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## The hand of a lawyer's clerk

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Six Shakespeare signatures are regularly reproduced in reference books. Four are preserved in the Public Record Office, one in the Guildhall Library and one in the British Library. Their authenticity has often been disputed, even by their custodians. The proper approach to all graphological problems, including historical cipher and shorthand, is by way of objective analysis, such as counting and classification. This soon shows that the signatures use some forty-five different characters, although only about fifteen are needed (For example, there are three kinds of capital W.) No doubt Shakespeare remains at least thrice as varied, in every respect, as most other writers. But some extra explanation seems called for. Presumably he was so conversant with the various styles of Tudor handwriting that he could try his hand to any of them and use their letter-forms *ad libitum*.

That inference is fully conformable with the facts. Provincial schoolboys in the 1560s learned the secretary hand, while London dramatists in the 1580s used an italic script for proper names and stage directions. Most of the letter-forms in each signature are penned in secretary style, but some (such as the minuscule "h" in the British Library signature) look much more like italic. The quirky abbreviations and ornaments suggest professional calligraphic training as a scrivener, or lawyer's clerk.

Such points were detected by two experienced palaeographers, Sir Edward Maunde Thompson (in *Shakespeare Handwriting*, 1916) and E. B. Everitt in *The Young Shakespeare*, 1954). Yet their findings have made no impact at all on today's scholars, who lack the requisite expertise. Thus the unqualified Samuel Schoenbaum continuously scoffs (in *Shakespeare's Lives*, 1970 and 1991) at Everitt's meticulous analyses and their clear corollaries. Like so much modern scholarship this dismissal derives directly and solely from personal preconceptions: of course our genteel Bard cannot possibly have devilled for lawyers, whatever any expert explains.

This anti-legal prejudice is also displayed in successive accounts of a putative seventh Shakespeare signature found in the Folger Library copy of Lambarde's *Archaionomia* (1568), a compilation of pre-Conquest regnal statutes in Anglo-Saxon and Latin. In 1942, the Folger palaeographer Giles Dawson published a report cautiously concluding that the signer was the Playwright, "perhaps because he owned the book – a strange volume indeed for his library". In other words it is for modern commentators, not Shakespeare himself, to decide what books he ought to own and read. Even in his youth, furthermore, he is imagined as a library-owner, far too grand for a mere bookshelf. These revealing assumptions are shared and echoed by Schoenbaum forty years later (*Records and Images*, 1981): "the volume...still seems an odd choice for Shakespeare's library". But surely no future finder of a text-book on logic, say, signed by Giles Dawson or Samuel Schoenbaum, would announce (however sorely tempted) that this was an odd choice or a strange volume for them to own? Unassuming common sense says that if Shakespeare signed a legal textbook, then he owned it, at a time when he was studying law, presumably in the 1580s.

Giles Dawson (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, Spring 1992) now finds "an overwhelming probability that the writer of all seven signatures was the same person, William Shakespeare" though he does not mention the scholar who first gave this seventh signature serious and informed consideration, Professor Nicholas Knight of Missouri-Rolla (*Shakespeare's Hidden Life: Shakespeare at the law*, 1973). The anti-legal prejudice has prevailed. Schoenbaum has spent twenty years dismissing everyone, however knowledgeable, who "revives the... old and generally discredited theory that Shakespeare during the lost years occupied himself a lawyer's scrivener", though this is a clear conclusion from documented fact, often pronounced by professional lawyers and paleographers, and there is no objective evidence or argument against it. Schoenbaum (op cit, 1981) writes that Professor Knight "tends to lose sight of the fact that the Chancery litigants in the [fifteen] nineties were John and Mary Shakespeare, not their son William". In fact, all three were named parties to a twenty-year battle; for the recovery of family land and property which Shakespeare himself, as the eldest son, stood to inherit. Indeed, by another obvious but overlooked inference, it was he who instigated and financed those protracted lawsuits.

No one has ever reported any detailed analysis of the Folger *Archaionomia*, although it is covered with manuscript annotations, bracketings and underlinings. For example, the cruel punishments by mutilation decreed by King Canute, and executed at his command in the play of *Edmund Ironside*, are underlined in red; so this book (and indeed the actual copy signed by Shakespeare, as Dawson now deposes) may well have been the playwright's source. In the same Folger volume, a later hand records Shakespeare's address as "No 1 Little Crown St Westminster, NB near Dorset Steps St James's Park", a location which is still readily identifiable; my own researches place it near Downing Street, a suitable residential area for

our national poet. Tudor lawsuits were heard in Westminster Hall; the lawyers lodged in that vicinity. The aid statutes in *Archaeionomia* include regulations about land and property; of course Shakespeare would study those subjects as part of the family campaign to reclaim the estates his father had forfeited.

