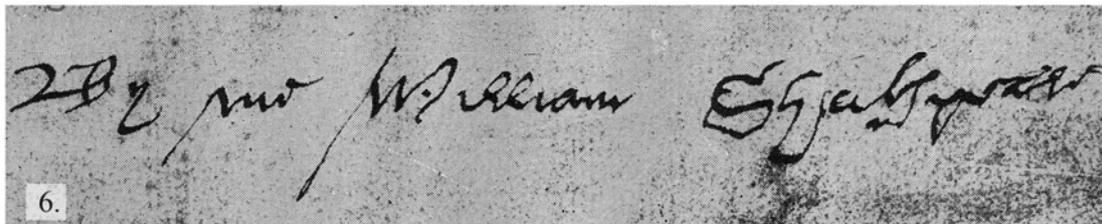
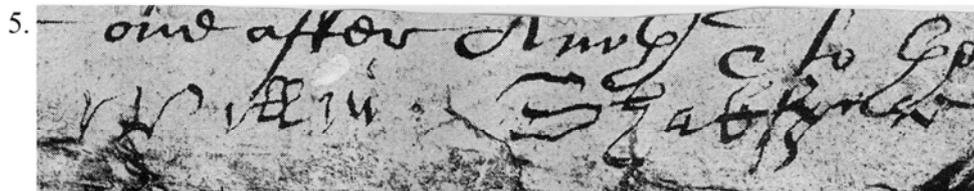
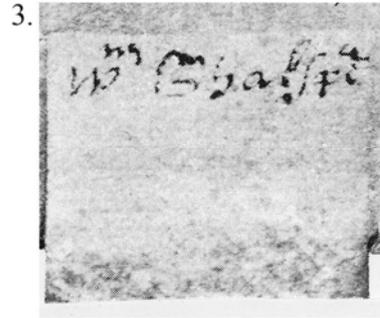
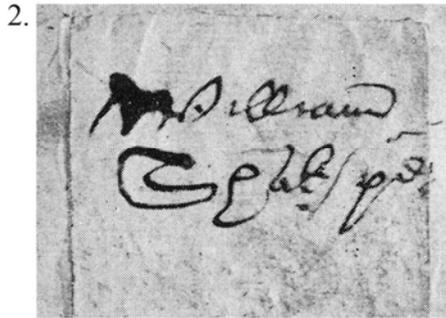


WILLIAM SHAKSPERE'S SIX SO-CALLED SIGNATURES



All that has been discovered allegedly in William Shakspeare of Stratford's handwriting, after nearly three centuries of exhaustive research, are these six signatures or, more accurately, writings of his name, on legal documents. The earliest of these was written in 1612, when he was 48. The second and third are on the transfer and mortgage deeds of a conveyancing transaction of 1613. The other three are on his will, dated 25 March, 1616, a month before he died, aged 52. Nothing else has been discovered in his handwriting, not a manuscript, or a letter or even a scribbled note. Many people, including surprisingly enough some well-known Baconian authors, assume that Shakspeare wrote his will, but he did not. It was written by his lawyer or one of his lawyer's clerks.

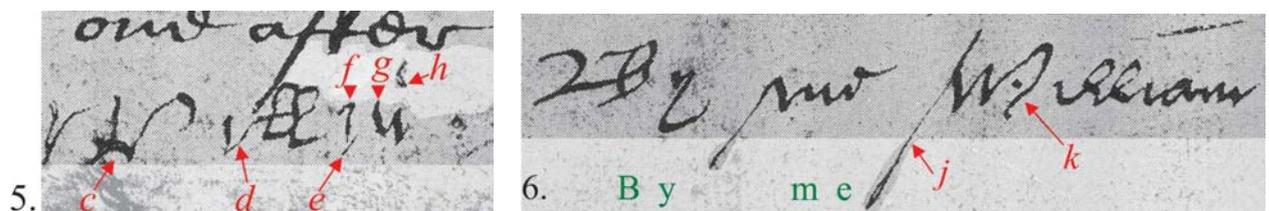
Another far more general assumption by Stratfordians and Baconians alike is that Shakspeare wrote *all* of the six signatures attributed to him. This notion has come to be taken for granted and what is surprising is that so few people have thought of questioning it .

Most people who are able to write have formed individual signatures by the time they are adults and these signatures change little in the course of their lives, particularly when written on legal documents where they are important for identification. What is extraordinary about William Shakspeare's six so-called signatures is that, although they were all written on legal documents in the last four years of his life, they are very different from one another. In fact the differences are so marked that they seem to have been written by six different hands. Even the three on his will, which must have been written within minutes of one another, appear to have been written, wholly or in part, by three different persons.

