

Shakespeare's signature

It is thought that Elizabethans did not care much for spelling and there was no set way to spell words as there is today. (The first dictionary would not be published for another couple of centuries – 'A Dictionary of the English Language' by Dr Samuel Johnson, printed in April 1755.)

Those lucky enough to go to school often improved their reading and speaking skills, but not necessarily their writing skills, as handwriting was not a part of the lessons. Reading and writing were taught separately in those days.

The style of writing used at the time was called Secretary Hand, written with a quill and ink commonly made from oak apples. However, many people in Tudor times could not write and simply signed their names with a X. It is said that Shakespeare's parents could not write and that his father, John, used a pair of glover's compasses (he was as glover by trade) as his signature. While Shakespeare's mother, Mary, used a running horse.

Over the years scholars have searched all sorts of archives, including court and church records as well as private collections for examples of William Shakespeare's name, and so far only found six known Shakespeare signatures, all included on legal documents. Each shows differences in the way they are written and even in the spelling of the name.

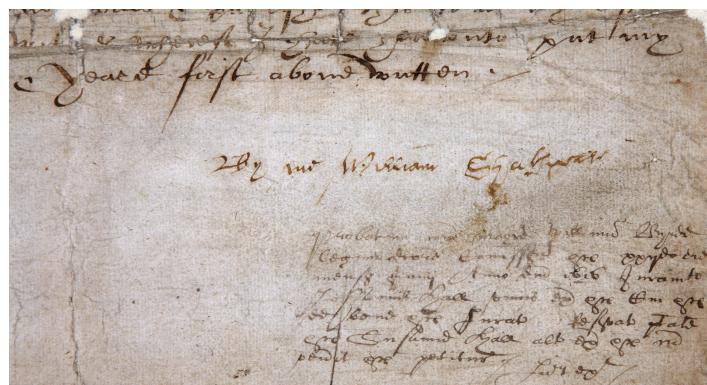


There is ongoing discussion amongst scholars as to whether all of these six signatures were actually written by Shakespeare himself or by legal clerks involved in the preparation of the documents.

Shakespeare's signature

The six known signatures can be found on the following documents:

- A deposition (sworn evidence) taken at Westminster in 1612 from William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon in the legal case of Stephen Belott versus Christopher Mountjoy. This document is held at the National Archives in Kew, London.
- The deed of sale of a house costing £140 in Blackfriars, London purchased by William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. No-one knows why he purchased the house, but it is the only property Shakespeare is known to have owned in London. However, there is no evidence he ever actually lived there. The document is held at the Guildhall Library, London.
- A mortgage deed for the same house in Blackfriars. This was produced the day after the deed of sale and requested that £60 of the purchase money should remain on mortgage. This money was still unpaid at the time of Shakespeare's death. A copy of this document is held at the British Library.
- The final three signatures are on William Shakespeare's Last Will and Testament dated 25 March 1616 and held at the National Archives in Kew, London. The will is a standard legal document written by a lawyer and includes no special last words for his friends and family.



The third of the signatures on the will. [Reproduced by kind permission of the National Archives in Kew, London.]