

The 'Learned' vs. The 'Unlearned' Shakespeare

Frank Davis

Shakespeare's prodigious learning has become a truism, yet it wasn't always so. Indeed, as recently as 1913 J.M. Robertson confidently belittled his legal knowledge in *The Baconian Heresy*, a book written to combat the idea that Sir Francis Bacon was the true author of the canon. Ironically, Robertson's argument served only to highlight the contradiction between what can be reasonably inferred about Shakespeare's education—the Shakspeare of Stratford, that is—and what is manifest in the *Collected Works of Shakespeare*.

The difficulty is one of the major weaknesses in conventional authorship scholarship. Barely three years after Robertson, Sir George Greenwood posed the paradox of the "Learned versus the Unlearned" Shakespeare in *Is There a Shakespeare Problem?* (111-167). How was it possible, Greenwood inquired, for a man who by all accounts was at best lightly educated, to produce some of the most learned and intellectually profound works in all literature? How could a provincial lad come by such celebrated depths of human understanding without extensive reading and, perhaps even less likely, encountering large numbers of people in great varieties of locale and circumstance, from Italy to Scotland, embracing the lowest to the highest in each land? This problem is well characterized in a poem that was written by a friend of Greenwood published in the above mentioned book (vii, emphasis added):



Sir George Greenwood
1850-1928

"When, Greenwood, you assert that those who write
On Shakespeare's Life invariably place
A heavy structure on a narrow base,
And finding that the facts are few and slight
Indulge conjecture in unmeasured flight-
You state the simple truth, and prove your case.
Indeed, biographers must now efface
The fabulous and bring the truth to light."

G.H. Radford, M.P.

Traditional Scholars

Modern Shakespeare scholars largely ignore the problem, perhaps because they don't see it. Their unexamined axiom is that the author of the *Collected Works* was a genius and thus omniscient—case closed. Yet as our colleague Prof. Robin Fox has well reported, one may be born with superior abilities but an education—particularly the kind of up-to-date information possessed by the author of the *Collected Works*—must still be acquired (113-136). This would have been especially difficult in an era when books were rare and expensive, and travel abroad even more so.

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scholars become uneasy and evasive. They begin to invent unlikely scenarios: If Shakespeare displays a deep and wide familiarity with Greek and Latin classics not yet translated into English in his day, as Earl

Showerman, for example, has overwhelmingly demonstrated,¹ this merely proves how superior Elizabethan provincial education really was—equal, it is sometimes claimed, to that of a modern first-year Classics student. If he knows how to swear in demotic French, or what it feels like to go down with your ship, or understands the detailed functioning of canal traffic in Tuscany, as Richard Roe shows in *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*, who's to say he didn't acquire this knowledge chatting with sailors and soldiers in London's east-end taverns? As for his easy familiarity with earls, and archbishops and the dangerous opportunities of Elizabethan court politics, Shakespeare "might have" developed it on the occasions his company played before the queen. To explain Shakespeare's knowledge of law, why, he must have worked in a law office. Or, explaining Shakespeare's knowledge of medicine, it was nothing special but just medical ideas that the public was aware of. So it goes.

The Unlearned Shakespeare

Among the earliest witnesses to Shakespeare's ignorance was Ben Jonson, who in 1619 commented to Drummond of Hawthorne that his fellow dramatist had "wanted arte."

This was followed by his famous dedicatory observation in the 1623 Folio that Shakespeare possessed "small Latin and lesse Greeke," later the ironic title of a famous book by T.W. Baldwin (1944) positing just the opposite. Jonson's final comment, published posthumously in the Timber papers (1637), contained his almost equally famous wish that Shakespeare "had blotted a thousand" [lines], that is, picked his words more scrupulously.

But this was just the beginning. In 1663 Thomas Fuller's *History of English Worthies* again reported that Shakespeare's "learning was very little..." and "like Plautus, was never any scholar" (284). In that same year the Reverend John Ward noted in his diary that he had "heard" that "Mr. Shakespeare was a natural wit, without any art at all." As

the vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon at the time, i.e., only 46 years after Shakespeare's death, it is conceivable Ward was told this by one of his parishioners, perhaps even someone who knew Shakespeare personally. Finally, it was Ward who reported that Shakespeare "supplied the stage with two plays every year," now routinely accepted as fact, noting that he had "for it...an allowance so large, that he spent at the rate of 1000 £ a year, as I have heard." It was also Ward who reported that Shakespeare's death resulted from a drinking bout with Jonson and Drayton.

Rowe's Biography

Shakespeare's first biographer was Nicholas Rowe (1709), who noted that apparently he had "left school early." Rowe added: "It is without controversie, that he had no knowledge of the Writings of the Antient poets." This information was given to Rowe by Thomas Betterton, who went to Stratford on Rowe's behalf to investigate.

