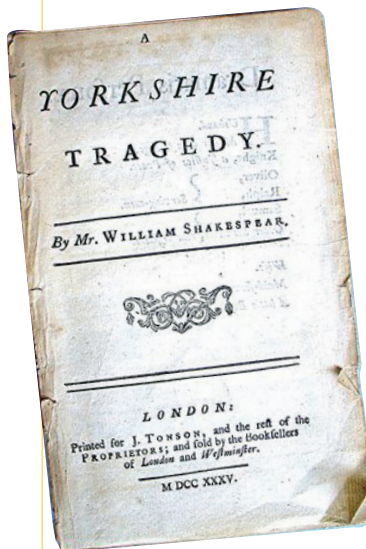


A TRUE CHAPBOOK LEGEND

BY JACK TEMPEST

- by William Shakespeare?



'Chapbooks' were cheap books costing but a penny or two. They were sold by 'chapmen' at English fairgrounds, and by street-corner printers in the 17th and 18th centuries. Chapmen were itinerant traders, and the 'chap' in their title—like the 'chap' in 'chapbook'—was a common pronunciation of 'cheap', as you may well have guessed.

Shakespeare was associated with the play that was performed at the Globe Theatre in London. It's possible that Thomas Middleton, who composed shorter plays that filled up performances at times when longer presentations by Shakespeare himself were unavailable, may have written the story.

Chapbooks were a phenomenon brought about with the invention of the printing press. Cheaply printed, the small chapbooks contained but a minimum of pages and few, if any, illustrations, which were an expensive addition; child labour was often used to add colour to their cover designs, and surviving examples are now highly sought after by collectors. Most chapbook entries were fictional stories, and one — entitled *A Yorkshire Tragedy* — is credited to none other than the famous bard himself, William Shakespeare.

The text of such publications covered various subjects such as fairytales and nursery rhymes for children, and legends and stories that often had a moral. When I came across the aforementioned chapbook, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, several years ago, the fact that it was supposedly written by William Shakespeare was interesting enough, but the subject was even more fascinating to me personally because I then lived but a couple of miles or so from the described scene of the tragedy at Calverley Hall, in the village of Calverley in Airedale, Yorkshire. For many years the story, based on truth, was dismissed as being a work of the bard. Today it is accepted that

cause his wife and children to become paupers. His fury grew, and on entering his home he violently attacked his family, giving the local people the impression that he had become 'possessed by the devil'.

Walter stabbed his two older children to death and then struck out at his wife, who was clutching the youngest child to her breast, but they were saved by the intervention of servants, who seized Walter. Apparently his fevered brain believed the family was better off dead than being committed to a life of poverty. All this took place in the year 1605, and slight variations have been given to the legend that has survived.

Refusing to enter any plea at his trial at York Assizes, Walter Calverley was sentenced to be 'pressed'. 'Pressing' was a ghastly legal persuasion of piling heavy rocks on the recumbent body of the accused, in a final attempt to obtain a plea of 'guilty' or 'not guilty'. The legend records that Walter Calverley was stretched out beneath an oaken board upon which the pile of heavy stones was steadily added, although Calverley continued to refuse to make any statement regarding his actions. As the breath was steadily being pushed out of his body, his final request for "one more stone" to be added was answered, putting him permanently out of his misery.

I knew something of the story in advance, because years earlier I had heard that local children once played a ghostly evening game around the doorway of Calverley's St Wilfred's Church. It was a scary game in which the children would gather around the church entrance on a dark evening, waiting for a cry that would send them scattering excitedly out of the darkened churchyard. Suddenly the expectant silence would be broken by one of the mischievous youngsters screaming out, "Owd Coverley's risen!" in the local accent. There are no known records of anyone actually seeing Walter Calverley's ghost riding away on horseback into the nearby woods — presumably the children had scampered home by then! Living but two or three miles from Calverley and interested in local history, my discovery of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* chapbook urged me to make enquiries of the terrible story.

The true account tells of Walter Calverley, the master of Calverley Hall, who had returned home penniless and in a frantic state from a visit to London. He had long been noted as a serious gambler, and on this occasion he had managed to lose everything he owned — not only his money, but also his estate. His hysterical outburst occurred after having fully realised that his folly would

I visited the nearby church of St Wilfred several years ago, and was lucky enough to find the vicar present. He not only confirmed the story of the two murdered Calverley boys, but also showed me the unmarked spot where he thought they were buried, as well as the entry of their burial in the Church

Register. The question remained, however, as to what happened to Walter Calverley's body after he was executed. No one has yet answered this, but there is a belief that his relatives possibly managed to gain possession of his body and arrange a private interment in St Wilfred's Church. Hence, perhaps, the origin of the children's gruesome game...

