Shakespeare's Will and Testament
William Shakespeare’s last will and testament provides one of the richest surviving documents for understanding his familial and professional networks. The will names many of the important people in his life, including family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours, as well as describing specific pieces of personal property. The handwriting does not match that of Shakespeare’s lawyer, Francis Collins, suggesting that the will was drawn up by a clerk. The document is written on three sheets of paper, with William Shakespeare’s signature appended to each sheet, as prescribed in contemporary manuals.

Most individuals in early modern England did not begin writing a will until death was imminent. He was almost certainly ill, although he did not die for another several months. The signatures are written in shaky strokes of the pen, suggestive of someone who had trouble holding a writing implement due to illness.

Shakespeare left the bulk of his property to his two daughters: Susanna Hall, his first child, and Judith Quiney. He left money and clothes to his sister Joan Hart and her three sons (the name of the third son, Thomas, is left blank), and plate to his granddaughter Elizabeth Hall, whom he refers to as his niece. The will also makes bequests of his various properties: New Place; the house on Henley Street in which he was born; the tithes purchased in 1605; the Combe property; the cottage near New Place; and the Blackfriars gatehouse in London. His monetary bequests add up to roughly £350. The only specific objects he bequeaths are a large silver gilt bowl to his daughter Judith; a sword to Thomas Combe, the nephew of his friend John; his clothing to his sister Joan; and his second best bed to his wife.

Shakespeare left a gift of £10 to the poor of Stratford, as well as bequests to his overseer, Thomas Russell, and his lawyer, Francis Collins. He left 26 shillings and 8 pence each to his theatrical fellows Richard Burbage, John Heminges, and Henry Condell, as well as to Hamnet Sadler, William Reynolds, and Anthony and John Nash, to buy mourning rings.

Shakespeare’s bequest to Richard Burbage, John Heminges, and Henry Condell, three of the King’s Men, confirms his association with members of his playing company to the last days of his life. The fact that he calls them “my fellowes” may suggest that he still considered himself a King’s Man.