collyns to "George", Antwerp, May 1, 1535, TNA SP 1/92, fol. 115r, "ther ys comysssyon come frome the procureur generall of brysselles to tacke iij yngles men wherof one ys docktor barns" (summarised at LP 8.652). The addressee, whose surname is missing, was a mercer, apparently in London (fol. 115v).

least two. Robert Barnes was named as one of those targets in each case. The commission mentioned by Collyns was issued by the official into whose hands one of the targets of the commission held by Phillips – namely William Tyndale – was subsequently delivered. The natural inference from all this data is that the commission under which Phillips acted was the one reported by Collyns as having been issued by the Procurator-General.

Mozley's chain of reasoning, therefore, is not attached to any fixed point. Phillips's commission is easily explained without reference to English bishops. As Bishop of London, John Stokesley had no jurisdiction in Antwerp or the Netherlands, and could have issued no formal instructions or authorization for an attempted arrest there. It is not inconceivable that he might have issued unofficial instructions to someone to go after Tyndale and deliver him into an appropriate jurisdiction in the Netherlands. Nor is it inconceivable to speculate further that people might have reported this as a "commission". But to propose that Stokesley did this is an act of imagination, not of observation or ratiocination. There is no evidence for it. The regimes of Henry VIII, Mary I, and Elizabeth I all, from time to time, dabbled with the kidnapping of individuals who had taken refuge in foreign jurisdictions – usually in the Netherlands.²⁰ When they did, they wanted those individuals brought back to England to face "justice". But I know of no instance in which a mere bishop attempted such a thing. And even had Stokesley made such an attempt, his putative agent would never have described such instructions in the formal language of having "a commission out": that is the vocabulary of a public executive instrument, not of a private, unofficial, and *ultra vires* undertaking.

Mozley tried to bolster his imaginary English "commission" with evidence that, at the time, Tyndale's arrest was credited in a nebulous way to the nefarious intervention of the English bishops. "That there were great persons in the church behind Phillips," he writes, "is stated by Poyntz and by Foxe; Theobald hints at it; and according to Halle it was a belief widely held at the time."²¹ This summary is not strictly accurate. Thomas Theobald does not so much as hint at English or episcopal responsibility.²² Thomas Poyntz makes no mention of English churchmen in connection with Tyndale's arrest, neither in his letter to his brother nor in the more detailed account later published by Foxe. In his letter to his brother, Poyntz does hint darkly that these events took place by "procurement out of England", but he offers no reason or evidence for this and names no suspects.²³ Foxe does indeed insinuate that the English bishops were responsible, in a marginal note he added to Poyntz's narrative in the second edition of the "Book of Martyrs", in 1570. The note reads "Phillippes well monyed by the Englishe byshops".²⁴

²⁰Henry VIII wanted to get hold of Tyndale early in the 1530s, and pursued both Harry Phillips and Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500–58) later in the decade, though without any success. Mary's regime shipped back John Cheke (1514–57), and Elizabeth's was delighted when some zealous English merchants kidnapped Dr John Story (c.1503–71) and carried him back to England, where he was gaoled, tried, and executed as a traitor.

²¹Mozley, *William Tyndale*, 300.

²²Mozley might perhaps have confused Poyntz's letter with Theobald's, as Poyntz's letter could be taken as hinting at the episcopal involvement for which Mozley believed he had found direct evidence elsewhere.

²³Thomas Poyntz to John Poyntz, BL MS Cotton Galba B. x. fol. 66r, "procurement owght of yngland". Oddly, Poyntz makes no mention of Phillips in this letter, and states that Tyndale was "taken owght of my howse be a sargant of armys other wyse a dore wardare, and the procurer lenerall of brabant". The natural reading of this passage (that Brabant officials entered his house and arrested Tyndale) casts a modicum of doubt on the elaborate version he later supplied to Foxe, with its loving details of Phillips's despicable trickery.

