

Shakspeare's Handwriting and the Booke of Sir Thomas More

Only five or six specimens of Will Shakspeare's handwriting have been accepted as authentic: six signatures on legal documents: three under his last will in 1616, two under deeds relating to the purchase of real property in London (1613) and one under a deposition in connection with a suit to which he had been summoned as a witness (1612). Hence the outstanding question whether some other documents, preferably of a literary nature, could be found identifying Shakspeare not only as a man engaged in the theatre business, as an occasional actor, moneylender and real property purchaser but as an author.

Richard Simpson was the first to suggest in *Notes & Queries* of July 1, 1871 a similarity between the six signatures and the handwriting in a fragment of a manuscript of a play *Sir Thomas More*, a coproduction of several playwrights. *Sir Thomas More* is a pithy popular play mainly from the pen of Anthony Munday (1553-1633) probably written between 1586 and 1593.

For a summary of the content of the play and the history of its attribution to Shakespeare see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Thomas_More_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Thomas_More_(play))

For the fragment in "hand D" claimed for Shakespeare:

<https://www.playshakespeare.com/sir-thomas-more/scenes/1193-act-ii-scene-4>

The sequence of events in the scene is as follows:

"More arrives at St. Martin's gate. The rioters (John Lincoln, a broker; George Betts; Doll, a carpenter's wife etc.) express their complaints, then agree to hear from More. More begins by saying that the riots are disgracing England, and that if disorder prevails, civil society will fall apart, and none of the rioters will live to an old age. He tells them that when they rebel against the law, they rebel against God. More offers a deal to the rioters: If they will behave, and go to prison in peace, he promises that they will be given a pardon. The only other option for them is death. The rioters accept More's offer, and are taken away."

No detailed stylistic comparison between *Sir Thomas More* and Shakespeare's plays *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* or *Troilus and Cressida* will be submitted here. Suffice it to point out that precisely the often claimed analogy between *Sir Thomas More*, Addition IIc, 84-7

For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
With self same hand, self reasons, and self right,
Would *shark* on you, and men like ravenous *fishes*
Would *feed* on one another.

and *Troilus and Cressida* I/3, 121-4:

And appetite, an universal wolf
(So doubly seconded with will and power)
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

is negated by the manifest stylistic differences between the text of the fragment in *Sir Thomas More* and Shakespeare's play. While the Shakespearean metaphor fathoms the philosophical depth, the speech of Thomas More, though not devoid of the time-honoured metaphors, uses them rather pragmatically.

(Among the first scholars to firmly reject Shakespeare's authorship of *Sir Thomas More* II/4 were Frederick J. Furnivall, 1877; Felix E. Schelling, 1902; and Levin L. Schücking, 1913. - W. W. Greg, the editor of the play wrote in 1911: "Hand D's lines have undoubtedly literary merit, but I cannot regard them with the admiration they have aroused in some critics.")

However, the issue at stake here is not the style but the handwriting.

For that the archetype is still the "proof" the palaeographer Sir Edward Maunde Thompson believed to have furnished in 1916 after having stressed from the start of his learned essay the nearly insurmountable problems inherent in comparing holographs with signatures. In Sir Edward's own words:

"The close of this general survey of the six authentic signatures of Shakespeare may be a fitting place to refer to opinions which have been entertained that in his later years he suffered from nervous disease which betrays itself in his handwriting. (..) The worst instances of failure, as we have already seen, are in the subscriptions to the will, namely, No. 6, the main signature, and Nos. 4 and 5, the two authenticating signatures of the first two sheets, of which No. 4 is too much defaced to be of any particular value. In the general description of the signatures I have noted that the defective writing of these three may be primarily accounted for by the testator's weak physical condition. (..) If, then, Shakespeare was indeed conscious, at the time of his last illness, of a weakness in his handwriting, in other words that he was in his later years subject, in some unknown degree, to a form of writer's cramp; and if I am right in suggesting that his failure with signature No. 6 was not altogether attributable to illness, but also to a nervous disablement in signing his name — a form of cramp which is not uncommon with those who are affected in this way. (..) I think that sufficient evidence is afforded by defects in his signatures to show that, in the three years preceding the date of his death, Shakespeare experienced a difficulty in signing his name, arising from the growing disability to control the reverse action of the hand as above described; and as this action of the hand would be put in motion every time he wrote the initial letter of his surname, that letter would gradually come to be, so to say, the nerve-centre of the disease and the point at which his signature might break down."