The contemptuous term applied to law-clerking by Greene and Nashe was "noverint", the first Latin word of a typical Tudor bond as appended to the Stratford document recording the sale of land and property by John and Mary Shakespeare on October 15, 1579. Their son William, whose later signatures suggest training as a law-clerk, was then fifteen and a half. The clerkly penmanship (an excerpt is reproduced in Schoenbaum's *Documentary Life*, 1975) looks startlingly like that of the *Ironsides* MS in the British Library (Egerton 1994). Both documents have their right-hand margins ruled or pricked by an impressed stylus. That play (lines 1789-95) deplores the loss of a father's land. Similar allusions occur in the canonical works, such as "those foresaid lands/ So by his father lost" and "those lands / Lost by his father" in *Hamlet* (I.i.103-4, I.ii.23-4). Nashe described the 1589 version of that play as the work of a "noverint" or lawyer's clerk. Yet the manifest inferences about the authorship in the 1602, first edition, "by William Shakespeare", and about the real name of Shakespeare's son, are still regularly rejected out of hand, for no reason at all. So is the independent affidavit of the documents expert Charles Hamilton, a lifelong specialist in handwriting identification (compare his 1985 book *In Search of Shakespeare*) that the *Ironsides* manuscript is a Shakespeare holograph. The testimony about Shakespeare's early legal training is equally compelling; yet this too is ignored or denied. Even the 1859 judgment of Chief Justice John Campbell, that the language of Shakespeare's will suggests professional legal experience on the part of the testator is set aside by Samuel Schoenbaum, who accuses Campbell of "tampering with the rules of evidence", on no evidence at all (*Shakespeare's Lives*, 1970 and 1991).

Of course, a trained law-clerk would draw up his own will. Equally typically, however, the experts violently contradict themselves and each other about everything else. According to a 1985 Public Record Office handbook, now in process of much-needed revision, it is obvious at a glance that most of the signatures are not those of the same man; so even the will signatures may be inauthentic. Yet the same source argues, absurdly, that Shakespeare cannot have written his own will because its hand differs from its signatures, and anyhow "no gentleman penned his own last wishes". This characteristic combination of confusion and snobbery culminates in a transcript of the will which incorporates some eighty errors. A Shakespeare Institute palaeographer, conversely, sees (also at a glance) that the signatures, though certainly authentic, differ from the writing in the will, which is hence not holograph. But in fact they are not different: each of their letter-forms can be matched in the will, which shows the same variability. Further, in other wills of the period the first two words of the famous phrase "By me, William Shakespeare" have the well-known meaning "in my own hand". Yet those words are condemned *a priori* as devoid of any meaning or sense whatever. Ignorance also begets phantoms like "Francis Collins", who was invented to write the will that Shakespeare is not allowed to, or "Collins's clerk", who was then invented to explain why the will does not seem to be in Collins's hand either. It appears that the only person who could not possibly have penned it is Shakespeare himself, who could never have been a lowly law-clerk.

As a result, the insurrection scene in the British Library manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* (Harley 7368) is also distrusted, instead of being used as further evidence of Shakespeare's handwriting. The legend that he wrote no extant document, announced as fact by the Public Record Office, exercises a fatal influence. Scholars such as Andrew Gurr are still sceptical about the *More* hand, despite a century of detailed argument. Hardly any modern Shakespeareans possess enough palaeographic expertise to form any firm judgment of their own. The same applies to many other possible examples, such as the letter of 1592 signed but not written by the third Earl of Southampton, at a time when Shakespeare was in his service, perhaps as his secretary (*Sunday Times*, April 19, 1981); the British Library's annotated copy of Hall's *Chronicle*, or its Montaigne inscribed "Will<sup>m</sup> Shakespeare"; the annotated Bodleian volume inscribed "W<sup>m</sup> Sh<sup>re</sup>", with the note "This little Books of Ovid was given to me by W. Hall who says it was once Will. Shakesperes. T. N.1682"; the Tudor Prayerbook inscribed "William Shakespeare" and "W. Shakespeare" recently sold at auction; and many Stratford and other documents including *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* MS identified as Shakespeare's by Everitt (1954) and Hamilton (1993).

Of course, there are perils in the path of all concerned, professional or amateur. Prejudice in favour of genuineness may dig even deeper pitfalls than prejudice against. Perhaps computer technology can one day decide. Meanwhile, apparent authority can always err. Thus the then Oxford Professor of Poetry, Peter Levi, after consultation with Oxford palaeographer wrongly identified certain verses as Shakespeare's and published them in a transcription containing some thirty errors. The only defence against such *débauches* is to acquire one's own expertise, or else opt for agnosticism. All serious researchers into this or any other aspect of Shakespeare studies should trust no one, unless and until they have studied the facts and documents for themselves.