²⁴John Foxe, *Actes and Monumentes* (2 vols. London: John Day, 1570), I:1224–32 (1263–71 in the online edition at <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/>): "Phillippes well monyed by the Englishe byshops". This is found in the top left margin on 1228 (online 1267). On the revision of the 1563 account of Tyndale for the 1570 edition of Foxe's work, see John N. King, "The

This is probably what gave Mozley the erroneous impression that Poyntz himself had said as much.²⁵ It is evident at a few points of his 1570 version of Tyndale's story that since 1563 Foxe had come across the brief account of Tyndale's fate in the chronicle of Henry VIII's reign compiled by Edward Hall (Mozley's "Halle") and published in 1548. Foxe's note looks as though it is embroidering Hall's remark that Tyndale was "betrayed and taken, as many sayd, not without the helpe and procurement of some bishoppes of this realme".²⁶ But such "conspiracy theory" hearsay, reported after the event by an anticlerical opponent of Henry VIII's more conservative bishops, hardly constitutes reliable evidence for believing that any English bishop had any role at all in the capture and prosecution of Tyndale.

Of all the sources invoked by Mozley, it is from Hall alone that the notion of English episcopal involvement stems. And Hall's use of the word "procurement" makes his comment look as though it embroiders the vaguer hint at "procurement out of England" dropped by Poyntz in his letter home. One might speculate that the rumor Hall relates originated in the oral circulation and embellishment of the gist of Poyntz's letter among the London merchant community. The evidence for English episcopal involvement of any kind in Tyndale's capture thus boils down to a single reference in Hall, itself acknowledged to be hearsay. There is therefore no secure basis for the Mozley Conjecture.

All that Brian Moynahan brings to the table is an alternative candidate for the role that Mozley posited on the basis of a tendentious interpretation of a few scraps of original sources. Where the Mozley Conjecture offers John Stokesley as the hidden hand behind Harry Phillips, the Moynahan Variation offers Thomas More.²⁷ As there is no persuasive reason to believe that the "commission" under which Phillips operated had emanated from England, however, there is no reason to believe that either More or Stokesley had anything to do with the case. Moreover, if one wishes to attach any credence to Mozley's theory of English involvement, then Stokesley remains a marginally more plausible culprit than More, because the nearest thing to evidence that he has – Edward Hall's report of London rumor – ascribed Tyndale's capture to the intrigues of English bishops, not to the intrigues of a layman imprisoned in the Tower of London. Throughout these events Thomas More was a prisoner in the Tower. He had neither the freedom of action nor the money to conceive, finance, and execute a plan of this nature. Nor is there any reason to think that he ever had any personal contact, direct or indirect, with Henry Phillips. The Moynahan Variation is nothing more than a flight of fancy.

The second crucial element in the Mozley Conjecture, and thus also in the Moynahan Variation, is something that struck both Thomas Poyntz and John Foxe as at once sinister and mysterious: Phillips in the Netherlands seemed to be flush with cash, and nobody

Light of Printing: William Tyndale, John Foxe, John Day, and Early Modern Print Culture," *Renaissance Quarterly* 44 (2001), 52–86.

²⁵The Victorian edition of Foxe's "Book of Martyrs", which conflates material from the various early editions, does not clearly signal that this marginal note was added only in 1570. See Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, ed. Townsend, V:122. However, Mozley used original editions, and specifically those of 1563 and 1570 (*William Tyndale*, vii), so he should have realized that this marginal note was Foxe's work.

²⁶Edward Hall, "The reign of Henry VIII", in *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre & Yorke* (London: Richard Grafton, 1548) (STC 12721), fol. 227v, under 1535.

²⁷Moynahan, *If God Spare My Life*, ch. 22, "The Paymaster", 329–54. Moynahan produces More like a rabbit out of a hat on 339.

knew for sure how he had come by it.²⁸ Where Mozley, taking up Foxe's marginal note about unspecified English bishops, conjectures that it came from Stokesley, Moynahan proposes that it came from More. To be fair, Moynahan realizes that in 1535 More was in no position to finance or mastermind conspiracies. For at the start of November 1534, a parliamentary act of attainder (26 Henry VIII, c. 23) had simply declared him guilty of "mysprision of High Treason".²⁹ His person and property were thereby put at the king's disposal, and shortly afterwards his wife wrote a plaintive letter to the king seeking pardon for her husband and relief for herself and her family. Her letter shows that the family had until then been allowed to retain the use of his income, but that their circumstances had latterly become straitened.³⁰ Moynahan's theory is therefore that More arranged everything earlier in 1534, when he still had access to financial resources and a measure of contact with the outside world.³¹ As Phillips did not matriculate at Leuven until December 14, 1534, there is certainly nothing in the timing to make this impossible.³² But there is a vast gulf between chronological possibility and historical probability. There is neither any evidence to suggest that More plotted with Phillips, nor any reason to suppose it.

