The Six So-Called Signatures of William Shakspere of Stratford

The British lawyer and voluminous Baconian writer Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence who was very familiar with legal documents and wills subjected the Shakspere will and the other three signatures (the 'signature' in the Bellot v Mountjoy case was dealt with in his Postscriptum) to a close examination. With the permission of the Corporation of London the intrepid Durning-Lawrence arranged for the Librarian and the Chairman of the Library Committee to transfer the Purchase Deed to the British Museum to place it side by side with the Mortgage Deed:

> After they had with myself and the Museum Authorities most carefully examined the two deeds, the Librarian of the City Corporation said to me, there is no reason to suppose that the Corporation deed has upon it the signature of Wm. Shakespeare, and the British Museum Authorities likewise told me that they did not think that the Museum Mortgage Deed had upon it a signature of William Shakespeare. The more you examine the whole five the more you will be certain, as the writer is, after the most careful study of the Will and of the Deeds, that not one of the five writings is a "signature," or pretends to be a "signature," and that therefore there is a probability, practically amounting to a certainty, that the Stratford Actor could not so much as manage to scrawl his own name.[1]

On closely examining all the so-called six signatures Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence delivered his damning verdict:

> Thus the question, whether William Shakespeare, of Stratford-upon-Avon, Gentleman, could or could not write his name is for ever settled in the negative, and there is not doubt, there can be no doubt, upon this matter.[2]

On the final page of the will and testament of William Shakspere of Stratford we read that Francis Bacon's relative Thomas Russell, esquire and Francis Collins, gent were appointed its overseers. At this time Bacon was attorney- general and soon to be Lord Keeper and Lord Chancellor under whose jurisdiction Collins (of whom there is no *DNB*/*ODNB*!) would fall and whose authority he ultimately answered to. Followed by the statement 'And [I] doe Revoke All former wills & published this to be my last will and testament.' The will is 'signed' by five witnesses: Francis Collins, Julius Shaw, John Robinson, Hamnet Sadler and Robert Whatcott. Aside from Collins, the other four 'signatures' are written with the same pen and ink. It was clear to Archibald Stalker (**not an anti-Stratfordian**) that:

> one man wrote the four signatures. The 'R' in 'Robinson' is a very tricky, swiftly-written 'R,' with a horizontal line for what should be the final curve, and it can be seen exactly repeated several times in the will. Other resemblances could no doubt be found. The four signatures are the same script in size, shape, slope, proportions, and are in the handwriting of the will itself. The signature of Collyns is the same handwriting, merely put on a different slope and a little disguised. As these names were not signatures there were no witnesses to the signature by Shakespeare of this mangled document, and I do not see how it could stand as a legal instrument if it had been challenged.[3]

In his *Outlines* the **orthodox Shakespeare authority** Halliwell-Phillips gave without comment a facsimile of Collyns's signature, taken from an authentic document, and as might be expected it is as different from the signature on Shakspere's will as any two kinds of writing in the same language could be.[4]

All three pages of the will carry a 'signature' supposedly by William Shakspere with all three 'signed' and spelt differently ('William Shakspere', 'Willm Shakspere', 'William Shakspeare') from the man supposed to be the greatest writer in the history of the world. Which are again

different from the other three 'signatures' found in the deposition of the *Bellot v. Mountjoy* case and the conveyance and mortgage documents relating to the Blackfriars property.

Seventy-five years after the British Museum authorities and the Librarian and the Chairman of the City Corporation keepers of the documents relating to the Blackfriars property adjudicated on the two Shakspere 'signatures' in the negative, officialdom decided to closely examine all six of the so-called Shakspere signatures.

The Principal Assistant Keeper of the Public Record Jane Cox of the Public Record Office, the longtime custodians of the last will and testament of Shakspere, in her official capacity dared say out loud what has been staring the Custodians of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in the face for the last two centuries that some (or all) of the so-called Shakspere signatures, are not from the hand of the same man:

It is obvious at a glance that these signatures with the exception of the last two [claimed by others to have been written by legal representatives or clerks], are not the signatures of the same man. Almost every letter is formed in a different way in each.