It is not necessary to be a professional expert in handwriting in order to see these differences and to realise their significance; all that is needed is a good eye and an open mind, something that experts and top academics do not always have. To make a modern comparison, it does not require expertise in physics or metallurgy to know that a tower whose structure is sustained by 100,000 tons of steel cannot be melted, or bent, let alone blown up and totally destroyed, by an aluminium aircraft carrying 100 tons of airfuel.

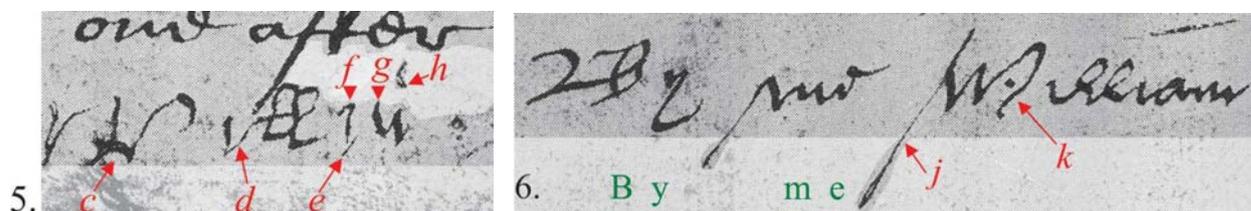
Perhaps the clearest evidence that more than one person wrote William Shakspeare's so-called signatures can be seen by comparing the first names of Nos 5 and 6, the second and third signatures on his will. Not only is the formation of the letters different in each case, but what is more significant is the difference in the quality of the writing. The 'William' of 6 is fluently and competently written, while the 'Willm' (or is it 'Willin'?) of 5 is the crude and laborious product of a person with little skill or practice in writing.

The six letters following the 'W' of No 6 are all smoothly connected . On the other hand, in the hesitant and painstaking formation of first name of No 5, during which the pen was lifted at least fourteen times, there is no fluent linking between the letters. The first 'i' is rather ineptly connected to the first 'l', the diagonal stroke from the foot of the 'i' changing direction and the pen being lifted twice before forming the horizontal beginnings of the loop of the 'l' (see red letter 'd' with arrow). These are all signs of poor writing skill.



The well-written capital 'W' of No 6 is much like the letter of today, apart from its long first upward stroke (see arrow 'j') and neatly curved third downstroke (see arrow 'k'). Note the small dot in the space between this downstroke and the third upstroke. This is sometimes regarded as decorative, but it had the practical purpose of

clearly distinguishing a capital 'W' from other letters. This practice was generally followed by lawyers and legal clerks but it was not confined to them. It is worth noting that the capital W's of signatures No 1 and 2 also have these distinguishing dots, suggesting that they were probably, but not necessarily, written by lawyers or legal clerks.



The 'W' of No 5 follows a different though acceptable model with its horizontal stroke to the right at the base of the second downstroke (see 'c') – but note, among the letter's other awkward elements, the blotchy mess at the foot of that second downstroke and the excessive thickness of the horizontal stroke. Again what a comparison between No 5 and No 6 shows is not only that the two W's were written by two different persons but that one was a competent writer (possibly the lawyer who drew up the will, or his clerk) and the other (presumably William Shakspeare) was not. It cannot have been the other way round, for, if Shakspeare had been capable of writing the words 'By me William' as they appear on the document he would have written all three signatures on the will himself, and with the same competence.

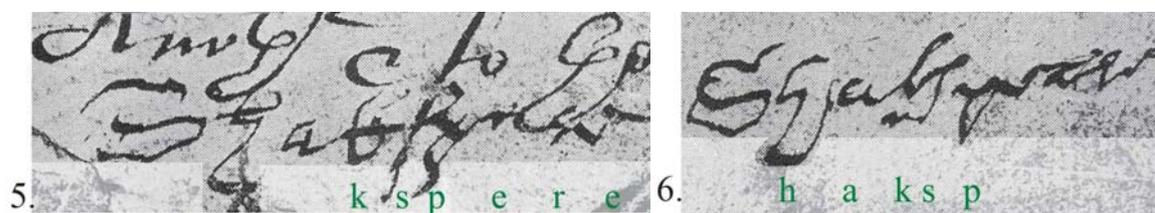
It is generally held that the first name of No 5 ends with an 'm' with a short vertical squiggle (see 'h') above the last stroke of the letter to indicate that the word has been abbreviated ('Willm'). If the letter is an 'm', it has been poorly formed, as (i) there is an excessive space between the first downstroke (see 'f') and the second (see 'g') and (ii) there is no normal upward diagonal stroke linking the first downstroke to the second.