It means that not only is the comparative basis for the palaeographer to rely on extremely small but it is (according to Thompson himself) further qualified by some additional factors. All this does not deter Thompson from confidently ascertaining the similarity of the handwriting of the signatures with that in "hand D" of *Sir Thomas More*. He detects in one of the Shakespeare signatures an "a" and emphasizes its similarity with some letters "a" in the three pages of the fragment in "hand D". He further detects in the More manuscript one "p" as it also occurs in the name beneath the mortgage deed [=3], that is in a name so badly written as to lead him to suspect the writer was suffering from writer's cramp. And four times he perceives a letter "k" similar in his opinion to the same letter in the signatures. An Italian long "s" happens several times in the name "Shakspere", Thompson writes, and Thompson thinks he can discern it twice in the manuscript.

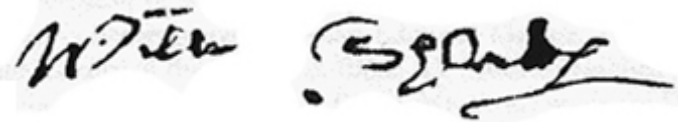
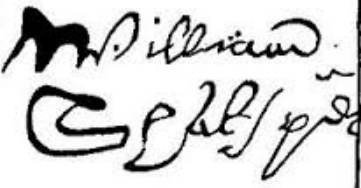
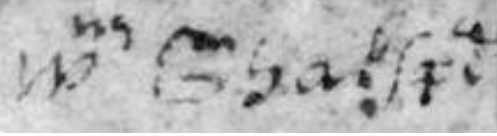
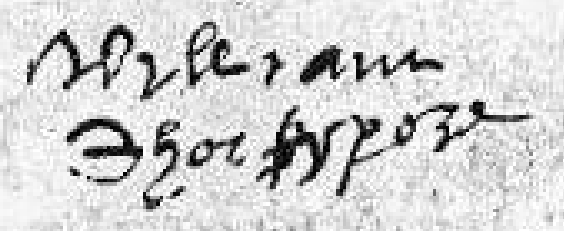


Samuel A. Tannenbaum (*Problems in Shakespeare's Penmanship*. (New York, 1927, pp. 179-211) strongly disagrees. According to Tannenbaum one of the two alleged long "s" in the manuscript is quite a normal English "s", while the other is indeed a long Italian "s" but it is written as a correction in the margin, and the corrections in the margin are manifestly written in another hand than the one of the manuscript. Neither would the "k"s and "p"s look alike.

On the basis of a total of 25 (!) detailed observations Tannenbaum rejects the hypothesis of Hand D being Shakspere's own handwriting.

“Summing up the results of this study of the two writings in question, we must say, then, that on the basis of the six unquestioned signatures the weight of the evidence is overwhelmingly *against* the theory that in folios 8 and 9 of *The Booke of Sir Thomas More* we have a Shakspere holograph.”

If experts arrive at such contradictory conclusions with such manifest partisan views involved (not in the case of Samuel A. Tannenbaum, otherwise a staunch Stratfordian but guided by a desire of objectivity) -, it is recommendable to take a closer look oneself.

We have six accepted signatures of Will Shakspere:

<p>a) <i>Willm Shakp [Shaks]</i> 1612-05-11 (Mountjoy suit depos.)</p>	
<p>b) <i>William Shaksper</i> 1613-03-10 (Blackfriars Gatehouse deed)</p>	
<p>c) <i>Wm Shakspe r[?]</i> 1613-03-11 (Blackfriars mortgage)</p>	
<p>d) <i>William Shakspere</i> 1616-03-25 (Will, page 1)</p>	
<p>e) <i>Wllm. Shakspere</i> 1616-03-25 (Will, page 2)</p>	
<p>f) <i>William Shakspere</i> 1616-03-25 (Will, page 3)</p>	