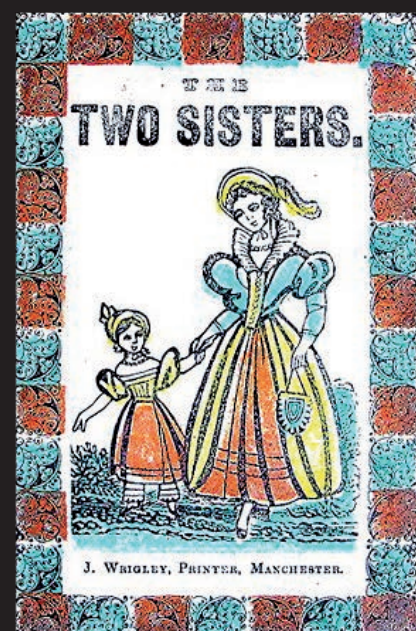
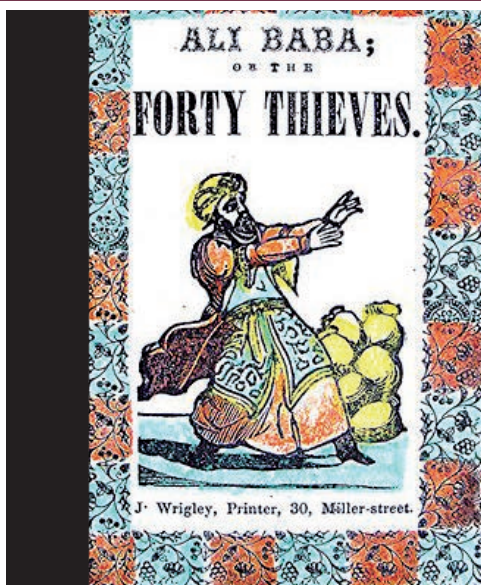
Did William Shakespeare write this play for performance at his Globe Theatre? It was acted at the Theatre as one of three short plays filling the programme at a time when no full presentation was available. My first enquiry into the authorship of the play in the Shakespeare section of the Manchester Library met with a cold reception, although I examined a book there that suggested he might well have written it. Years later, changes have taken place in which many more experts agree that it is very possible the bard was the writer. However, others go no further than conceding that *A Yorkshire Tragedy* was a product of one of Shakespeare's staff. Middleton was favoured as the writer. He had often composed plays for the Globe Theatre for Shakespeare, and may well have been the author. The arguments still continue. Whether or not *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, based upon a true enough story, will ever again be performed at the modern Globe Theatre remains to be seen.

The remains of Calverley Hall – a curious mixture of ancient buildings surrounded by more recently built residences – are still to be seen. The site is only a short walk from St Wilfred's Church, on the other side of the main roadway, and its scant remains may be viewed from the roadside amongst latterly built housing properties. The scene of mad murder and inspiration for Shakespeare lie in a suburban jungle.

About the chapbook

Originally, chapbooks were known as 'small books' or 'merrymen'. They were waistcoat pocket-sized, very cheap, crudely made and coverless. Usually created using just a single sheet of rag paper that was printed on both sides, folded and simply stitched to make 8, 12 or 16 little pages, the outside leaves thus doubled as their own book cover. Writing in *The History of Street Literature*, author Leslie Shepard says: 'The purchaser would slit the pages and lovingly stitch or pin them – a kind of do-it-yourself paperback.' They were sometimes illustrated using recycled woodcuts, and for many people they were the only form of – and format for – literature.

In the same way that the Internet is often viewed today, chapbooks were treated as dangerous by the political and religious authorities because they distributed new ideas. For example, Tom Paine's second edition of *The Rights of Man* was originally distributed as a sixpenny chapbook, and eventually sold two million copies. A



fear of enlightenment atheist philosophies led to the introduction of religious chapbooks, nicknamed 'godlinesses' and 'Sunday schools'. Other subjects included stories of debauchery, shipwrecks, murders (as we have already seen), and anything else that the publisher thought the public might find interesting. And they were not restricted to English publications, either; chapbooks were produced in Spain, Germany, France, Italy and China, to name just a few nations who enjoyed this form of populist literature.

Looked down on by the literary establishment, which called them 'penny dreadfuls', chapbooks evolved into magazines and comics on the one hand, and children's storybooks on the other. Contemporary 'merrymen'-style booklets include the *Reader's Digest* and *People's Friend*.

Chapbooks for the chapmen: There were some chapbooks that contained detailed information on fairs, roads and town layouts, especially to assist the travelling chapmen.

Chapmen also had a reputation for being rogues, and indeed some of them doubled as pickpockets...