In 1767 Dr. Richard Farmer observed in his *Essay on Shakespeare's Learning* that the playwright was a fundamentally uncultured man who "knew no language other than his own" and "wrote as it were by plenary inspiration." This judgment prevailed for more than another century. In the 1880s even Halliwell-Phillips could still write that

Although the information at present accessible does not enable us to determine the exact nature of Shakespeare's occupations from his fourteenth to his eighteenth year, that is to say from 1577 to 1582, there can be no hesitation in concluding that during that animated and receptive period of life, he was mercifully released from what, to a spirit like his, must have been the deleterious monotony of a school education."²

These judgments, together with Rowe's biography and Betterton's reports gave credibility to the tradition that Shakespeare never completed grammar school. He was, as Milton memorably expressed it, simply "fancy's child warbling his native woodnotes wild."³

The Learned Shakespeare

But by the latter part of the 19th Century scholars were increasingly forced to recognize Shakespeare's expansive knowledge. In 1903, Prof. Churlton Collins argued that while the dramatist wrote not by design but by "inspiration" and "genius," it was clear that "with some at least of the principal Latin classics he was intimately acquainted." As Greenwood observed, not without irony, scholarship had finally moved from a Shakespeare who "knew no language but his own" to one at least "acquainted with some of the principal Latin classics" (Greenwood 113). Greenwood went on to identify Dr. William Maginn and Prof. Spencer Baynws as representatives of a new trend maintaining that "the works themselves" showed that the author was endowed with an amount of learning totally inconsistent with the "never no scholar" theory of the "unlearned Shakespeare" school (111-112).

By the 1940s scholarly opinion had taken a decisive turn, thanks in great measure to T.W. Baldwin's 1944 two-volume classic, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*. While "in no sense a book on Shakspeare's education," Baldwin concluded that:

Whether or not Shakspeare ever spent a single day in petty or grammar school, petty and grammar school were a powerful shaping influence upon him, as they were, and were planned to be, upon the whole society of his day...If Shakspeare did attend the Stratford grammar school and completed his level-two studies and graduated, he would be a long way onto being on course to be capable of being a writer.⁴

It must be acknowledged that *if* he attended and completed his level two studies and graduated are two big questions. This is at odds with what was said of Shakspeare's learning over most of the previous 300 years.

Baldwin's impact may be gauged by F.P. Wilson's 1949 review. "Few who have read through T.W. Baldwin's thesis," he wrote,

will have the strength to deny that Shakspeare acquired the grammar-school training of his day in grammar, logic, and rhetoric, that he could and did read in the originals some Terrence and Plautus, some Ovid and Virgil; that possessing a reading knowledge of Latin all those short-cuts to learning *in florigia* and *compendia* were at his service if he cared to avail himself of them; and that he read Latin not in the spirit of a scholar but a poet (15).

Classical Sources

Baldwin's work consummated decades of research. Throughout the late 19th Century more and more classical sources were identified in Shakespeare's works. Sir Sidney Lee himself offered this list:

Belleforest <i>Histoires Tragiques</i>	(<i>Hamlet</i>)
Ser Giovanni <i>Il Pecorone</i>	(<i>Merchant of Venice</i>)
Cinthio <i>Hecatommithi</i>	(<i>Othello</i>)
Plautus <i>Menaechmi</i>	(<i>Comedy of Errors</i>)
Sophocles <i>Electra</i>	(<i>Hamlet</i>)
Sophocles <i>Oedipus Coloneus</i>	(<i>2 Henry IV</i>)
Euripides <i>Andromache</i>	(<i>Hamlet, Sonnets, 62</i>)
Aeschulus <i>Persae</i>	(<i>Hamlet</i>)
Aeschulus <i>Clytemnestra</i>	Lady Macbeth

Yet even Lee doubted some of his own evidence. Apparent references in Shakespeare included Greek, Latin, French and Italian authors never taught in Elizabethan petty or grammar schools. Lee's unpersuasive conclusion was that these echoes must simply be "coincidences" or "accidental" (13).

Oxfordian Evidence

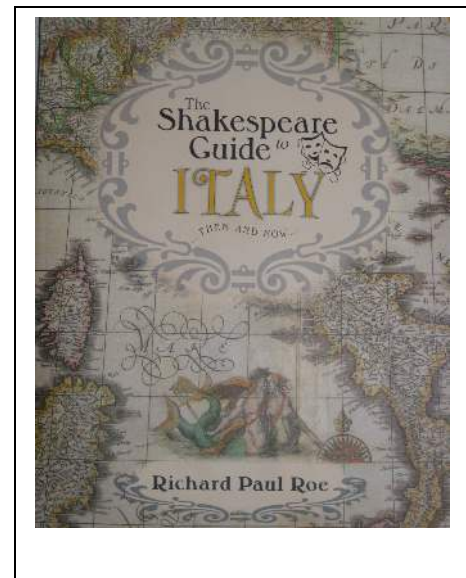
More recently, however, Robin Fox has taken up the issue of “Shakespeare, Oxford and the Grammar School Question” in the pages of this journal. Rather than debate the merits of Elizabethan education, Fox made the subtler observation (assuming the traditional author is our man) that

Whatever he got from Stratford, it is not sufficient to explain the plays and poems, which contain a breadth of knowledge and experience, and an attitude, that go way beyond small-town Warwickshire.