Of particular interest are the photographs of the original documents with the signatures:

a) *Willm Shakp [Shaks]*, Mountjoy suit deposition, 1612-05-11

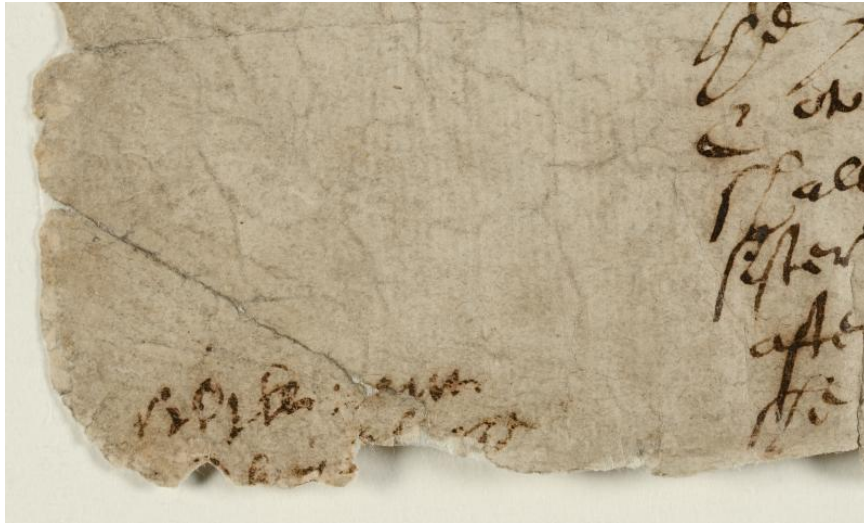
The signature is written on a narrow parchment tag at the top of the seal; the parchment tag was passed through a slit made in the bottom of the deed and then glued to the deed by some material (shellac /wax). The signature appears on the parchment tag; the parchment tag appears as an independent rectangular area at the bottom of the deed – also c).

c) *Wm Shakspe r[?]*, Blackfriars mortgage, 1613-03-11

See: <http://www.shakespearedocumented.org/file/egerton-ms-1787-recto>

The character showing above the letters “pe” probably represents an “r” with a loop.

d) *William Shakspeare*, Will page 1, 1616-03-25



Of this signature the Christian name is practically all that remains on the original document today, wherefore it is advisable to disregard it for a comparison of handwriting.

e) *Willm. Shakspeare*, Will page 2, 1616-03-25

Knowinge & for default of the
lawe of god saide & asme
doe of god done of god saide
default of sure yf the god same
- After this & about
one after another & to the heirs
William Shakspeare

Over this signature we read: "one after another & to the heirs". The two "h"s overlap with the signature.

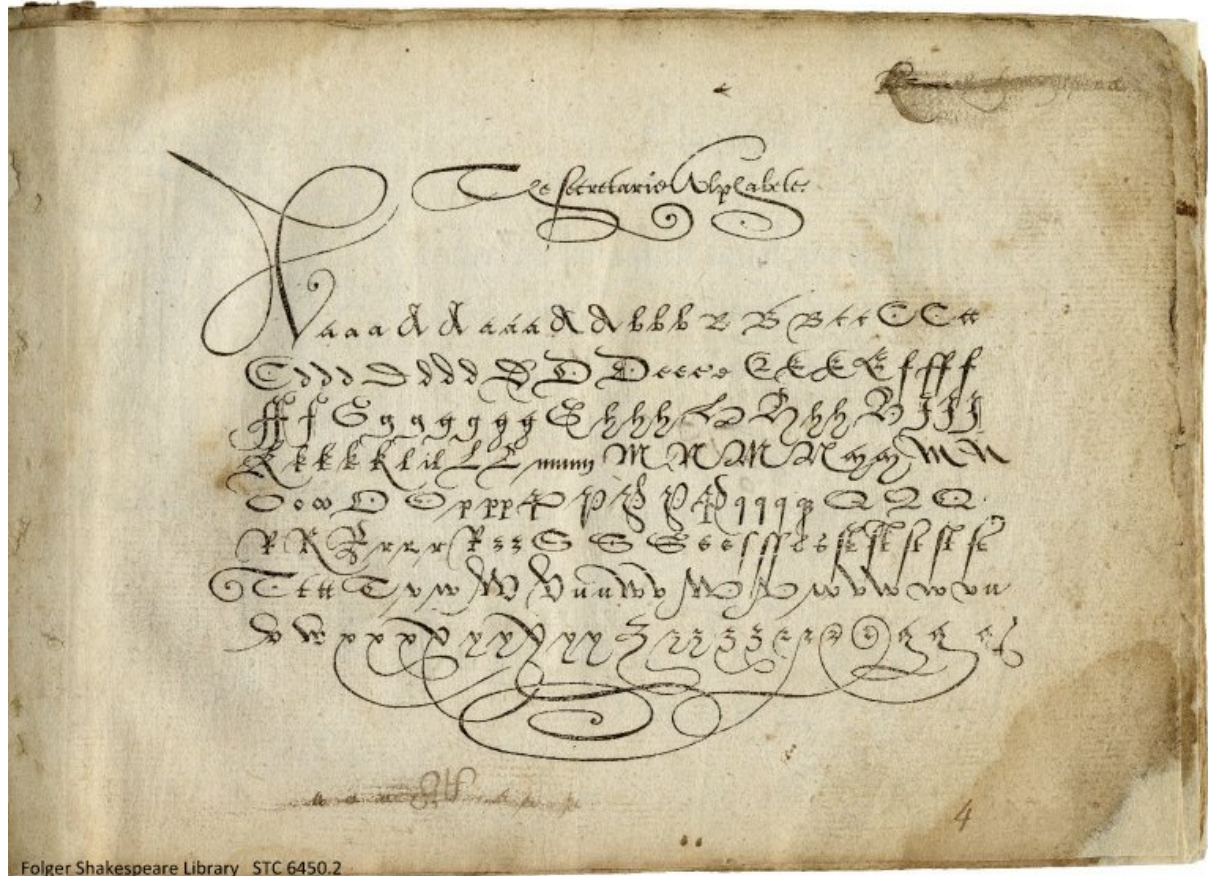
f) By me William Shakspeare, Will page 3, 1616-03-25

