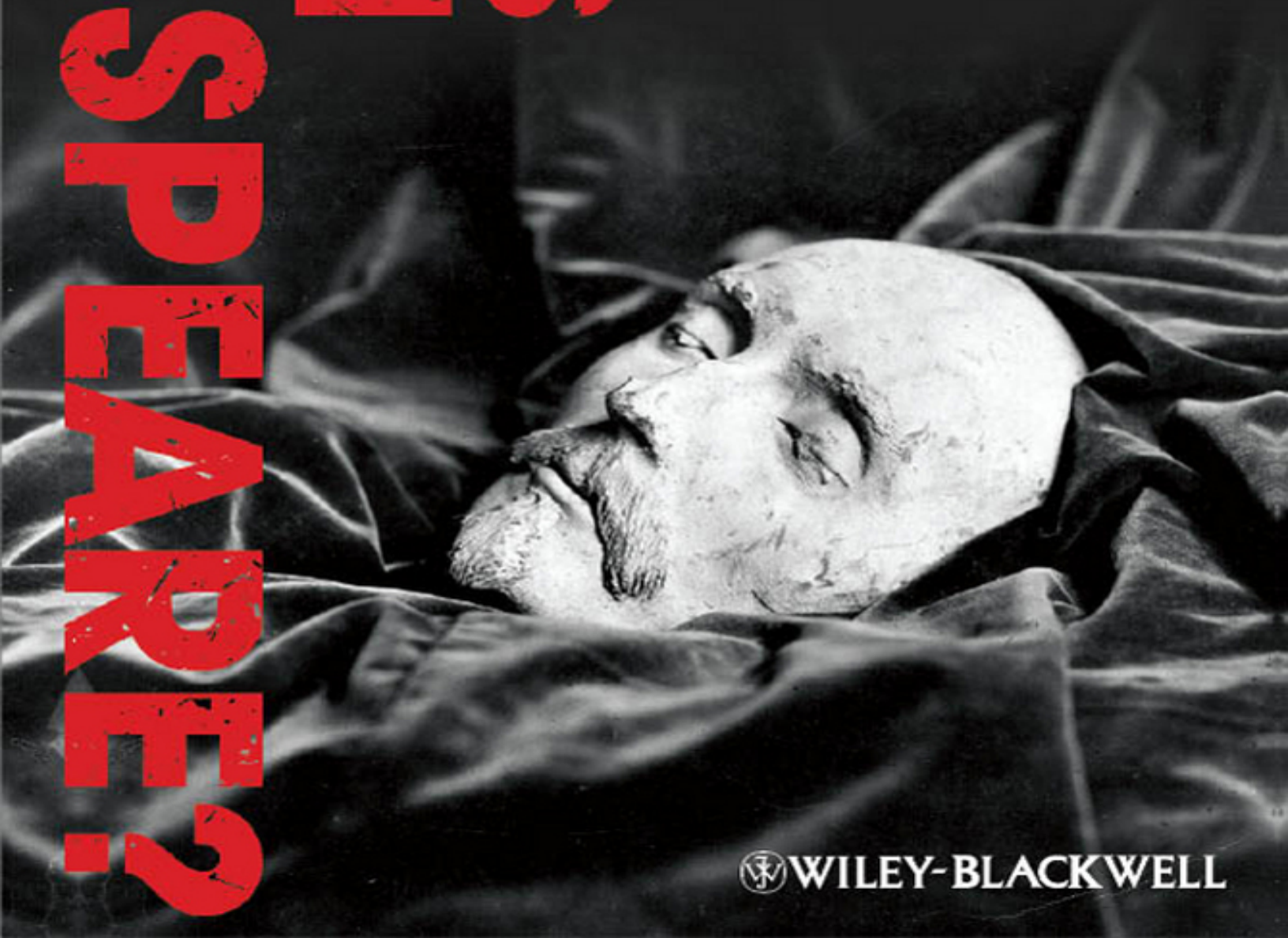


DYMPNA
CALLAGHAN

**WHO WAS
WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE?**




 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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WHO WAS
WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE?