And:

A grammar school education is then not a sufficient explanation of the author’s knowledge and ability.⁵

Supporting Fox’s conclusion, Richard Paul Roe’s long awaited *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*, published in a commemorative publication (2010), records countless remarkable discoveries clearly demonstrating that the author of the plays and poems must have traveled extensively in Italy. Among Roe’s discoveries is the identification of Prospero’s island as Vulcano, a rock in the Tyrrhenian sea; the location of St Peter’s Church and the sycamore grove mentioned in *Romeo and Juliet*; and the finding of the “Duke’s oak” in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* where Quince and Bottom were to meet. Roe’s noteworthy book is scheduled to be published by HarperCollins in 2011.



Shakspere versus Shakespeare

The debate over the Unlearned versus the Learned Shakespeare becomes less confusing and more productive if we separate the actor from the author. Clearly the brain behind the plays and poems was highly literate—perhaps none more so. But was Shakspere the actor literate? The surprising answer is, not necessarily.

First, we must look at the issue of literacy in England during the Elizabethan period. Despite Michael Wood’s claim, based on More’s *Apologye* (1533) that “England was probably the most literate society that had yet existed” (50), David Cressy’s *Literacy & the Social Order* (1980) shows that the literacy rate for English men in 1641-44 was no more than 30 percent.⁶ Extrapolating further from Cressy, the rate in Warwickshire, 1570-1590, i.e., Shakspere’s place and time, would have been barely 25% (142-174).

What we mean by “literacy” must also be examined. Laura Stevenson demonstrated in 1984 that “Writing skills don’t necessarily reflect one’s ability to read” (53). Thomas Corns echoes: “...social historians have often argued that the ability to read may have been enjoyed by some who were not able to write” (2). According to John Brewer (1997), literacy today means “the ability to read *and* write.” He adds:

Throughout history, reading has been more common than writing, partly because writing materials were so expensive...Some estimates of literacy are based on who could sign their names on church registers. It’s generally believed that the reading rate was substantially higher than what would be indicated by the number of people who could write (155).

A clear example of the ability to read but not write is found in a work contemporary with Shakespeare. Edmund Coote’s *The English Schoole-maister*, published in 1596 contains this revealing exchange:

John: How do you write people?

Robert: I cannot write.

John: I mean not so, but when I say write I mean spell, for in my meaning they are both one.

Robert: Then I answer you p,e,o,p,l,e.

(Cressy 21)

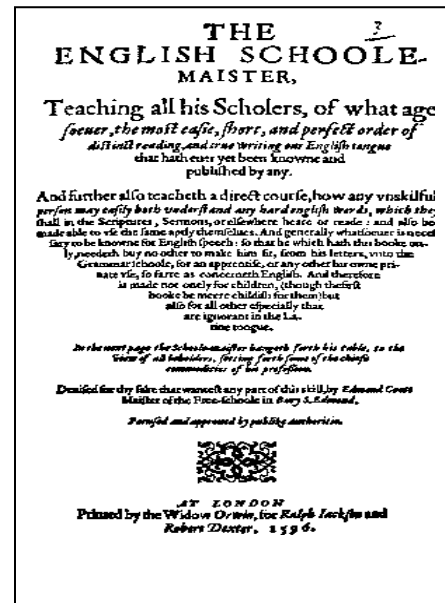
It should also be noted that according to James Daybell in 2005, “The ability to perform a rudimentary signature rather than making a mark, an act that could be learned as a trick, does not provide a qualitative indication of the extent of individuals’ literary skills” (695).

Among players, a majority were undoubtedly literate in the full sense.⁷ As evidenced by Henslowe’s Diary and other documents noted by Honigmann & Brock in *Playhouse Wills*, a majority of actors could read and sign their names legibly. However, there are documented exceptions.