for all becomms discharged of god done
come in Lane John Hall your & my daughter
upon of adame & make over to of god my
And of doe intreat & appoint Thomas
am in solms your to be over for god done
and will & will be to be my gift
and of god done of god done put my
Your first about with on

By me William Shakspeare

Iacobus ...
legimus ...
mensis ...
...
...
...
...
...

In order to get better accustomed to 16th-century handwriting it is useful to look somewhat closer at the English *Secretary Alphabet* on the manuscript page.



Folger Shakespeare Library STC 6450.2

Of the *Sir Thomas More* manuscript pages in “hand D” (BL, Harley MS 7368 fol. 8r, 8v and 9r) **fol. 8v** are in part fairly well and **fol. 9r** throughout well legible.

fol. 8v

Hereafter the transcription of the two manuscript pages fol. 8v and fol. 9r according to *The book of Sir Thomas More*, by Anthony Munday etc. ed. by W. W. Greg, London 1911, pp. 75-78: <https://archive.org/details/bookofsirthomasm00brituoft>

The words relevant for the comparison of handwriting are marked in red colour.

fol. 8v

moor	{even} by the rule you haue among your sealues {comand sti}ll audience
all	{Surrey S}ury {moor moor}
Lincolne betts	peace peace scilens peace.
moor	You that haue voyce and Credyt wt the [mv] nvmbur Comaund them to a stilnes
Lincolne	a plaigue on them they will not hold their peace the deule Cannot rule them
moor	Then what a rough and ryotous charge haue you to Leade those that the deule Cannot rule good masters heare me speake
Doll	I byth mas will we moor thart a good Hows-Keeper and I thanck thy good worship for my Brother Arthur W atchins
all	peace peace
moor	look what you do offend you Cry vppō that is the peace, not { of you heare} present had there such fellowes, lyv{d w}hen you wer babes that could haue topt the p{eace} as nowe you woold the peace wherin you haue till nowe growne vp had bin tane from you, and the bloody tymes could not haue brought you to [] the state of men alas poor things what is yt you haue gott although we graunt you geat the thing you seeke
[D] Bett	marry the removing of the straingers wch cannot choose but much [helpe] advauntage the poor handycraftes of the Cytty
moor	graunt them remoued and graunt that this yor [y] noyce hath Chidd downe all the matie of England ymagin that you see the wretched straingers their babyes at their backs , and their poor lugage plodding tooth ports and costs for transportacion and that you sytt as kings in your desyres 200 aucthoryty quyte sylenct by yor braule and you in ruff of yor [yo] opynions clothd what had you gott, I'le tell you, you had taught how insolenc and strong hand shoold prevayle how ordere shoold be quelld, and by this patterne not on of you shoold lyve an aged man for other ruffians as their fancies wrought with sealf same hand sealf reasons and sealf right woold shark on you and men lyke ravenous fishes woold feed on on another
Doll	before god thats as trewe as the gospell