But is the letter ending the abbreviation an 'm'? There is a short diagonal stroke below the first downstroke (see 'e'). This is not a connecting stroke, as it begins to the left of the downstroke and ends equidistantly to the right. Its purpose is to underline the first downstroke and this shows it to be a completed 'i', not the initial stroke of an 'm'. In which case the space that follows is not excessive but appropriate, as it does not come between the first two downstrokes of an 'm' but in order to separate two distinct letters, an 'i' and an 'n'.

So either the second syllable of 'William' has been abbreviated to a crudely composed 'm', or, as seems far more probable, it has been abbreviated to 'in', hardly an acceptable abbreviation, even in those days of great spelling irregularity. 'Willin Shakspeare'! One could not have imagined the author of over a hundred thousand lines of great dramatic verse writing his first name like that. But one might have imagined Shakspeare, the barely literate countryman of Stratford, doing so, and here surely is proof that he did. 'Willin Shakspeare'? It makes one think of the ever-'willin' Barkis in *David Copperfield*, a slightly different example of semi-literacy.

Looking now at the surnames of signatures Nos 5 and 6, it can be seen that they have certain features in common: in both the spelling appears to be the same, as far as it is

legible, and in both the first syllable *is* legible, while the second degenerates into a barely legible or totally illegible scrawl. Furthermore there is a similarity in the overall shapes of these two surnames, unlike the surnames in signatures 1 – 4. These common features have generally been accepted as sufficient indication that the last two surnames were written by the same person, presumably the testator, William Shakspere, who also wrote the first name of No 5.



But the differences between the two surnames are more marked than the similarities, as can be seen by comparing them, letter by letter. It can also be seen that for the most part they are not standard and acceptable differences in the formation of the letters but differences in crudities and malformations that reveal the writer's poor skill. Even the crude scrawls purporting to be the last three letters are different in each case.

It has been suggested (even asserted) that the reason for these defects was that Shakespeare was suffering from writer's cramp, or a mental ailment, or enfeeblement through long sickness and approaching death. Stratfordian experts are divided on this issue, offering arguments for and against each of these three possibilities (and others); but what is really significant about these theories and assertions is that they all acknowledge that there is 'something wrong' with the writing, it is not 'good', not what we might have expected from the writer of the plays.

A number of further points need to be made here, regarding Shakspere's mental and physical capability at the time. One is that the opening sentence of the will (not written by Shakspere himself, of course) reads, '...I William Shackspeare...in perfect health & memorie God be prayed...' – not 'I William Shackspeare sick in body but sound in mind' or some such phrase indicating physical debility or approaching death. The second point is that just before he signed the will Shakspere had a number of changes and additions made to it, all requiring active thought and judgment. The third point is that he did not die immediately or soon after signing the will, but almost a month later.

Furthermore, where the quality of the writing is at its worst, in fact where it can scarcely be called writing – i.e., in the last syllables of the surnames of Nos 5 and 6 – there is no lack of vigour in the formation (or malformation) of the letters. This can be seen in the thickness of much of the stroke-making. What is revealed here is not debility or feebleness but simply very poor writing skill.

The writer of these two surnames and the first name of No 5 seems to have been a person who never fully mastered the art, or practised it sufficiently to form an individual signature. It is the writing of a person who learnt the rudiments at some stage of his life, but he wrote very little and seldom even signed his name.

Moving to No 4, the first signature on the will, the first name is fairly clear, unlike the surname, most of which has been virtually obliterated. Apart from the fat over-inked

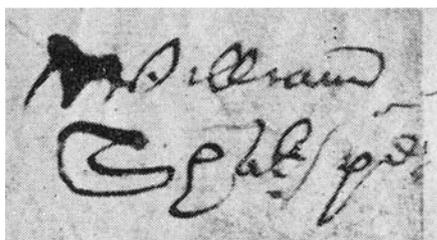
strokes of the ‘W’ and the blot that almost completely hides the ‘a’, what is most noticeable in the writing is the irregularity of the sizes of the letters. The first ‘i’ is nearly the same height as the first ‘l’ and it descends below the level of the other letters. The broken loop of this ‘l’ is distended clumsily to the right, as a result of which the second ‘l’ has been squashed under it and looks more like a small modern ‘e’. The downstroke of the second ‘i’ is minute, only a little bigger than the dot above it. Also noticeable are the excessively wide spaces between this ‘i’ and the letters that precede and follow it. The last two letters appear to have been adequately formed, in spite of the blot that hides most of the ‘a’.