Three Suspected Illiterate Actors

1. Hugh Davis

F.G. Fleay reported in 1881 that Hew Davis was such an example of an illiterate actor. This case, however, is questionable, despite Davis being listed on the Royal Historical Society’s actor list of 1578-1642, probably on the basis of Fleay’s report (44-81). Fleay listed page f2v of Henslowe’s Diary as his source:



Lent unto Francis Henslowe the 8 of maye 1593 to laye downe for his share
to the Queenes players when they broke & went into the countrey to playe
the some of fifteen pownd to be payd unto me at his retorne out of the countrey.
I say lent

Wittnes John towne
Hew Daves & E. Alleyn

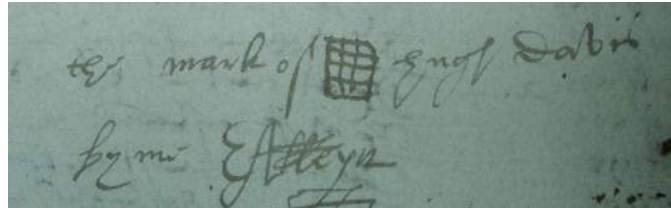


Fig. 1: “the mark of hugh Davis by me E Alleyn”

Davis signed only with a mark (Fig.1). I agree with Greg and Chambers who did not believe this document alone warranted considering Davis an actor. In the quote from Henslowe above, he is only listed as a witness. Davis is mentioned on nine other occasions in the Diary but only because he was a renter of lodging from Henslowe or witnessing a receipt. Nothing else suggests his being an actor. It is more likely he worked on sets or did other menial jobs for Henslowe.

2. Jaques Jones

Jaques Jones is a better example of an illiterate actor. Honigmann and Brock transcribe the will, dated June 7, 1628, of Jaques Jones who signs with a mark (161). Jack Jones is recorded as a boy actor in the dramatic plot of *I Tamar Cam* found with Henslowe’s Papers; the date of the production is believed to be 1602 (Foakes 332). Given that Jones died in 1628 and was probably about 14 or 15 when a “boy actor,” the age seems to fit our suspect, Jaques.

The question of literacy among boy actors is understandable, since there would be little chance for the boy actor to attend grammar school if active in the theater. His learning would more likely be derived from the adult actors. Learning to read would be of paramount necessity whereas the ability to write much less important.

3. William Sly

Sly, Slye or sometimes Slie or Slee was a common name in Warwickshire. Unlike the other two suspects above, we have considerably more biographical information on him due to his greater achievements in the theater. Sly (Christopher) is the name given for the drunkard in the Induction to the *Taming of a Shrew* and *Taming of the Shrew*.

In *The Shrew* Sly refers to persons/places in Warwickshire. However, we have no

evidence of William Sly's birth. His later residence was found to be in the parish of St. Saviour's in the neighborhood of the Bankside theaters. In 1588 he resided in Norman's Rents, and a "widow Sly" who might have been his mother lived near Philip Henslowe at the east end of Bankside. In 1593 Sly was to be found living at Horseshoe Court where also lived the actors Augustine Phillips, Richard Jones and Thomas Downton. After the building of the Globe in 1595, Sly had moved to Rose Alley next to Henslowe's playhouse. He was still there in 1596, but thereafter there is no record of his domicile.

Sly was first recorded as acting in Tarlton's *Second Part of the Seven Deadly Sins* sometime before 1588. In 1594, Henslowe records in his diary that Sly bought a gold jewel from him:

Sowld unto William Sly, the 11 of October, 1594, a Jewell of gowld, seat with a whitte safer, for viijs, to be payd after xijd a weake, as followeth.

Although Henslowe's record fails to note that Sly fully paid for the jewel, the fact that he bought it was indicative of some degree of affluence.

Sly is mentioned again in the Henslowe papers (13 March, 1598) where in an inventory is recorded a "Perowes sewt [suit], which Wm Sley were [wore]" (Foakes 322). This is proof that Sly did indeed act for Henslowe at this point or sometime earlier. Two years later, Sly is found acting with the Lord Chamberlain's company acting at the Globe and Blackfriars. In 1596, Sly was one of the petitioners to the Privy Council for permission to repair and enlarge Blackfriars. He was one of eight "owners and players." Sly was one of the performers listed on James I patent granted in 1603 to the same list of actors.

Sly acted in Marston's *The Malcontent*, which was printed in 1604. The play was presented before James I by the "King's Majesties servants" whereby Sly, Sinklow, Burbadge, Condell, and Lowin are introduced by their names. Other plays Sly is found to have acted in include *Every Man in his Humor* in 1598, *Every Man out of his Humor* in 1599, *Sejanus* in 1603, and *Volpone* in 1605. Sly became a shareholder in the Blackfriar's playhouse in 1608, the year that he died; and he was listed among the principal actors in the 1623 First Folio.

Sly was appointed 4 May, 1605 as one of the overseers and later executors of the will of Augustine Phillips. Although he apparently never married, in 1606 he had a son, John, who lived only a few days:

Christened: John, sonne of William Sley (player), base-borne on the body of Margaret Chambers, 24 Sept., 1606.

Buried: John, sonne of William Sly, player, (base) 4 Oct., 1606.