[Betts] Lincoln	nay this a sound fellowe I tell you lets mark him
Moor	Let me sett vp before yor thoughts good freinds on supposyion which if you will marke you shall pceaue howe horrible a shape yor ynnovation beres, first tis a sinn which oft thappostle did forwarne vs of vrging obedienc to aucthory{ty and twere [] no error yf I told you all you wer in armes gainst g{

fol. 9r

all	marry god forbid that
moo	nay certainly you ar for to the king god hath his offyce lent of dread of Iustyce, power and Comaund hath bid him rule, and willd you to obay and to add ampler matie. to this he [god] hath not [le] only lent the king his figure his throne [his] sword, but gyven him his owne name calls him a god on earth, what do you then rysing gainst him that god himsealf enstalls but ryse gainst god, what do you to yor sowles in doing this o desperat [ar] as you are. wash your foule mynds wt teares and those same hands that you lyke rebels lyft against the peace lift vp for peace, and your vnreuerent knees [that] make them your feet to kneele to be forgyven [is safer warrs, then euer you can make] [whose discipline is ryot; why euen your [warrs] hurly] [in in to yor obedienc.] [cannot pceed but by obedienc] tell me but this what rebell captaine as mutynes ar incident, by his name can still the rout who will obay [th] a traytor or howe can well that pclamation sounde when ther is no adicion but a rebell to quallyfy a rebell, youle put downe straingers kill them cutt their throts possesse their howses and leade the matie of lawe in liom to slipp him lyke a hound; [saying] [alas alas] say nowe the king as he is clement, yf thoffendor moorne shoold so much com to short of your great trespas as but to banysh you, whether woold you go. what Country by the nature of yor error shoold gyve you harber go you to ffraunc or flanders to any Iarman pvince, [to] spane or portigall nay any where [why you] that not adheres to England why you must needy be straingers. woold you be pleasd to find a nation of such barbarous temper that breaking out in hiddious violence woold not afoord you, an abode on earth whett their detested knyves against yor throtes spurne you lyke doggs, and lyke as yf that god owed not nor made not you, nor that the elamenty wer not all appropriat to [ther] yor Comforts.

	but Charterd vnto them, what woold you thinck to be thus vsd, this is the straingers case all and this your momtanish inhumanity
all	fayth a sales trewe letts vs do as we may be doon by
[all] Linco	weele be ruld by you master moor yf youle stand our freind to pcure our pdon
moor	S ubmyt you to theise noble gentlemen entreate their mediation to the kinge gyve vp yor sealf to forme obay the maiestrate and thers no doubt, but mercy may be found, yf you so seek it

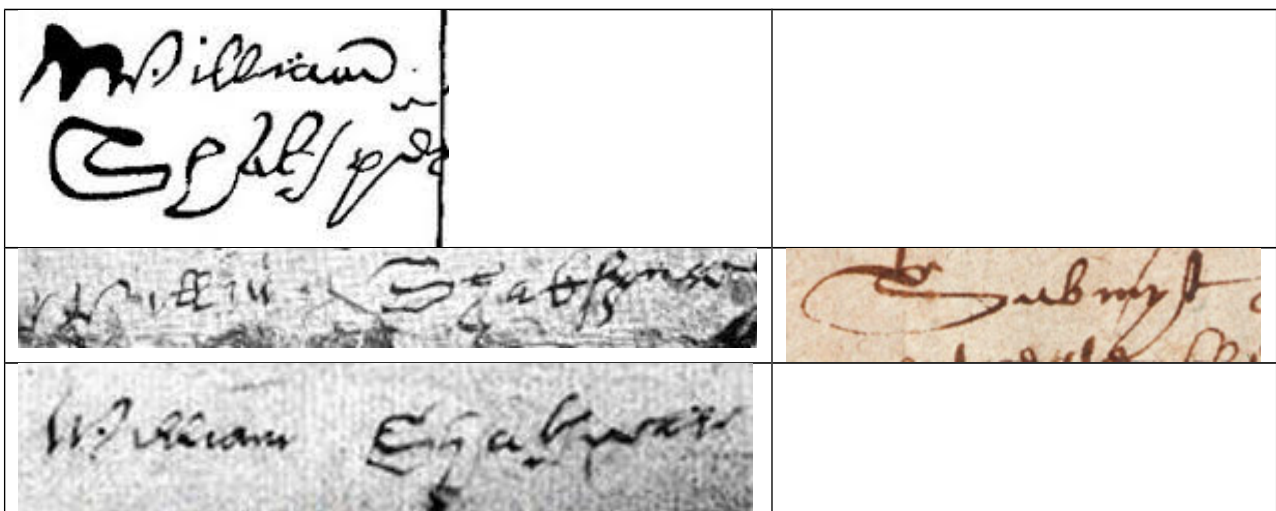
In order to graphically illustrate how Shakspere's handwriting compares with hand D in *Sir Thomas More (STM)*, we set off characteristic letter sequences in hand D against significant uppercase letters in the signatures.