An article by Sir Hilary Jenkinson [**not an anti-Stratfordian**], published in 1922, gives a clue to what the solution might be. It was his opinion that clerks taking down the evidence of witnesses in law suits often 'signed' it the deponent's name themselves, using a different hand from that which they had used for the body of the text to give it 'an air of verisimilitude'. So much for the signature on the deponent given by Shakespeare to the Court of Requests. If this was the practice in the equity courts, why should it not have been the practice of attorney's clerks when drawing up conveyancing documents? Possibly Shakespeare was not even in London to sign the mortgage deed and the deed of purchase for the Blackfriars gatehouse.[5]

The six non-existent signatures of William Shakspere and Hand D in the manuscript of the Shakespeare play *Sir Thomas More*

In 'Shakespeare's Hand Unknown in *Sir Thomas More*: Thompson, Dawson, and the Futility of the Paleographic Argument' **the orthodox Shakespeare scholar** Michael L. Hays delivered his devastating verdict on Sir Edward Maunde Thompson palaeographer & Principal Librarian and First Director of the British Museum and Dr Giles E. Dawson, curator of rare books and manuscripts at the Folger Shakespeare Library:

Thompson's and Dawson's arguments reflect the work of two of the most respected paleographers of the twentieth century. Their purportedly scientific efforts have achieved unmerited acceptance by those who have overlooked their inadequate data, deficient methods, or indefensible conclusion. Their discussions of minutiae-letter shapes or strokes, or principles or practices of letter construction-have obscured the first facts of this paleographic comparison: viewed as wholes, the handwritings must look alike but do not, and features matched must be typical, not just unusual. Their explanations of irreconcilable differences between the handwritings of Addition IIc and Shakespeare's signatures cannot scientifically, not even reasonably, establish imperceptible or unimaginable similarities. Their practice of paleography as a science masks an actual practice of it as a sophistry.

Their-any-paleographic argument identifying Hand D as Shakespeare's cannot ultimately prevail because of an inherent and irremediable problem: no control. Without it, similarities of features cannot avoid the challenge that they are accidental; no statistical comparison of the distribution of such features is reliable. Without it, the method of agreement is inoperable and the method of disagreement is irrelevant. More generally, without a control, any effort to construct a paleographic argument for identification is inescapably an exercise in futility. Such should be the lesson of the hundred-year history

of one flawed and failed paleographic argument after another to achieve consensus that Hand D is Shakespeare's. This history should diminish hope that further efforts can attain ultimate success.

Any reason for the popularity of Thompson's and Dawson's paleographic arguments must be speculative: disregard of, or ignorance about, scientific method; wonder at, mystification by, or trust in accounts of technical details, numerical tabulations, and frequency analyses; or regret that we have nothing of a literary nature in Shakespeare's hand. Dawson's arguments in particular do not satisfy the standards of science or even scholarly discourse. His data are dubious, his methods defective, and his arguments dependent on trust-a sort of argument from authority.[6]

From the very beginning the first of these Sir Edward Maunde Thompson and Sir W. W. Greg on which most or all subsequent orthodox scholarship has been built have repeatedly been discredited throughout the last hundred years.

Surely, no knowledgeable, critical or rational scholar could or would take anything on trust from these Stratfordian apologists and sophists who continue to insist upon the likelihood, probability, or certainty, that the six so-called Shakspere signatures and the handwriting of Hand D in *Sir Thomas More* are one and the same.

The mother and father of William Shakspere were illiterate and his children were also illiterate and so too other members of his family. It is never wise to underestimate the gross stupidity of humankind. Yet surely the idea that William Shakspere, the father of illiterate children, was the author of the Shakespeare works is way beyond even the unspeakably ignorant and foolish, and the fact that such a transparent falsehood has been sold to learned fools, the ordinary schoolmen and the rest of the world, is frankly beyond all reasonable comprehension. The Stratford man William Shakspere was also illiterate and unable to even sign his own name. The so-called six signatures were the work of lawyers or legal clerks. It is these 'signatures' all written and spelt differently and in different hands that Stratfordian sophists have risibly attempted to match to the handwriting of Hand D in the play of *Sir Thomas More* when it is obvious there exists no genuine convergence whatsoever.

The transparent illusion that the illiterate/semi-illiterate William Shakspere of Stratford was the author of the divine and immortal Shakespeare works is the greatest literary fraud in the history of the world.

1. Sir Edwin Durning-Lawrence, *Bacon Is Shakespeare* (New York: The John McBride Company, 1910), p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 171.

3. Archibald Stalker, 'Is Shakespeare's Will A Forgery?', *The Quarterly Review*, Vol. 274, January and April 1940, pp. 256-57.

4. J. O. Halliwell-Phillips, *Outlines Of The Life Of Shakespeare* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887), I, p. 252.

5. *Shakespeare In The Public Records Text and Selection of Documents by David Thomas Section on the will and signatures by Jane Cox* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1985), pp. 33-34.

6. Michael L. Hays, 'Shakespeare's Hand Unknown in *Sir Thomas More*: Thompson, Dawson, and the Futility of the Paleographic Argument', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 67 (2016), pp. 180-203, at p. 202.