Sly, himself, was buried less than two years later. The registers of St. Leonard record:

1608. William Sleye, gent., was buried the same day [16 August].

It is interesting that at his death we see Sly described as a “gentleman” apparently due to his successes both as an actor and financially. Sly’s will was dated August 4 and proved on August 24. According to Chalmers, the will was contested by a “William Sly” who claimed to be next of kin. This contestation failed. Sly signed his will only with an “X” mark. His share in the Globe was left to a Robert Browne. It is uncertain if this is the same Robert Browne who wrote a letter to Edward Alleyn in favor of a player and his wife of the name of Rose. A codicil to the will bequeathed Sly’s sword to Cuthbert Burbadge, and 40 shilling to the poor of the parish where Sly died (Collier 151-158).

So being a Renaissance actor does not prove Sly had ability in writing—certainly not to the degree of a highly successful author.

Shakspeare’s Signatures

Shakspeare’s signatures have attracted the attention of scholars like Greenwood, Thompson, Tannenbaum and myself (Davis 8-13). What has yet to be done is a comparison between those signatures and those of his contemporary actors and writers. In what follows I restrict my discussion to the six examples almost universally accepted as the dramatist’s, ignoring the eight or ten now considered forgeries.

Shakspeare’s six acknowledged signatures are all in the English secretary hand. This is surprising in itself, given that the vast majority of even the most minor writers, as well as some actors, used the Italian style when writing their names. The English Secretary hand was generally kept for notes or letters. In 1899 Sylvanus Urban called attention to this when he said:

Educated men who had been to the Universities or had travelled abroad were capable of employing with equal facility both the English and the Italian character, and though they employed the former in their ordinary correspondence, they signed their names in the Italian hand (206).

And furthermore:

Nowhere have I found a signature [i.e. Shakspeare’s] so distinctly “English” (207).

Sir George Greenwood found it “extraordinary” that Shakspeare, as author of the plays and poems of Shakespeare should not have learned to write the Italian script (22). He went on to admonish Sidney Lee for his statement that Shakspeare “should not have taken the trouble to do so” [write in the Italian hand]. Greenwood points out that Shakespeare certainly knew the value of the art of good handwriting, quoting from *Hamlet*:

I sat me down;
Devised a new commission; wrote it fair
I once did hold it, as our statists do,
A baseness to write fair, and labour’d much
How to forget that learning: But, sir, now
It did me yeoman’s service. (V.ii.35-40)

And in *Twelfth Night*, when Malvolio speaks of the forged Olivia letter:

I think we do know the sweet Roman hand. (III.iv.31)

The six currently “unquestioned” Shakspere autographs (Tannenbaum, vii), consist of two on documents relating to the purchase of Blackfriars, March, 1613; three in Shakspere’s will of 1616; and one on the Bellott vs. Mountjoy deposition, May 11, 1612. This important document was discovered in 1909 by the Americans, Dr. and Mrs. Charles Wallace, who spent years in England researching Shakespeare-related material.

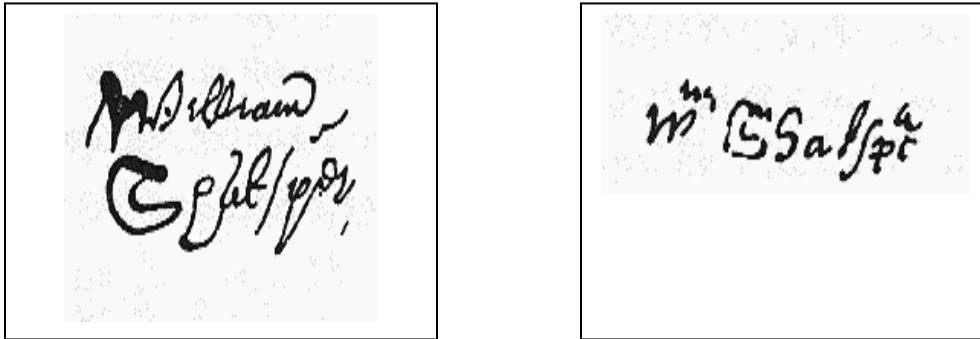


Fig. 2 a and b: The Blackfriars Signatures

It is important to acknowledge that the authenticity of some of these signatures is still questioned, for example by Jane Cox, formerly Custodian of the Wills at the Public Records Office, who writes:

It is obvious at a glance that these signatures, with the exception of the last two [the Blackfriars signatures] are not the signatures of the same man. Almost every letter is formed in a different way in each. Literate men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed personalized signatures much as people do today and it is unthinkable that Shakespeare did not. Which of the signatures reproduced here is the genuine article is anybody’s guess (24-35).

The documents related to the purchase of the Blackfriars gatehouse by Shakspere (and Trustees) consist of a deed dated March 10, 1613, located in the Guildhall Library, for conveying the house, and a mortgage-deed, now in the British Library, dated March 11, 1613. These documents have been thoroughly examined and described by Greenwood, Thompson, Halliwell-Phillipps and many others.⁸ Greenwood “has no doubts” that the transactions were actually carried out on the same day (14).