Phillips was, or at least liked to be thought, "monyed". According to Foxe's narrative, Thomas Poyntz saw "that he was monyed, and would that Pointz should thinke no lesse".³³ In retrospect, there is a hint of the grifter or swindler about all this. One thinks of the forty shillings he took off Tyndale even as he betrayed him. But at the time, rightly or wrongly, his pretensions were taken seriously, and there was speculation about the source of his money. Thomas Theobald suspected that he had "great friends in England", while Phillips himself apparently pretended that he was "well beneficed in the bishopric of Exeter".³⁴ This story evidently got around, because it reached the ears of another English student who was at Leuven in autumn 1535. Robert Faryngton had matriculated there in August 1535 but was evidently back in England before Christmas, because he wrote a letter to Thomas Cromwell from Cambridge on January 12, 1536, in which he reported that he was "credibly informed" that Phillips "had two benefices and a prebend when he went over the sea".³⁵ His turn of phrase, "credibly informed", along with the fact that he passed on this information only after he had already had a meeting with Cromwell to report on his dealings with Phillips, suggests that he did

²⁸ John Foxe, *Actes and Monumentes* [1570], I:1227–28 (1266–7 online).

²⁹ *Statutes of the Realm* (11 vols in 12; London, 1810–28), III:528.

³⁰ Lady Alice More to Henry VIII, undated, but probably November or December 1534, in *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E. F. Rogers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 547–49.

³¹ Moynahan, *If God Spare My Life*, 351–53.

³² *Matricule de l'Université de Louvain*, ed. E. Reusens (10 vols. Brussels: Kiessling, 1903–67), IV.i.116, "Henricus Philippus de Anglia", matr. December 14, 1534.

³³ John Foxe, *Actes and Monumentes* [1570], I:1227 (1266 online).

³⁴ Theobald to Cranmer, BL MS Cotton Galba B. x. fol. 119v: "other this Phylleps hathe gret ffrendes in ynghland to mayntayne hym here or els as he shewed me he is well benyfyced in the bysshopyrke of exciter". Had this been true, then Phillips's benefices would have been rendered vacant by his attainder in 1539, and it would therefore have fallen to the king to present his successors. There is no sign in the patent rolls of Henry making presentations to any benefices vacated by the attainder of anyone called Phillips. Poorer benefices in the king's gift tended to be filled at the presentation of the Chancellor (Lord Chancellor) and thus not to appear in the patent rolls as royal grants. But the kind of benefices that would justify the phrase "well benyfyced" would almost certainly have cleared the threshold for the king's personal attention and disposal.

³⁵ *Matricule de l'Université de Louvain*, IV.i.124. Robert Faryngton to Cromwell, Cambridge, January 12, 1536, TNA SP1/101, fol. 69r (summarised at LP 10.85): "Pleasith it your mastershippe (as I am credeblye informyd) Phillipe had ij benefices and a prebend when he went over the see. What order his fryndes have taken with them synce his departinge your mastershippe may have soone knolege".

not hear this from the man himself, but had picked it up as gossip since then. There is, however, no evidence that Phillips had any preferment in the church, so we can be reasonably sure that he was lying, and also that he wanted to keep the source of his money secret. Of course, if there had been any wealthy English patrons behind him, he would have had good reason to keep that quiet. For Mozley and Moynahan the conclusion seemed obvious: his money had come from the Englishman who gave him his “commission”. For Mozley, that was Stokesley; for Moynahan, More. But now there is no longer any reason to believe that Phillips received his commission from England, and since there is every sign that it came from the Procurator-General in Brussels, there is no longer any reason to suppose that he was financed by an English boss.

Still more decisively, there is good evidence to explain not only how Phillips came by his money but also why he kept quiet about it. It comes from one of Thomas Cromwell’s shrewdest and most trusted agents, Richard Layton, who had wormed innumerable dirty secrets out of naïve monks and nuns in the royal visitation of the monasteries in 1535–36, thus helping to pave the way for their dissolution.³⁶ Layton had learned of it from none other than Robert Faryngton, soon after the latter’s return from Leuven. Faryngton had had some dealings with Phillips, who, he reported, had “robbed his own father, and so at that time had more money than all the Englishmen that then were there”.³⁷