Suitable for such a comparison are: **ha / ak / acks / sp / spe / sper / ill / S** and **W**.

Let us first look at the family name SHAKSPERE and at corresponding letter sequences from *STM*.

1. S

The capital letter S in Shakspere's handwriting also occurs with some regularity in a), b), c), e) and f). In *STM*, fol. 8-9 we find the capital letter S once in: {**S**ubmyt}.



The comparison reveals a different style and movement of the two handwritings. – One could be led to think that the S in **S**ubmyt in hand D would be the first letter of a punchy signature. By contrast Shakspere's capital S looks like “painted” (even at the time when the alleged “writer’s cramp” had not yet happened).

2. ha

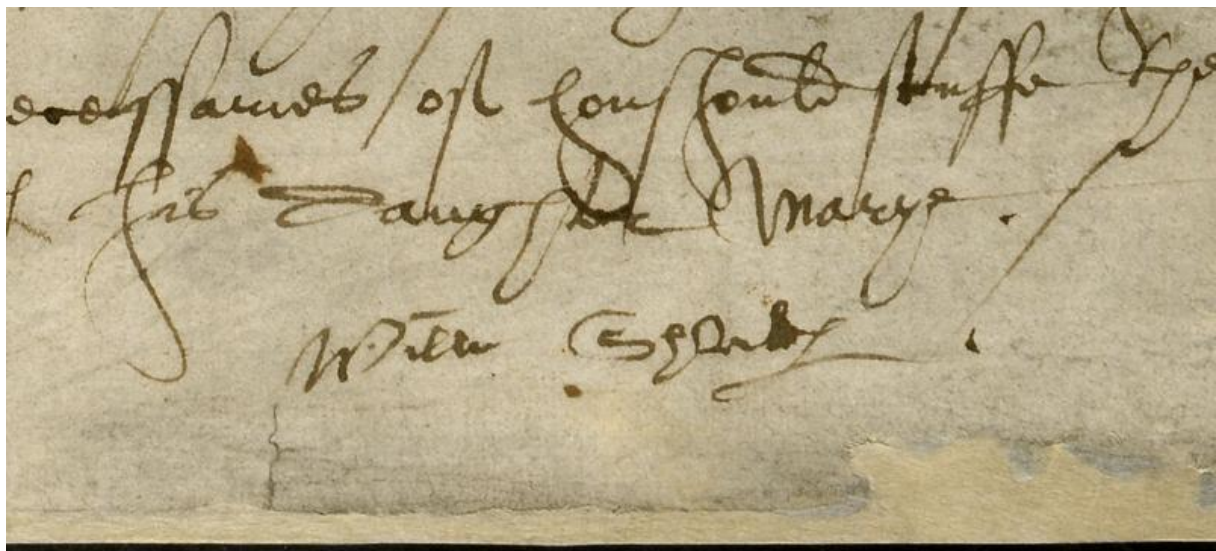
Shakspere's signatures from above to below: a), b), e) and f).

Hand D from above to below: {9.1 **that**} {9.3 **hath**} {8.7 **shape**} and {9.5 **that**}.



The upper loop of Shakspere's "h" is in most cases wider, its lower loop is less rounded. That is, the letter "h" shows a different calligraphic shape.