*An Introduction to
the Life and Works*

DYMPNA CALLAGHAN

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Cover image: A death mask thought to be that of English dramatist William Shakespeare. Photo (c) Hulton Archive/Getty Images

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For Chris

NOTE ON THE TEXT

I have adopted the *via media* in relation to the issue of modernized versus original spelling in using quotations from texts and documents from the period. I have left original spellings except where I felt it would make the language unduly difficult to understand for a non-specialist audience or when a quotation is taken from an already modernized edition. My objective here is to introduce readers to the singular eloquence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English with its sometimes alien locutions and resonances and to do so without making early modern spelling an impediment to reading excerpts from the period's texts and documents. Although I have tried throughout to keep notes to a minimum, there are rather more of them in sections that make extensive reference to primary documents and historical materials.

References to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) can all be found in its online edition at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/>.

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Last, but by no means least, I must thank my family: my sister, Margaret Newcombe, offered wise counsel upon listening with superhuman patience to weekly installments of where I was with this book. My husband, Chris Kyle, read the script from first to last with unfailingly generous perspicacity and with his extraordinary knowledge of early modern England. I dedicate this book to him.

PART I

THE LIFE

1

WHO WAS WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE?

In 1841 a canon of Cologne Cathedral, Count Francis von Kesselstadt, died. His passing promised to answer definitively the question that is the subject of this book: Who was William Shakespeare? This was because among the count's dispersed possessions was a death mask bearing the label "Traditionen nach Shakespeare,"¹ and marked on the reverse "Ao Dm. 1616," the year of Shakespeare's death (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Believed to have been purchased in England by one of the count's ancestors, who had been attached to an embassy at the court of James I, the curiosity was recovered in 1849 from a secondhand shop in Darmstadt and brought from Germany to the British Museum by a man named Dr Ludwig Becker as the death mask of none other than England's national poet.² Unfortunately, the unpainted death mask is *not* an image of Shakespeare, but the belief that it was such epitomizes the persistent desire to capture Shakespeare's identity.

Figure 1.1 The Kesselstadt Death Mask.

Image reproduced by kind permission of Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt.



The death mask is perhaps what Shakespeare *ought* to look like, unlike the figure mounted on the north wall of the

chancel in Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1622, pen and paper in hand (see [Figure 1.2](#)). Apart from the engraving executed by Martin Droeshout on the First Folio (the collection of Shakespeare's plays compiled in 1623), this unprepossessing figure is the only reliably authentic image of Shakespeare left to posterity. It is singularly unfortunate, then, that the figure on the funeral monument in Holy Trinity, as the critic Dover Wilson once remarked, looks "like a self-satisfied pork butcher."³ Dissatisfaction with the bust grew almost directly in proportion to Shakespeare's posthumous reputation, which gathered increasing momentum through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the nineteenth century, fascination with the Kesselstadt death mask was excited by what was felt to be the inadequacy of the Holy Trinity monument. When A.H. Wall, who had spent many years as a professional portrait artist, addressed the Melbourne Shakespeare Society in 1890 in a paper called "Shakespeare's Face: A Monologue on the Various Portraits of Shakespeare in Comparison with the Death Mask ..." he described the monument as "a failure," "clumsy," "crude, inartistic, and unnatural."⁴

Figure 1.2 The Shakespeare memorial bust from Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-Upon-Avon. © John Cheal "Inspired Images 2010."



Whatever the alleged deficiencies, the Stratford monument (and it is, admittedly, no great work of art) must have

offered at least a minimally adequate likeness of Shakespeare because his wife, Anne, and daughters, Judith and Susanna, his sister, Joan, as well as other relatives, friends, and denizens of Stratford who knew the poet well would have seen it every time they went to church. The dissatisfaction Wall articulates, however, extends beyond artistic merit to the ideological reconstruction of Shakespeare's face by the Romantics as a serene and high-browed poetic countenance that probably bears little or no similarity to Shakespeare's actual face - which the monument no doubt creditably, if not very artfully, resembles. In contrast, the marble statue at University College Oxford by Edward Onslow Ford of the handsome young poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who drowned in 1822, looks exactly as a dead poet should (see [Figure 1.3](#)). Little wonder, then, that by the time the Kesselstadt death mask was discovered, many prominent artists and experts were eager to proclaim the likeness to be truly Shakespeare's. After the "discovery" of the death mask, Ronald Gower, opined, "Sentimentally speaking, I am convinced that this is indeed no other but Shakespeare's face; that none but the great immortal looked thus in death, and bore so grandly stamped on his high brow and serene features the promise of an immortality not of this earth alone."⁵ Although, periodically, claims for its authenticity resurface (the most recent advocate being Dr Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel of the University of Mainz in 2006), the death mask's authenticity has now been wholly discredited, and it does not any longer form part of the British Museum collection, having been consigned to the provincial obscurity of the Grand Ducal Museum in Darmstadt, Germany. David Piper of the National Portrait Gallery in London has queried whether the artifact even genuinely dates from the period. He claims that if it had been an authentic Jacobean artifact, "it must be the only death mask of a subject other than