That Phillips had indeed robbed his own father is amply attested and is agreed even by Mozley and Moynahan.³⁸ In their view, however, he had squandered this windfall before he left for Leuven, now with money from another source. The key question is therefore that of timing. But Layton’s story receives some support from a clutch of letters Phillips wrote to his family from Leuven or nearby, pleading to his father for forgiveness and begging the others to intercede for him. These letters, which presumably travelled together, were almost certainly captured en route, because they are found together in the State Papers.³⁹ They are probably to be identified as letters that, according to John Hutton (the English ambassador to the Netherlands from spring 1537 to autumn 1538), Phillips had sent back to England baked inside a loaf.⁴⁰ In a letter to his father,

³⁶For Layton’s particular importance in discrediting the monasteries, see Richard Rex, “The Lost *Breviarium Comperitorium* and Henry VIII’s First Act for the Dissolution of the Monasteries, 1536”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, FirstView, 2023.

³⁷Richard Layton to Cromwell, incomplete and undated, in early 1539, LP 14.i.393. The original letter is at TNA SP1/143, fol. 181r–182r. Its badly damaged and obscured opening words verify the citation from the LP summary. Phillips is not named, but is evidently the subject of this first surviving part of the letter. Layton goes on to remind Cromwell that he had told him about Phillips himself on a former occasion, when he had “brought with me a scolar then retournyde from Loyayne callyd Faryngton to declare unto you the circumstantes and the hool trewth of that Traytour his dealynges and behaviour” (fol. 181r). Faryngton’s own letter to Cromwell (see above, note 35) was presumably written after that visit. The purpose of Layton’s 1539 letter was to defend his brother William (who had matriculated at Leuven on September 20, 1537 – see *Matricule de l’Université de Louvain*, IV.i.164), and incurred Cromwell’s displeasure through his part in a bungled attempt to get Phillips back to England. William Layton had helped secure the surrender of Phillips to Thomas Wriothesley at Brussels in February 1539, but then blotted his copybook by allowing Phillips to escape while in his custody. See the letter from Edward Carne to Cromwell, Brussels, February 7, 1539, TNA SP1/143, fols 39r–40v (summarised at LP 14.i.248), reporting at 39r that Layton and his companion, one Mr Joyes, “suffred hym to departe”.

³⁸Mozley, *William Tyndale*, 299; Moynahan, *If God Spare My Life*, 325–26. Brian Buxton, *House of Thomas Poyntz*, 77, asks whether Phillips might have stolen his father’s money, but seems unaware of the evidence and consensus that he had done so.

³⁹Harry Phillips’s undated letters to (respectively) his mother (Emelyn), his father (Richard), Dr Brerewood (Chancellor of Exeter), his brother-in-law Richard Seward, his brother Thomas, his brother-in-law John Stoker, and his brother William, are bound together at TNA SP1/100, fols. 78–85, and summarised at LP 9.1138–44.

⁴⁰John Hutton to Cromwell, Brussels, May 26, 1537, TNA SP1/120, fols 205r–208v (LP 12.i.1293), at fol. 206r–v, reports Phillips’s boast, in relation to another plot requiring clandestine correspondence, that “I have devysid to do as I did by sarten letters that I sent to my father wiche was I cawssid them to be baken with in a loffe of bred and soo ar

seeking forgiveness “after the transaction of a long time”, Phillips laments that calumny has followed him through Flanders, Germany, Italy, and France, while to his mother he indicates that three years have passed since his offence against his father (begging that what “one or two years could not obtain, let three years purchase”).⁴¹ Counting back three years from 1537 takes us to 1534. In that case, Phillips had probably run off with his father’s money in summer 1534, which would fit very well with his arrival at Leuven in December that year.

The story Phillips told his mother is confirmed by what is known of his travels. In summer 1535 he was planning to leave the Netherlands for Paris.⁴² He was at Rome by May 1536.⁴³ And he was back in the Netherlands by May 1537, when the new English ambassador, John Hutton, managed to win his confidence.⁴⁴ His visit to Rome demands attention because according to the king’s agent there, Gregorio Casale (or Casali), Phillips was passing himself off as a relative and servant of Thomas More and as a victim of persecution by Henry VIII for upholding papal supremacy. Casale, however, informed the pope’s secretary that Phillips was a “good for nothing and a great rascal of mean birth, who was accustomed to make his living by trickery and deceit” and warned him that harboring English thieves who pretended persecution could only bring the papal court into disrepute.⁴⁵ There is no reason to credit any of the claims Phillips made in Rome in hope of finding favor, and judging by the fact that he does not seem to have stayed there long, it does not look as though this gambit paid off.