4. W i l l i a m

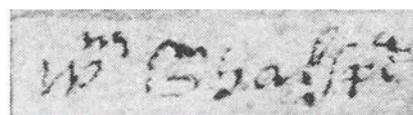


Although the faults referred to in the ‘William’ of No 4 show poor writing ability, it is more fluently written than the ‘Willin’ of No 5 and on the whole the letters are better formed; but the differences in the writing of the two names are so great that it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that they were written by the same person and within a matter of minutes of one another. Nor, clearly, was No 4 written by the competent writer of ‘By me William’ of No 6.

Signature No 2 was written on the square paper seal that was stuck onto a deed of transfer to William Shakespeare of a Blackfriars property. It was dated 10th March, 1613. No 3 was written on the seal that was stuck onto the mortgage bond taken out on the same property. It was dated the following day, as was usual with mortgage bonds, to leave no doubt that the transaction took place after and not before the deed of transfer; but almost certainly No 3 was written on the same day as No 2 and only a short while after it. Both are competent pieces of writing but, as already stated, they are totally different from Nos 4, 5 and 6, and they are so different from one another that they must have been written by two different hands, most probably both legal clerks. The surname of No 2 was abbreviated to ‘Shakspe’ and written below the first name in order to fit it on the narrow paper seal. For the same reason in No 3 the names were abbreviated to ‘Wm Shakspe’. However the fact that the names were not written in full in itself indicates that they were not intended as legal signatures. Here is what an eminent lawyer wrote about Nos 2 and 3 and the documents on which they were found:



2. h a k s p e



3. W^m S h a k s p e

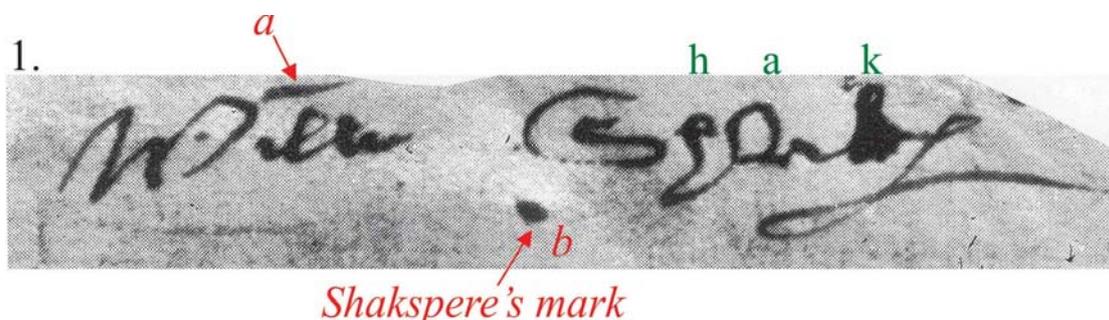
“Neither of these documents states that it was ‘signed’ but only says that it was ‘sealed’, and it was at that date in no way necessary that any signatures

should be written over the seals, but that clerks might and evidently did, place upon these deeds an abbreviated name of William Shakespeare over the seals of each document. In the case of the other two parties to the documents, the signatures are most beautifully written and are almost absolutely identical in the two deeds.

“Look at these two (so-called) signatures. To myself it is difficult to imagine that anyone with eyes to see could suppose them to be signatures by the same hand.”

That is what Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence wrote a hundred years ago in his book *Bacon is Shakespeare* (p.38). When he arranged for the two signatures, one of which was in the British Museum, the other in the London Corporation Library, to be placed next to one another and examined, the experts from both institutions agreed that they were written by two different persons and that neither was a signature of William Shakspeare.

Now last, because it possibly provides the most significant piece of evidence on Shakspeare’s handwriting, the so-called signature No 1. Though chronologically the earliest of the signatures, it was the last of the six to be discovered – in 1910 by a devoted Shakespearean researcher, a Canadian Dr Wallace. Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, former Director of the British Museum, regarded this as ‘by far the best’ of the first three signatures, in spite of the wildly ill-formed ‘a’ and the badly blotted ‘k’ of the abbreviated surname. ‘It is dashed off with freedom,’ Sir Edward said, ‘and it conveys the impression of coming from a ready writer.’ Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence would have agreed with Sir Edward in this, but he would not have agreed as to who the writer was. The plain fact is that the person who wrote the whole of signature No 5 and the surname of No 6 was not capable of writing No 1. Using a similar expression to Sir Edward, Sir Edwin said Signature 1 was not ‘dashed off’ but ‘dashed in’ or interposed ‘by the ready pen’ not of Shakspeare, but *of the clerk who wrote the deposition*. As it was abbreviated, this piece of writing would not have been acceptable as a signature on a deposition, nor was it intended as such. It was simply intended as an indicant, hastily written immediately above the *mark* that Shakspeare made in lieu of a signature. This small oval perfectly legal mark can be clearly seen just below the backward curve and flourish of the ‘S’ of the surname (see arrow ‘b’).



