

1616: THE YEAR OF THE SECOND BEST BED

ON 23rd April the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare will be commemorated. Or will it? Even if you believe that William Shakspere (the spelling on most contemporary documents) of Stratford was the greatest writer who ever lived, the exact date of his death is not known. No record exists, only a record of his burial on 25th April. The cause of death is also a mystery. A 1661 entry in the diary of John Ward, the vicar of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford (where William is buried), says that “Shakespeare, Drayton, and Ben Jonson had a merry meeting and it seems drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted”. But Ward wrote his diary nearly fifty years afterwards and most historians agree that it is a baseless anecdote. No meeting between William and these writers was recorded at any stage during his lifetime. There are so many invented stories about Shakspere’s life that it is almost impossible to get at the truth. There is an even bigger mystery than the time and cause of William’s demise, and the events surrounding it highlight the nature of the problem.

William’s Will

WE start with William's will (right), apparently drafted by Francis Collins, a Warwick lawyer, who signed as the first of five witnesses, on 25th March 1616. There are many erasures and interlineations in the three pages, suggesting an earlier draft ('January' is crossed out and replaced by 'March'). If William was the world's supreme poet and dramatist, you would never guess it from the style and content of this document. Everything about it militates against this accolade, both in terms of what it contains and what it omits. There are four main areas of concern: his relatives, friends, manuscripts and books, and the signatures.

William's elder daughter Susanna Hall, the main legatee, was left nearly everything, including his holdings in Stratford and London, with remainder in tail male, "for better enabling of her to perform this my will and towards the performance thereof". Clearly he meant her to be in charge, unlike most testators of the time who made their widows the executors or co-executors of their wills. He also made his son-in-law John Hall her co-executor and left his younger daughter Judith £150, another £150 if she was living after three years, and a silver bowl. Her £300 would be worth hundreds of thousands in today's money – not a bad inheritance. There were some other legacies to his sister, his three nephews and his granddaughter Elizabeth. To the poor of Stratford he left the modest sum of £10.

Near the bottom of page 3, almost as an afterthought, we read: “Item, I give unto my wife my second best bed with the furniture”. This is perhaps the most infamous legacy in history. The first point to note is that this is an interlineation in the second draft. Anne was not mentioned at all in the first draft. As Greenblatt notes: “it is as if she had been completely erased” (*Will in the World*, p145). Secondly, as we have noted, whereas most testators of the period who left widows made them executors or co-executors of their will (see Sir Thomas Smith: *The Commonwealth of England and the Manner and Government Thereof*, 1583), Shakspeare gave this responsibility to his elder daughter Susanna.

Then there was the absence of his wife’s name, though most other people’s names are stated. Again, contrary to the common practice then of an affectionate reference to their spouses, William made no allusion to ‘my loving Anne’ or ‘my beloved wife’. For William it was just ‘my wife’. Yet, worst of all, is the bequest itself. Despite attempts to suggest that it was the marital bed or that the best bed was reserved for overnight guests, it does appear to be a slight, given the other facts above. Indeed, it looks suspiciously like an insult. It was as if to say: “I found my love, my intimacy, my best bed, elsewhere”. Bear in mind that, although William was married to Anne for about 33 years, he spent most of this time away

from home in London. It is generally believed that he consorted with prostitutes in theatreland.

Another defence of the second best bed is to argue that Anne was automatically entitled to a third of the estate as a dowry. But English common law did not guarantee any such thing, and if a male testator wished for it to happen, he usually specifically expressed the entitlement. Arguably, by stating the object – the bed – William was actually seeking to disinherit her of anything else. To stress the fact that he was granting her this object for no other reason than to wipe out the dowry, it was to be the *second* best bed.

The likelihood that William Shakspeare behaved meanly, spitefully, heartlessly and ungenerously towards his wife does not of course prove that he didn't write Shakespeare. But it's rather like a single fibre in a rope. By itself, it is easily broken, but when many fibres are woven together they form a material which can support a heavy weight. So it is not on each item of the will taken separately but on the whole argument formed by all the items taken collectively that the scepticism about William's authorship is based.

Consider next the will's absence of educational provision for his relatives. William's actor colleagues John Heminges, Henry Condell, John Bentley and John Underwood all provided for their children's education, sometimes specifying their daughters' education. The writer John Marston even left money to educate the

sons of one of his friends. Shakspeare, on the other hand, left no comparable bequests for his eight-year-old granddaughter or anyone else. We know that his parents and wife were illiterates, but his children were also defective in this area. His younger daughter Judith signed her name with a mark. It can be seen clearly on the facsimile document above as a pigtail shape in the middle of the image: it was scribe or attorney who wrote the name.