There is, then, a straightforward and well-documented explanation of why Phillips had plenty of money when he arrived in the Netherlands late in 1534, one that fits with what is known of his untrustworthy character. Once we appreciate that his “monied” status was the fruit of embezzlement rather than an advance on services to be rendered, the whole notion that he left England on a secret mission crumbles away. The taking of Tyndale was more likely his own venture, embarked upon as a way to

we apoyntid to do with thois”. For Hutton’s position as ambassador, see Gary M. Bell, *A Handlist of British Diplomatic Representatives, 1509–1688* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1990), 176.

⁴¹Phillips to Richard Phillips, SP1/100, fol. 80r-v, at 80r, “after the transactione of a longe tyme”; and to his mother, Emelyn, SP1/100, fols. 78r–79r, at 78v, “be good unto me, and that one oder two yere cold not obtayne, lett iij yerys porrchase”. For more on Richard Phillips, see the entry for Richard Phelips of Poole and Charborough in the History of Parliament online database of MPs, 1509–1558, at <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/>.

⁴²Theobald to Cranmer, July 31, 1535, said he had sold his books for 20 marks, “entendynng to goo hens to parres” (BL MS Cotton Galba B x, fol. 119v; LP 8.1151). Brian Buxton suggests that a letter written by Mary Basset puts Phillips in Paris by March 1536 (*House of Thomas Poyntz*, 42). But Mary Basset’s comment in a letter to Philippa Basset, “There is a gentleman here who is called Philip, and for love of your name he sendeth you a little basket”, gives no reason to identify that man with Tyndale’s betrayer. See Mary Basset to Philippa Basset, Abbeville, March 13, 1536, in *The Lisle Letters*, ed. Muriel St. Clare Byrne (6 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), vol. 3, pp. 165. Edward Carne reported much later that another English expatriate student, Mr Stokes, had admitted seeing Phillips at Paris “raggyd and torne”, and lending him some clothes – which Phillips stole (Carne to Cromwell, Brussels, February 7, 1539, SP1/143, fol. 40v; LP 14.i.248). But Phillips’s dishevelled state probably places this sighting after his return from Italy. Thomas Stokes matriculated at Leuven on January 17, 1539 (*Matricule de l’Université de Louvain*, IV.i.186).

⁴³Phillips is mentioned in two despatches sent from Rome by Gregorio Casale. See Casale to Cromwell, Rome, May 3, 1536, TNA SP1/103, fols. 224r–226r (LP 10.796); and Rome, May 6, 1536, BL MS Cotton Vitellius B xiv, fols. 191r–192v (LP 10.814).

⁴⁴Hutton to Cromwell, Brussels, May 26, 1537.

⁴⁵Casale to Cromwell, Rome, 3 May 1536, SP1/103, fol. 225r-v: “Ex Pontificis secretario cognovi, Anglum quendam Philippum nomine ad Pontificis familiaritatem aspiran[tem] opera Cardinalis Caraccioli, qui eum ut virum doctum nobilem-que commendat, atque Thomae Moro consanguineum et necessarium fuisse, nuncque serenissimum Regem eum persequi propter ea et quod sedis apostolicae autoritatem asseruisset. . . Ideo secretario dixi irridens hunc humili loco natum esse hominem nequam et nebulonem magnum, qui sibi per dolos et fallacias victum soleat quaerere”.

win favor and perhaps reward. The “commission” under which he went about his work was a commission from the relevant jurisdiction in the Netherlands, not from a foreign jurisdiction in London operating *ultra vires*, and still less from a private individual languishing in the Tower. Phillips was an accredited agent of the Procurator-General of Brabant, not the catspaw of shadowy English conspirators.

The Moynahan Variation, therefore, has nothing to commend it beyond its audacity. It is sheer speculation, utterly unfounded, and propped up by rickety arguments. The crucial issues are the source of Phillips’s commission and the source of his funds. There is no reason to believe that his commission was anything other than the one known to have been issued by the Procurator-General. And there is no reason to believe that the funds he had in 1535 were anything other than monies he had embezzled from his own father. The groundless claim that Thomas More was responsible for Tyn-dale’s betrayal and capture was, regrettably, taken up and popularized by a celebrated and widely known novelist who cultivated a reputation for respecting “historical facts”. It must be recognized for what it is – mere fiction.