The Will Signatures

Three signatures are found on Shakspere’s will, one each at the bottom of pages one and two, with the third in the middle of the final page (Fig.. 3 a, b and c).

The third signature is particularly important. Its first part, “By me William” appears obviously to have been written by another hand than the one writing “Shaksper.” This has been noted by others, including some Stratfordians. C.C. Stopes even suggested that the words “By me” may have been written by the lawyer (Tannenbaum 153).

Edward Thompson postulated that Shakspeare suffered from “writer’s cramps” and that “It was only when he came to the capital S ...that his hand gave way” (64-5). The question of “writer’s cramps” was investigated by Ralph W. Leftwich, M.D. when he studied the signatures and compared them with 20 “recognized signs” of writer’s cramps. Leftwich found “unimpeachable” evidence supporting the condition:

Thus every one of the nineteen signs collected by me is present and I submit that a diagnosis of writer’s cramp is unimpeachable. Every condition precedent, whether of age, of occupation, of chronicity, or of freedom from bodily or mental disease is fulfilled in the history of the case and every objective sign in the handwriting has been demonstrated. It should be a source of satisfaction to us that any misgivings as to Shakespeare’s illiteracy have been set at rest by these investigations, for Baconians and others have been hard to argue with (37).

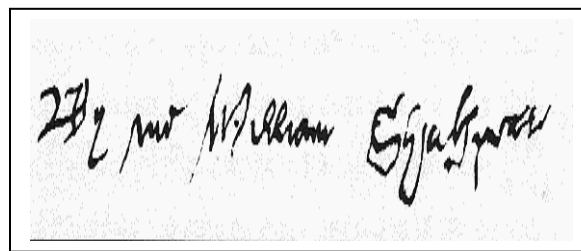
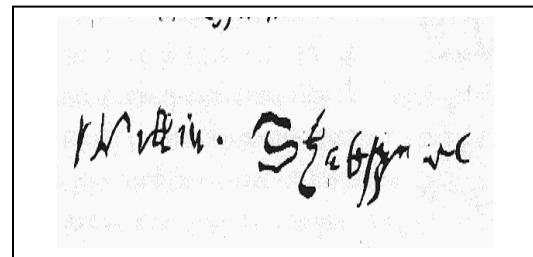
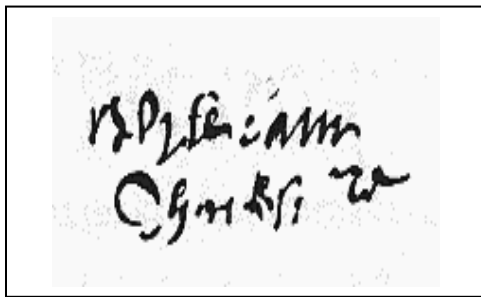


Fig. 3 a, b, c: Signatures on the Will

Whatever the case, it seems more likely that the difference in the writing could only be explained by Shakspeare’s lack of writing skill, or by his being too sick at the signing of his will. However, the latter would not explain the similarity with the other poorly exercised signatures, 3 and 4 years before his death, attributed to him. What is clear is that the sudden increase in the importance of his signatures was prompted by rise of the authorship issue in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The Mountjoy Deposition

There seems no difference of opinion among academics that this signature was without a doubt that of the man, Shakspere, and not that of a scribe or attorney. It is, no less, still a poorly contrived autograph despite the accolades some orthodox scholars attempt to give it.

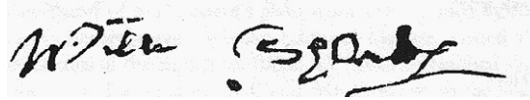


Fig. 4 Signature on The Mountjoy Deposition

Despite more than a century of examination, experts have not been able to come to an agreement about Shakspere's spelling of his own name. Their illegibility of course complicates matters, though his apparent uncertainty tends to confirm his early reputation as unlearned.

This becomes much more significant when a comparison of his signatures is made with his contemporaries, both actors and especially writers. The examples below, all of them clear and legible whether in the English secretary or Italian hand, should be sufficient to make the point that there is reason to question William Shakspere's writing ability. If he were in the profession of writing for a living as well as acting, how can we justify the discrepancy between his ability to sign his name in comparison with his fellow actors, let alone his contemporary writers? Note that even the signatures in English secretarial hand are clearly signed with each letter distinct, something not present in Shakspere's signatures.