His elder daughter Susanna, who married John Hall, a respected doctor, learned to sign her name but the palaeographer E. Maude Thompson described the one example that survives as “a poorly formed signature, which was probably the most that she was capable of doing with the pen” (above right). There is certainly evidence that she could not recognise her husband's handwriting. Dr. James Cooke translated Hall's casebook from Latin into English and published it. In his introduction, he gives an account of his interview with Susanna, in which he showed her one or two of her husband's books and she denied they were his, presumably because she could not recognise her husband's handwriting.

What writer would not teach his children to read, especially one who devoted his life to the world's greatest dramatic canon, a canon committed to improving the mental condition of his audiences? Did the alleged creator of Portia, Olivia and Beatrice fail to educate his own daughters? In fact, William didn't actually need to teach them

himself. After all, his old school, if it was such, was just across the road and it welcomed girls as well as boys. And if William wrote some of his plays at home in Stratford, would his daughters not be curious and want to read their father's works? George Greenwood's comment in a book published on the 300th anniversary of William's death is worth quoting:

“Judith Shakspere was allowed to grow up in such entire ignorance that she could neither read nor write. She could not even write her own name, but had to use a mark for signature, and a terrible illiterate scrawl it is. Now for a player's daughter this was natural enough. But for the bard who was not of an age but for all time; the bard who has provided an appropriate word of poetry or philosophy for every incident and contingency of human life; the bard whom to know is indeed a liberal education; the literary light of the world; the myriad-minded man who wrote that ‘there is no darkness but ignorance’ — for him to permit his daughter to remain in that darkness — to take no care or thought whatever as to her education — that seems to me one of the most extraordinary facts (if fact it be) in the world's history. From the player we expect little or nothing in such matters. From the author of Hamlet is it too much to expect some little care for the intelligence of his children?” (Is There a Shakespeare Problem? 1916, p248).

Shakspeare added a few bequests to friends, including money to three actors whom he had known for many years: “to my fellows John Hemynges, Richard Burbage and Henry Condell xxvis. viiid. apiece to buy them rings”. A witness to the will worth noting was Hamnet Sadler, a Stratford baker, who was also mentioned in the body of the will. William almost certainly named his son Hamnet after him and Hamnet named his son after William. Since William’s son Hamnet was born in 1585, this suggests that Sadler and he were friends even before William left Stratford for the first time, usually dated in 1586 or 1587. It does tend to reinforce the view that William’s enduring relationships were not with playwrights or poets but with actors and fellow traders.

The will ought to tell us something which connects the actor/tradesman to the poet and dramatist, either by mentioning books or manuscripts or by reference to fellow poets and dramatists. It does not do any of this at all but instead bears the stamp of a tradesman. It is suggested that William’s books may have been listed in a lost inventory. Surely one or two of his books would have found their way into a private collection or the public domain sooner or later? But none has ever been discovered. Is it possible that the universal philosopher, the author whose works are saturated with allusions to other authors, died without a book in his possession?

18 of the 36 *First Folio* plays were still unpublished at his death, so where were the manuscripts? The customary view is that he had already handed them over to Heminges and Condell as his literary executors. Yet these plays remained unpublished until the 1623 *Folio*, where we are told that the editors had “scarce received a blot in his papers” and that they were “absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them”. Yet in the seven years between his death and the *Folio*, 10 quartos were published, containing numerous revisions to the earlier texts. *Othello* appeared in print for the first time in 1622; the *Folio* edition a year later contains 160 new lines and 70 deleted. These post-1616 revisions surely require explanation.

Shakspeare’s will is perfectly in keeping with the known facts of William’s life. It is not surprising that no books or manuscripts belonging to him have ever been found because they would have sat uneasily with the bags of corn and malt that preoccupied him in later years.

The will contains three alleged signatures which have been the subject of much debate. There are three more in existence, one of which relates to his deposition in the case of Bellott v. Mountjoy in 1612, and two others which relate to the purchase and mortgage deeds on his property in Blackfriars. The 1612 entry does not include the full name but is abbreviated to what seems to be ‘Willi Shak’. The Blackfriars entries seem to be in two different hands but

are again incomplete, the first reading as 'William Shakspe' and the second as 'Wm Shakspi'. This leaves us with the three on the will. In all three cases the terminal letters after the 'p' in the surname are illegible. If the same man wrote all six, then he never finishes spelling his name. Was this a matter of carelessness? Or difficulty in forming letters? In the second will signature the writer appears unable to spell the Christian name which reads 'Willin'. Ornamental dots were often used in those days by law clerks who wrote out documents and one clearly appears in the third Christian name in the will. There is no doubt, though, that the three will surnames are also shakily scribbled, which has been explained variously as evidence of writer's cramp or even a stroke.

