

# Shakespeare's Final Days: What do we Know?



One night in 1613, a canon misfired at The Globe during a performance of *Henry VIII*. The thatched roof caught alight, the patrons and players vacated and the Theatre burned (as wood will do) to nothing. The “Wooden O” that gave London almost fourteen years of relentless genius was no more. Shakespeare, now aged forty nine, retired to Stratford upon Avon.

William had been slowing down in output since 1609. *The Tempest* being his last major play as a solo writer. He had since collaborated with John Fletcher on *Henry VIII* (controversial), *The Two Noble Kinsman* and *Cardenio*. The last of which is tragically lost. In 1613 however, with The Globe gone, he sold his shares in The Blackfriars Theatre and hung up his quill. Another way to put it might be to say that he “broke his staff” or “drowned his book”.

It has always been tempting to read Prospero surrendering his control of the Island as Shakespeare saying farewell to the Theatre. No wonder, the Actor steps out of character and speaks of Actors and the Theatre itself in that most famous of farewell speeches:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

Forget all the allusions to Colonialism and Politics in *The Tempest*..... This play is over shadowed by a theme of “All things end.” Though he may of had premonitions of British Empire.

So what does a magician and conjurer of so many worlds and characters do

when he finds himself living back in the country side of his youth? Well, William busied himself with loans and lawsuits and petty town business. He bought a good deal of land.... He did buy a small house back in Blackfriars, perhaps just to know that London was still there?

So here he was, rich, retired and back with Anne Hathaway. A Woman he married thirty one years before and had spent a lot of time away from. Did he love her? Considering the separations, the sonnets to a young Man and a Dark Lady.... It's debatable.

He had his children, Susana and Judith, some grandchildren. A much loved local Doctor as a son in law. One would like to think he was happy.... But if you've seen Edward Bond's *Bingo, a Tale of Death and Money*... Shakespeare's end is speculated as being akin to a misery fest. Bond paints a bored Man now stuck with an elderly wife he never loved and a spiteful, philistine of a daughter. He waits for death and plans to leave his family nothing. Happy days. The one upbeat scene of the play is Will in a Tavern, drunk with Ben Jonson.

The final account of Shakespeare and Jonson's acquaintance leaves less room for speculation. Satisfyingly and heart warmingly. Will was a Godfather to one of Jonson's sons. We know Jonson went up to Stratford to drink with his old friendly rival. Then, when Will died, Jonson gave us great tributes. Notably in the poem for the first folio of 1623; *To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author William Shakespeare, and what he hath Left us*. But also in his private note books, which spoke of a gentle Man, 'Honest, and of an open nature, had an excellence of Fancy, brave notions and gentle expressions.' He also talks of his wit and energy and how he outdid even the Classics in his work.

Thomas Kyd created the Theatrical hit with *The Spanish Tragedy*. John Lyly created the first hit Comedies. Christopher Marlowe created the "mighty line" of his verse.... But Shakespeare out did them all. Jonson wrote of how he even out did Aeschylus and Sophocles and their Tragedies. Aristophanes and Plautus in their Comedies.

How do you stop writing after that kind of achievement? Why do you stop writing? Forty Nine wasn't old if you consider that Will's parents lived to be seventy. Yet it was old enough when most people died well before the age of forty nine in Jacobean England.

Will died on April 25<sup>th</sup> (or 23<sup>rd</sup>), 1616, aged fifty two. He was buried in Holy Trinity Church and the tomb reads;

*Good frend for Iesvs sake forbeare,  
To digg the dvst enclosed heare.  
Bleste be ye man yt spares thes stones,  
And cvrst be he yt moves my bones*

The family put up a bust in the Church and every year the quill in the hand is

replaced.

His last year was sullied when daughter Judith married a Tavern owner, Thomas Quiney. Quiney impregnated another Woman (who died along with the baby). Shakespeare did indeed change his will so as to protect his estate from Quiney. You can be the greatest genius of the arts to ever live and still.... Life and its petty foibles can catch you up.

Famously, Shakespeare also left Anne the 'second best bed' in his will. Yet, this could have been the bed they used, their first (romantic) bed. Also many house holds reserved the biggest bed for guests. Shakespeare the Man is forever unknowable. At once everyone and no one.

Genealogically, Susana and Doctor Hall's three children died childless. Elizabeth living until 1670. Hamnet had died in 1596, aged nine. Judith did have three children but they died, aged one, twenty one and nineteen respectively. Judith herself died in 1642, two weeks before a Writer from London was due to interview her regarding her Father. Queue sharp intake of breath by Scholars everywhere.

So, in the light of all this death and genealogical line ending... thank goodness for the most under appreciated Men in all Cultural history. Heminges and Condell, of Shakespeare's company, put together and published the first folio seven years after his death. Without this happening we would have lost many of the Plays forever. Considering it's just *Cardenio* and *Loves Labour Won*... we are lucky.