royalty known to have been made let alone survived at this period.”⁶ What the death mask unequivocally demonstrates, however, is the degree to which ideas about authorship inherited from the nineteenth century still shape ideas and understandings of Shakespeare’s life and work. It is, after all, the disparity between the Shakespeare to be found in the historical record and exalted ideas about dead poets that have led Oxfordians and others to dismiss the real, historical Shakespeare as the mere “man from Stratford.”

Figure 1.3 Memorial Sculpture of Percy Bysshe Shelley by Edward Onslow Ford.

Photograph by Dr Robin Darwall-Smith, FSA, FRHistS. Used by the permission of the Master and Fellows of University College Oxford.



We might expect that Shakespeare would have at the very least merited the services of one of the greatest artists of his time, some English Michelangelo: perhaps Nicholas Stone, who sculpted the magnificent full-length statue of

John Donne in his shroud for St. Paul's cathedral in 1631. Stone was already receiving important commissions by 1614 when he was only fifteen years old, and two years later, in the year of Shakespeare's death, he was appointed to royal service. Or perhaps Maximilian Colt, who completed the marble sculpture of Elizabeth I for Westminster Abbey, and who in 1608 was appointed master carver to the king, would have been a worthy recipient of the commission. Despite the disparagement heaped on the artistic inadequacies of Shakespeare's funeral monument, its artist, Gheerart Janssen (sometimes anglicized as Gerard Johnson), the son of a Dutch sculptor of the same name who had settled in London around 1567 and established a notable family business near the Globe theatre in Southwark, was, in fact, a perfectly respectable choice to execute the likeness of the poet. The Janssens had sculpted the handsome monument for Edward Manners, the third Earl of Rutland, who died in 1587. This work is on a vastly larger and grander scale than Shakespeare's effigy. It includes evidence of the scope of Rutland's political power in the kneeling alabaster figure of Rutland's granddaughter, Elizabeth, whose marriage he had arranged to none other than the grandson of Elizabeth's chief minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley. A second tomb (which also interned his wife Elizabeth) was made for Edward's brother, John, the fourth Earl of Rutland, who died only a year later. For this aristocratic charge - two tombs and four paintings erected at St Mary the Virgin in Bottesford, Leicestershire - Janssen the elder was paid two hundred pounds in 1590. When Roger, the fifth earl died, the Janssens were employed again for a recumbent alabaster effigy of the earl and his wife. Shakespeare probably knew about these tombs because the sixth Earl of Rutland, Francis Manners, was a friend of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. Indeed, Rutland and Southampton had been brought up together as wards of Lord Burghley. Further, Rutland hired Shakespeare

along with Richard Burbage for forty-four shillings apiece to design an *impresa* – a chivalric device of an emblem with a motto – which would be displayed on the combatant’s shield, for the Accession Day Tilt, an annual jousting tournament, of 1613.

A comparison between the full-sized, elaborate, recumbent effigies of the earls of Rutland replete with ancillary figures and Shakespeare’s modest edifice is instructive. Shakespeare was a poet, a playwright, and a player, not an aristocrat, and his funeral monument, commemorating a life begun in Stratford, where he was baptized in 1564 and buried in 1616, is an instance in which art accurately mirrors life, or at least social status. This is exactly how early moderns thought things should be. For, as John Weever observed in *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631), “Sepulchers should be made according to the qualitie and degree of the person deceased, that by the Tombe one might bee discerned of what ranke he was living.”⁷ The image in Holy Trinity Church, reflects rather accurately, then, the status of a poet and playmaker in early modern England, even one of Shakespeare’s unparalleled talent. By these standards, the bust is appropriate, and thus successfully fulfills the purpose for which it was intended. Indeed, Nicholas Rowe records in his 1709 volume of Shakespeare’s works that in 1634 an early visitor, a Lieutenant Hammond, described it as a “neat Monument.”⁸ The image in fact tells us a great deal about what it meant to be an author at a time when no one then living could ever have envisaged that the gifted Warwickshire native would vie with Elizabeth I as the most important figure of late sixteenth-century England.