If I were to write 'William Shakspre' with my right hand (I am left-handed), it would be uneven and jerky because I am not used to writing with that hand. This appears to be the situation in this will, at least with the surnames. The writer is not used to writing with a pen nib because he presses too hard and makes blots. Of course, being barely able to write doesn't mean that you can't be a successful business man, and it is entirely possible that William had been taught in his youth to write his name but in his mature years had almost forgotten how to write and spell. Therefore his penmanship was adequate for his purposes but totally inadequate for a professional writer.

It is certainly light years away from the “unblotted papers” to which Heminges and Condell, or whoever, refer in the *First Folio*. It is also in different planetary space from that of many contemporary writers whose handwriting and signatures are available. Many of them were collected together in a book published in 1925 by Dr. W. W. Greg. Part 1 has 30 plates of writing by dramatists such as the Earl of Derby, Heywood, Jonson, Lodge, Lyly, Marston, Nashe and Peele. Part 2 has 30 plates devoted to poets including Golding, Herbert, Sidney and Spenser. Part 3 covers the prose writing of Bacon, Raleigh and Harvey. In all cases the writing is elegant and skilful. There are different styles, to be sure. Some have simple letter formation and some are more flowery and ornate. But there can be no doubt that they can all write. Dr. Greg did not, however, include William Shakspere in his *English Literary Autographs, 1550- 1650*; if he had, the startling difference would be plain for all to see.

Of course, it is entirely possible that these six signatures were all written, not by William at all, but by the clerks who drew up the relevant documents. A common practice of clerks in the law courts was to sign statements of evidence themselves and to write the names of the witness(es) in a different hand from what they had used in the text. The ornamental dot in the will's third Christian name seems to point in this direction, as does the fact that the

signatures of three witnesses—Shaw, Robinson and Sadler—look suspiciously similar. Perhaps it is anybody's guess which of the signatures is the genuine article.

William Shakspeare's will reinforces many documented facts of his life. He was an actor, he made a lot of money and he greatly valued material possessions such as plates, jewels, swords and bowls, but not apparently books or manuscripts. Joseph Greene, the Vicar of Holy Trinity, was the man who found a copy of Shakspeare's will in 1747. He wrote:

“The legacies and bequests therein are doubtless as he intended; but the manner of introducing them, appears to me so dull and irregular, so absolutely void of the least particle of that spirit which animated our great poet, that it must lessen his character as a writer to imagine the least sentence of it his production”.

After Death

WILLIAM'S death was followed within a couple days by his burial – presumably the bereaved saw no reason to wait because they were blissfully unaware of any fame attached to their relative outside the confines of Stratford. His burial in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church on 25th April 1616 is noted in the Stratford register, but there is no name on his grave. On the flat stone over it there is inscribed the well-known curse:

Good frend, for Jesus sake forbear,

To digg the dust enclosed heare:

Bleste be ye man t[hat]y spares thes stones,

And curst be he t[hat]y moves my bones.

Did William write these lines himself shortly before his death to prevent his widow from being buried with him? Some critics realise how damning it is to imply that this doggerel curse is the supreme poet's final farewell and suggest that the inscription was placed there on an intended temporary stone in order to prevent his remains from being thrown into the charnel-house beside the church, as was the custom of the day.

Although Shakspeare's passing was presumably mourned by his daughters and possibly even his wife, it was totally ignored by everyone else. No written lament has ever been found. In an age of copious eulogies, none was forthcoming. This silence stands in stark contrast to the encomiums delivered upon the death of other writers and theatrical figures. Francis Beaumont had been mourned with a shower of elegies on his death in the month before William's. When Francis Bacon died in 1626, thirty two elegies, in Latin, were published honouring him. Michael Drayton, on his death in 1631, was honoured by a funeral procession to Westminster. In the year following his burial in the Abbey a monument to his memory was erected and verses attributed to Ben Jonson and others were contributed. Jonson himself was buried in

Westminster Abbey. His death was mourned within six months in a book of verses by the leading poets of the day. Richard Burbage, who was left a token remembrance by Shakspeare in his will, died in 1619 and elegiac effusions poured forth like a torrent such that, according to the playwright Thomas Middleton, “in London is not one eye dry”.

With William it was very different. No one outside the immediate family seems to have taken the slightest notice of the supposed death of the world’s greatest dramatist. He died, ‘unwept, unhonoured and unsung’. William was a complete nobody at the time as far as the literary world was concerned. He was, apparently, the most famous nonentity in history. Now this is very strange and Stratfordians have never offered a satisfactory answer. It was another 7 years, and the publication of the *First Folio*, before tributes were paid.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “I cannot marry the facts of William Shakespeare to his verse: other men had led lives in some sort of keeping with their thought, but this man is in wide contrast”. The myriad-minded man whose works remain the outward limit of human literary achievement is simply light years away from the life and death of Shakspeare. This mundane and mercenary character has created the world’s most puzzling paradox.