

Shakespeare's sister: Digital archives reveal hidden insights into world-famous playwright's unknown sibling

March 21 2024



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By analyzing digital copies of an incredibly rare and obscure 17th-century Italian religious text, a University of Bristol academic has revealed that a long-lost document previously thought to have been written by William Shakespeare's father belongs, in fact, to his relatively unknown sister Joan.

The document, a religious tract in which the writer pledges to die a good Catholic death, written at a point in English history when Catholicism was strongly disapproved of, was found by a bricklayer hidden in the rafters of the Shakespeare House in Stratford-upon-Avon around 1770.

It was seen and described by two early Shakespeare experts and then lost. Both thought it must have belonged to Shakespeare's father, John, who died in 1601, which would imply that he was a zealous secret Catholic in an Elizabethan world of priest holes where people risked torture for their faith. Subsequent scholars thought it was a forgery designed to give the impression of being a document from John's lifetime.

In fact, the document is actually a translation of an Italian text, "The Last Will and Testament of the Soul," and Professor Matthew Steggle, from the University's Department of English, used Google Books and other internet archives to track down early editions of that text in Italian and six other languages, many of which editions survive only in a single copy and are scattered across the libraries of Europe.

This proved that it was from several years after John Shakespeare died and that the author of the manuscript was, in fact, the only other possible J Shakespeare—Joan—who lived from 1569 to 1646.

She was five years younger than her brother William and, in the later

years of his life, his only significant living relative other than his wife and daughters. She lived in Stratford-upon-Avon all her life and is thought to have married a penniless tradesman. She had four children and outlived both her husband and her famous sibling by 30 years, living quietly in part of the old Shakespeare family house.

Professor Steggle said, "Even 30 years ago, a researcher approaching a problem like this would have been based in a single big research library, using printed catalogs and even card catalogs to try to find copies of this text. But research libraries have now made many of their resources available digitally so that it is possible to look across many different libraries in different countries at once, and what's more, you can look through the whole text, not just at the title and other details."

"There are only seven surviving documents from Joan's lifetime that even mention her by name. Virginia Woolf wrote a famous essay, 'Shakespeare's sister', about how a figure like her could never hope to be a writer or have her writing preserved, so she has become something of a symbol for all the lost voices of early modern women. There are hundreds of thousands of words surviving from her brother, and until now none at all, of any description, from her."

Quotes from the document include:

"I, [Joan] Shakespeare, do protest that I will willingly accept of death in whatsoever manner it may befall me, conforming my will unto the will of God; accepting of the same in satisfaction for my sins and giving thanks unto his divine majesty for the life he hath bestowed upon me."

"I, [Joan] Shakespeare, do here protest that I do render infinite thanks to his divine majesty for all the benefits that I have received as well secret as manifest... but above all for his so great expectation of me to penance, when he might most justly have taken me out of this life when

I least thought of it, yea even then when I was plunged in the dirty puddle of my sins."

"I, [Joan] Shakespeare, do protest that I am willing, yea I do infinitely desire and humbly crave, that of this my last will and testament, the glorious and ever Virgin Mary, mother of God, refuge and advocate of sinners, whom I honor specially above all other saints, may be the chief Executrix together with these other saints my patrons, Saint Winifred, all whom I invoke and beseech to be present at the hour of my death that she and they may comfort me with their desired presence and crave of sweet Jesus that he will receive my soul into peace."

St Winifred, claimed as a patron saint in this passage, was a seventh-century Welsh princess who survived being beheaded by a disgruntled suitor and went on to found a nunnery. Winifred, whose story was all about repelling unwanted sexual advances by men, was particularly venerated by women, and this is another sign that the document belongs to Joan.

Pledges of this nature were about taking control of your own death, making a statement about final beliefs before the approach of death impairs any mental capacity. The Joan Shakespeare [document](#) is the only known British example, and there are only a handful known from the Continent.

The research, [published](#) in the journal *Shakespeare Quarterly*, is part of Professor Steggle's work on a biography of Shakespeare.

More information: Matthew Steggle, John Shakespeare's "Spiritual Testament" Is Not John Shakespeare's, *Shakespeare Quarterly* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/sq/quae003](https://doi.org/10.1093/sq/quae003)

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: Shakespeare's sister: Digital archives reveal hidden insights into world-famous playwright's unknown sibling (2024, March 21) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-shakespeare-sister-digital-archives-reveal.html>

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