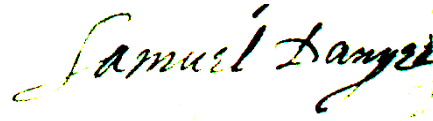
Writers' Signatures

Anthony Mundy

Michael Drayton



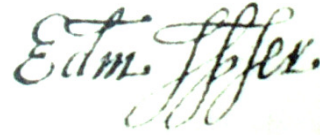
Edward Dyer



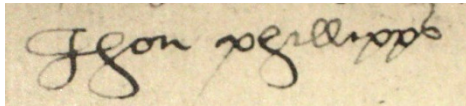
Samuel Danyel



Gabriel Harvey
(Latinized signature)



Edmund Spenser



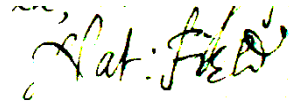
Jhon Phillipps
(Secretarial hand showing
each letter distinctively)



Ben Jonson



John Daye



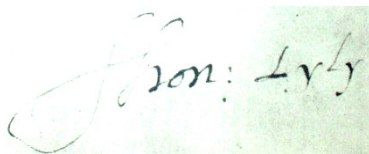
Nathan Field



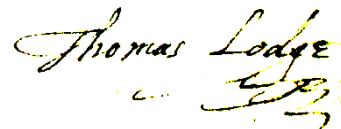
Henry Porter



Thomas Kydd



Jhon Lyly



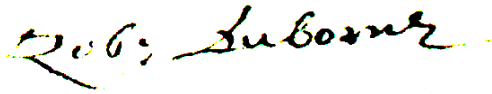
Thomas Lodge



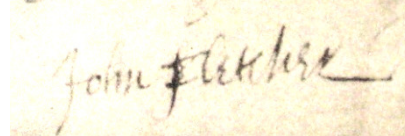
Anthony Wadeson



Thomas Middleton



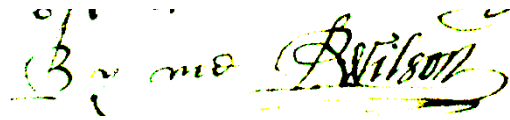
Robert Duborne



John Fletcher



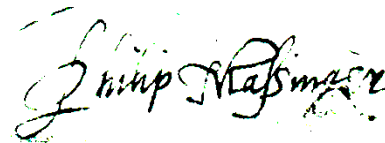
Thomas Heywood



Robert Wilson



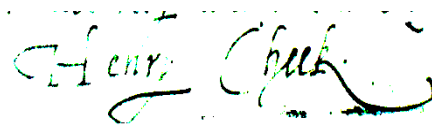
George Peele



Philip Massinger

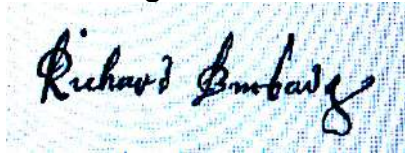


John Marston



Henry Cheek

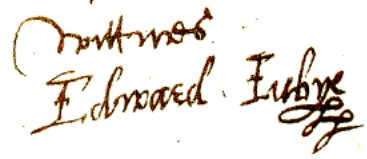
Actors' Signatures



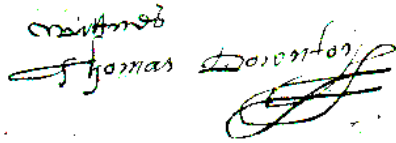
Richard Burbadge(e)



Edward Alleyn



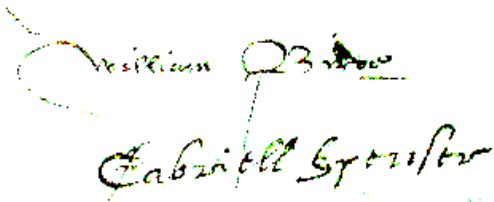
Edward Juby



Thomas Downton



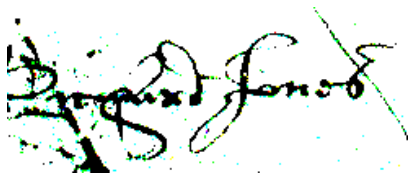
Robert Shaa & Thomas Towne



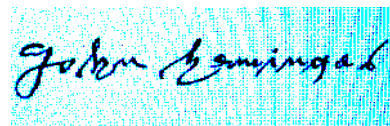
William Birde & Gabriel Spenser



William Birde



Richard Jones



John Heminges

Many more examples can be found in Henslowe's diary and papers⁹, and W.W. Greg's books on autographs and manuscripts. Perhaps significantly, Greg omitted Shakespeare's signatures in his great work, *English Literary Autographs*. His astounding excuse for not including these six signatures is given in the Introduction to his book:

Of course, it will be understood that of many authors I should have liked to include no autograph was available, beyond, in some cases, a bare signature, which I had decided was of no use for my purpose.

It is possible Greg was concerned about the side-by-side comparison of Shakespeare's penmanship.