The most likely person to have written signature No 1 is indeed the clerk who wrote Shakspeare’s deposition, as Sir Edwin so triumphantly asserts. And although there are differences between the writing of the first syllable of ‘Shakespeare’ here and in other parts of the deposition one can see a similarity in the general formation of the letters

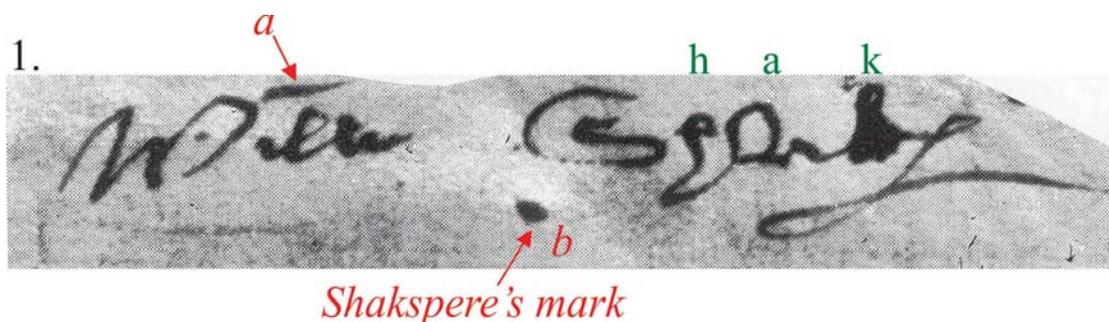
and differences were probably the result of the haste with which the clerk scribbled the abbreviated names.

There is however a more conclusive piece of evidence that the clerk wrote this 'signature'. A distinctly individual feature of his handwriting in the deposition is that sometimes, instead of dotting his small 'i's, he 'dashes' them! Examples of this can be seen in two phrases from the deposition (see arrows 'l' and 'm' below):



In both we see the word 'him' dashed instead of dotted, though in 'l' the dash is some way to the right of the 'i'. There are a number of other examples of this in the deposition, but on the whole the clerk's 'dashing' of his 'i's is far less frequent than his more regular 'dotting' of them. What is also noticeable is that he never fails to leave his small 'i's without either a dot or a dash.

Now look at the first name of signature No 1. Note the dash starting above the 'i' of the first syllable (see arrow 'a'). This dash is generally regarded as an indication that the name has been abbreviated, and it might be so, but, one might ask, why then was this not indicated with a mark above the last letter, as in Nos 2, 3 and 5? In view of the clerk's known idiosyncrasy, should we not conclude that this dash was made in lieu of a dot above the 'i' of 'Wilm', which would otherwise have been left undotted? But whether or not the clerk who wrote the deposition also wrote this signature, it clear the writer of signature 5 and the surname of 6 (i.e., William Shakspere) did not. He simply made his small oval mark. It seems that, like his father John Shakspere before him, he preferred to let his lawyers or their clerks do his writing for him. His father, who was for a period the Stratford bailiff, signed his name with a cross, and so did most of the other members of the town council.



In conclusion I am reminded of another example of a cross made in lieu of a signature. In the matter of William Shakspere's marriage to Anne Hathaway a bond of

sureties was drawn up in the Bishop of Worcester's registry on 27th November 1582. William was eighteen and Anne was twenty-seven, three months pregnant and described as a 'maiden'. Referring to this bond of sureties, E.K. Chambers wrote: 'In the lower margin are two marks, apparently a cross and an English capital S' (*William Shakespeare*, Vol.2, p.41).

And who was more likely to have put his cross to the bond than the young man who was responsible for the not-so-young maiden's pregnancy? That would mean that at eighteen William Shakspeare could not write his name and he never attended the Stratford Grammar School, which Stratfordians tell us gave him the wonderful education that enabled him to write the plays!

I wish to acknowledge quotations from Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence, *Bacon is Shakespeare* (Gay & Hancock, London, 1910) Ch. XIV, and from Sir Edward Maunde Thompson's article *Handwriting*, from *Shakespeare's England* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1916) Vol 1, p. 300.

Walter Saunders

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