Only in a) {Willm Shakp} is the connecting stroke from "h" to "a" in Shakspere as vigorously shaped as in hand D.

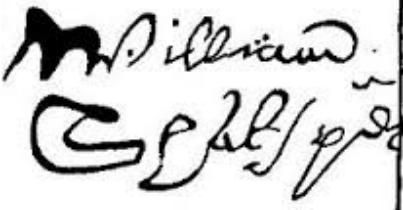



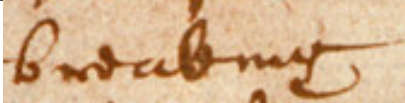


But here too the lower loop of the writer's "h" is less rounded than in hand D.

3. ak / ack / ks

Shakspere's signatures from above to below: b), c) and e).

Hand D from above to below: {8.5 backs} {9.6 make} and {9.9 breaking}.

The character connections “ak” in {9.6 **make**} and {9.9 **breaking**} show no recognizable similarity with the “ak” s in b), c) and e). Hand D does not show the middle bar characteristic in the “k” for Shaksper but has a small loop instead. Shaksper’s typical long “ſ” is absent from Hand D – nor is it found in {8.5 **backs**}.

4. sp / spe / sper

Shaksper’s signatures from above to below: b), c), e) and f).

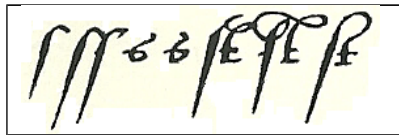
Hand D from above to below: {8.4 **peace peace**} {9.7 **trespas**} {8.6 **gospel**} {9.4 **desperat**} {8.1 **speake**} {9.8 **temper**}.



Shakspere's "p"s hardly differ from the "p"s in hand D. **However, his "spe"- connections in the middle of the signature are totally different from those in hand D.** Only in one case – at {8.1 **speake**} does hand D use an "sp" remotely similar to that in the signatures e) and f)– although at the beginning of the word! Compared with the generously curved "s" of hand D Shakspere's "s" look stretched and meagre.

In the secretary alphabet we find the following "s" and "st"s:



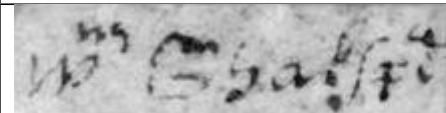
We now compare the handwriting of the Christian name WILLIAM or WILLM with the handwriting of *STM* (hand D).

6. W

Shakspere's signatures from above to below: a), b), f) and c).

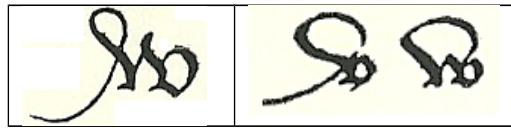
The signatures a), b), f) and c) show an identical **W** : a, b) and f) with a dot in the final loop - c) without dot.

In *STM* fol. 8-9 we only once meet the uppercase **W**, namely in the family name "Arthur Watchins". (There are several occurrences of the small w.)

As can readily be seen, Shakspere's W, has absolutely nothing to do with the capital W in hand D!

Shakspere's W follows , model 7.7 of the Secretary Alphabet; hand D follows model 8.1-2.



This remarkable difference alone would suffice to peremptorily rule out the alleged identity of Shakspere's handwriting and hand D!

7. ill



Shakspere's small i is sharper and his double "l" looks at any rate sharper, less rounded and more clumsy than in hand D.

CONCLUSION: there can be no question of any concordance of the two handwritings.

Will Shakspere neither wrote nor penned *The book of Sir Thomas More* II/4.

Annotation: You may also compare the uppercase "B" in signature f) {*By me William Shakspere*} with the "B" in "Bett" from hand D (fol. 8v, left margin).

What do you think about?

faillie beventes d'espargod f' g'p' d'ouye
come in Lane John Gall yout a my daughter
upon f' adame a make overto ^{to said} f' hit my
And f' doe intreat a appoint Thomas
amoi Dolins yout to be d'arford yout f' d'ar
and will a pullye to be to be my wife
And a yout f' g'p' d'ouye put my
Your first about wutton.

By me William Egbert

quodam meo d'arford William Egbert
legimus d'arford d'arford meo d'arford
meo f' g'p' d'ouye d'arford d'arford
d'arford d'arford d'arford d'arford
d'arford d'arford d'arford d'arford