Conclusions

Modern biographers continue to maintain that Shakspeare completed grammar school. But this is at odds with what we know about his education, i.e., nothing, and ignores contemporary reports and opinions for over 200 years after his death. Henslowe's diary and papers and Honnigmann's book make it clear that most actors were almost certainly literate or at least capable of signing their names legibly. However, the ability to write was not a requirement to being an actor as it was common at the time that many could read yet not be able to write. When signing their names, particularly to documents, special care was normally taken. No other actor's signature, let alone writer's signatures, was as illegible as Shakspeare's casting doubt that he would go into the profession of writing as a means of earning a living.

The difficulty in the case of Shakespeare is of course resolved if we recognize that he was not the author of the plays attributed to him. They were written by someone highly literate, educated, widely travelled and familiar with aspects of Elizabethan court life. The plays and poems are certainly beyond the scope of a barely literate provincial lad who could hardly write his own name.

Notes

¹ *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 11, pp. 207-234, 2009; *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 7, pp. 89-114.

² vol. I, 57.

³ *Samson Agonistes and the Shorter Poems of Milton*. "L' Allegro", Ed. I.G. MacCaffrey, The Signet Classic Poetry Series, New English Library. London, 1966, pp. 78-89, line 133.

⁴ vii-viii Ibid.

⁵ Fox 134

⁶ Excepting London, where the literacy rate was 78% 74.

⁷ Evidenced by Henslowe's Diary and other documents as noted by Honigmann & Brock's work in *Playhouse Wills*,

⁸ Oxfordian Robert Detobel's notable article on the subject raises many questions and gives a detailed evaluation of these two signatures as well as the other signatures <http://www.shakespearefellowship.org/virtualclassroom/stateofdebate/detobel%20signatures.htm>.

⁹ Henslowe's diary and papers are now available in digitalized form from Dulwich College at www.henslowe-alley.org.uk/catalogue/catalogue.html

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Declaration of Reasonable Doubt About the Identity of William Shakespeare

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To Shakespeare lovers everywhere as well as to those encountering him for the first time: know that a great mystery lies before you. How could William 'Shakespeare' of Stratford have been the author, William Shakespeare, and leave no definitive evidence of it that dates from his lifetime? And why is there an enormous gulf between the alleged author's life and the contents of his works? In the annals of world literature, William Shakespeare is an icon of towering greatness. **But who was he?** The following are among the many outstanding writers, thinkers, actors, directors and statesmen of the past who have expressed **doubt that Mr. 'Shakespeare' wrote the works of William Shakespeare:**

Mark Twain	Orson Welles	William James	Paul H. Nitze
Henry James	Leslie Howard	Sigmund Freud	Lord Palmerston
Walt Whitman	Tyrone Guthrie	Clifton Fadiman	William Y. Elliott
Charles Dickens	Charlie Chaplin	John Galsworthy	Lewis F. Powell, Jr.
Ralph Waldo Emerson	Sir John Gielgud	Mortimer J. Adler	Harry A. Blackmun

Present-day doubters include many prominent individuals, numerous leading Shakespeare actors, and growing numbers of English professors. Brunel University in West London, and Concordia University in Portland, Oregon, now offer degree programs in authorship studies. **Yet orthodox scholars claim that there is *no room for doubt* that Mr. Shakespeare wrote the plays and poems traditionally attributed to him.**

We, the undersigned, hereby declare our view that that **there is room for reasonable doubt** about the identity of William Shakespeare, and that it is an important question for anyone seeking to understand the works, the formative literary culture in which they were produced, or the nature of literary creativity and genius. Many people think that Mr. Shakespeare (a frequent spelling of his name, used here to distinguish him from the author) claimed to have written the works. No such record exists. The case for him as author rests largely on testimony in the First Folio collection of the plays, published in 1623, seven years after he died. However, nothing in the contemporaneous documentary evidence of his life confirms the Folio testimony. Of a few great writers, like Homer, we know nothing at all; but there is only one great writer about whom the more we learn, the less he appears to have been a writer. How can this be for England's Shakespeare?

To read, sign and download the completed declaration, including summaries of Evidence both for and against Mr. Shakespeare, go to www.DoubtAboutWill.org

If writers and thinkers of the stature of Henry James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and all the rest of the outstanding people named above, have expressed doubt that Mr. William Shakespeare of Stratford wrote the works attributed to him, why is it even necessary to say that there is room for doubt? There clearly is doubt, as a matter of empirical fact – reasonable doubt, expressed by very credible people. Reasonable people may differ about whether a preponderance of the evidence supports Mr. Shakespeare, **but it is simply not credible for anyone to claim, in 2009, that there is no room for doubt about the author.**

Therefore, in adding our names to these of the distinguished individuals named above, we hereby declare that the identity of William Shakespeare should, henceforth, be regarded in academia as a legitimate issue for research and publication, and an appropriate topic for instruction and discussion in classrooms.