Shakespeare’s immediate family almost certainly commissioned the monument, and they probably employed Gheerart Janssen because he had executed the full-length, recumbent alabaster effigy of fellow-Stratfordian, John

Combe, which also lies in Holy Trinity Church. Combe was the friend who left “Mr. William Shackspere five pounds” in his will, and when the poet himself died, he bequeathed his sword to another member of the Combe family, Thomas, John’s nephew. Shakespeare’s image is just the torso and is made of the cheaper, local Cotswold limestone and would have been considerably less expensive than Combe’s more elaborate monument that cost sixty pounds in 1588. However, what most distinguishes the monuments of these friends is that Combe is depicted lying down in peaceful repose whereas Shakespeare is alert, upright, and at work. This posture is not unique to Shakespeare but simply accords with representational convention. The chronicler of London, John Stow, for example, is also thus depicted. Yet, that Shakespeare, almost completely bald, whiskered, and wearing a red doublet and a black sleeveless gown, holds the tools of his trade in his hands – a quill and paper – conveys the sense that even Shakespeare’s afterlife would be in some way about writing rather than resting in peace.

The bizarre phenomenon of the Kesselstadt death mask, however, promised something more than a face better fitted to Shakespeare’s plays than Janssen’s rendering. Had it indeed proved genuine, the mask would constitute the material vestige of Shakespeare’s actual visual identity in a way that a mere sculpted depiction does not. What is more, the Janssen bust is one of only two verifiably authentic portraits of Shakespeare – the other being Martin Droeshout’s engraving on the First Folio.⁹ The yearning, represented by the death mask, for an image that would take us closer to Shakespeare is understandable in so far as his lineal descendants had died out before the end of the seventeenth century and there are no truly personal traces, such as diaries, letters, or possessions, not even the much-vilified second-best bed that Shakespeare bequeathed to his wife. Probably the closest we get to Shakespeare-the-man is

his will, which is simply an inventory of his possessions and their disposal. Little wonder, then, that, even in the late twentieth century, Susan Sontag wished for an impossibly vivid connection with Shakespeare: "Having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross ... , something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."¹⁰ The German mask had, in fact, promised precisely such a hallowed and evidentiary trace: red facial hair was still attached to the plaster on the inside.¹¹

Thus, the fascination with Shakespeare's image has persisted despite Ben Jonson's famous verse directing readers to the works rather than the engraving on the First Folio: "Reader look / Not on his picture, but his book." Written seven years after Shakespeare's death and printed under an engraving of the Holy Trinity bust, Leonard Digges's verse panegyric issues a similar reminder:

when that stone is rent,
And time dissolves thy Stratford monument,
Here we alive shall view thee still. [in] This
book¹²

The monument did indeed begin to fall apart rather early on: the fingers had broken off and the paint peeled away by 1748. But then, in 1793, the Shakespearean editor Edmond Malone persuaded James Davenport, then vicar of Stratford, to whitewash the bust in the mistaken belief that this restrained, classical style must have been its original color. For his pains, Malone – whose editorial labors, though lauded by many contemporaries, also had their vocal detractors – was rewarded with an epigram inserted in the Stratford Visitors' Book:

Stranger, to whom this monument is shewn,
Invoke the Poet's curse upon Malone;

Whose meddling zeal his barbarous taste betrays,
And daubs his tombstone, as he mars his plays!¹³

In 1861, the “daubed” image was repainted, this time in the belief that Shakespeare was represented to borrow his own words in “his very habit as he lived.”¹⁴

