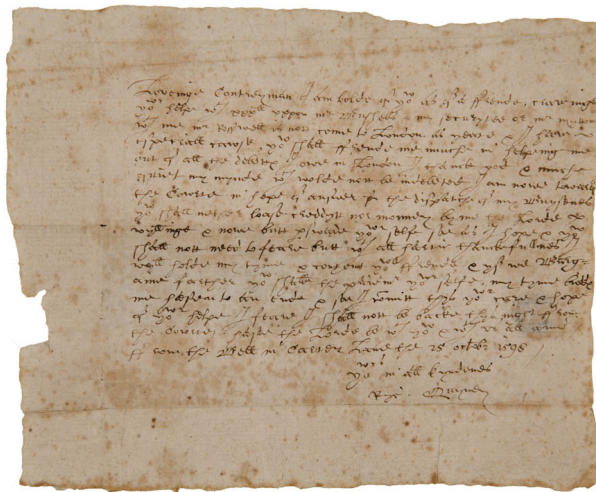


# Letter writing and Shakespeare

In Shakespeare's time, letter writing held great importance and significance. Being able to write and communicate through letter writing was not something everyone could do. Without telephones, electronic or digital forms of communication, letters were one of the main ways to send messages between people.

In 'Twelfth Night', Maria writes a trick letter to Malvolio which he believes is from his mistress, Olivia. In the play Maria is a servant but she still must have had some form of education as she was able to write and copy Olivia's handwriting.

Letters that have survived through time provide us with written evidence and insight into what life might have been like hundreds of years ago.



Letter from Richard Quiney to William Shakespeare dated 25th October 1598  
CC-BY-NC-ND Image Courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

We have many letters in our collections at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and one that is particularly fascinating is a letter written directly to William Shakespeare by a friend called Richard Quiney whose son later married Shakespeare's daughter Judith. It is believed the Quiney letter is the only surviving letter to William Shakespeare.

# Letter writing and Shakespeare

The letter was discovered in 1793, and described as being a “very pretty little relick, about three inches long by two broad”.

The letter was written in 1598. At that time Richard Quiney had left Stratford-upon-Avon and was in London. He wrote to Shakespeare asking for his help. Times had been hard in Stratford-upon-Avon as bad weather, poor harvests and two devastating fires had caused havoc with the local economy. Quiney was in London for four months and had been looking for support. On 25 October 1598 he wrote to Shakespeare as follows:

*“Lovinge good ffrend & contreymann Mr Wm Shackespere”.*

Quiney then asks for a loan of £30 (about £3,750 in today's money). It is possible that Shakespeare never received the letter as many years later it was found among Quiney's papers in the archives of the Stratford-upon-Avon Corporation.

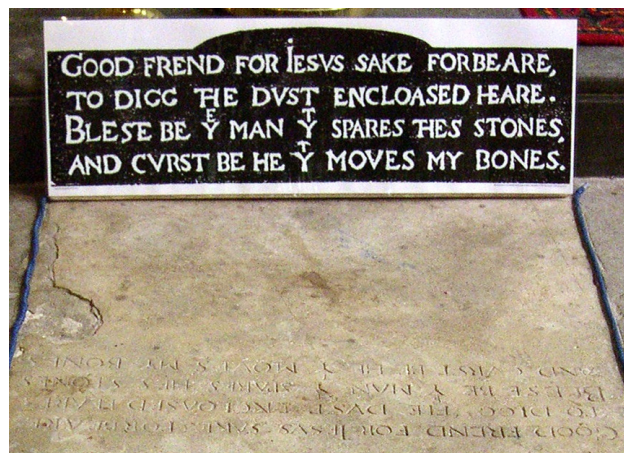


Decorative letters from 'The Scholemaster' (1571) and 'The Breviary of Health' (1577)  
CC-BY-NC-ND Images Courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

The first letter of an important document could sometimes be decorative. They are sometimes known as illuminated letters. In Shakespeare's day, the lowercase letter 'V' was often substituted for the letter 'U'.

# Letter writing and Shakespeare

One example of the substitution of the letter 'U' with a 'V' is on the engraving found on Shakespeare's grave. Can you work out what it says?



William Shakespeare's grave at Holy Trinity Church,  
Stratford-upon-Avon