I begin this volume with the end in mind, the end, that is, both of Shakespeare’s life in his funeral monument and the posthumous reputation that so far outshines it – he was voted Man of the Millennium, for instance, in 2000. Shakespeare’s life does not and cannot explain his works, but it can, I trust, help us to more fully understand them. The central theme of this book is how Shakespeare’s personal circumstances together with historical events and conditions, as well as political, social, and institutional frameworks, helped constitute his identity as a writer. This book takes a counterintuitive approach to Shakespeare’s life, not examining how it was different from the lives of other Elizabethans, but rather the ways in which it occupied common ground with theirs. What made Shakespeare exceptional was not, after all, his life (his extra-literary pursuits) but his identity as a writer, his literary and theatrical career. Above all, this book endeavors to understand what it meant to be a writer in a world long before the rise of the novel. This entails an examination of the intellectual, social, and political forces – educational institutions, systems of patronage, and new institutions such as the printing house and the public theatre – that molded a writer and created the category of the author, the creative literary artist as we have come to know it. Endeavoring to understand Shakespeare’s life and writing also necessitates understanding the complex political and religious forces that upheld and opposed his art. For Shakespeare was part of the Elizabethan Renaissance, that remarkable flowering in English letters that occurred towards the end of the

sixteenth century, a period which produced, at an exponential rate, some of the greatest authors in the language: Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Ben Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe – along with a host of other writers whose very considerable successes are often dwarfed by the titanic proportions of their contemporaries. However, the post-Reformation Protestant regime in which Shakespeare lived also saw some of the most voluble objections to literature as a discourse that promulgated untruth and ungodliness, and to the theatre as a place that fostered idolatry and immorality.

That the established “facts” of Shakespeare’s life for which there is irrefutable documentary evidence are relatively few is a circumstance neither unusual nor one that tarnishes the veracity of the facts themselves. It is a “fact” that, according to historians of the period, the survival rate for early modern documents is low and that Shakespeare lived in a world prior to the systematic, all-inclusive collection of data that provides the foundation of modern bureaucracy. Shakespeare’s life left two kinds of texts in its wake. The first takes the form of various church and legal documents of which he was not the author but which sometimes refer to him or, in the case of his will, for instance, bear his signature. The parish register duly notes his baptism, marriage, and death, while legal records, especially relating to property transactions and bequests, provide the far from scant evidence for his life. This volume does not aim to detail every legal document, every property transaction, or every record that can be connected with Shakespeare, because this would merely be to traverse rather dry ground that is already amply covered elsewhere. We are fortunate that Shakespeare’s art is left to us in a much more abundant supply than these secondary documents, even though neither the plays nor the poems, any more than the legal records, offer the kind of material that allows anything other

than speculation about Shakespeare's inner world, his emotions, relationships, or political opinions. Even if information about other matters pertaining to a writer's life, such as his opinions and emotions, his political and religious adherences, and so forth, is sparse, what is remarkable about Shakespeare's life is that the interstices of all that counts as "evidence" and "fact" are crammed with literary production.

In brief, the substantive details of Shakespeare's life, chronologically arranged (but excluding the often very problematic dates of performance and publication of his plays) are as follows: He was born the eldest son of John Shakespeare and his wife Mary, née Arden. His father, a glove maker, was a prominent tradesman in Stratford-Upon-Avon and became a bailiff in 1568. An older sister, Joan, had been born in September 1558 and seems to have died in infancy, a fate that also befell John and Mary's next daughter, Margaret, born in 1562 and buried the following year. Shakespeare, christened on April 26, 1564, was luckier and survived an outbreak of plague in the area during his infancy. His brother Gilbert was born to them in 1566, another child, also named Joan, in 1569, and their daughter Anne, in 1571. Anne, however, died at only eight years of age, and indeed, of Shakespeare's four sisters only Joan, reached adulthood, dying in 1646. Two more brothers, Richard, born in 1574 and Edmund, born in 1580, completed the family. Of his male siblings, only the much younger Edmund followed Shakespeare's path to London and became an actor. None of his brothers survived him, though they all lived to adulthood.

Since there was a thriving grammar school in Stratford, that is undoubtedly where Shakespeare received his education. We do not know why in 1582 Shakespeare was issued a marriage license by the bishop of Worcester to marry Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton, but it is most likely

simply the result of a clerical error since when he was eighteen, in November 1582, he married Anne Hathaway from Shottery, nearby to Stratford. Shakespeare's first child, Susanna, although born in wedlock was conceived some months outside it. She was baptized on May 26, 1583, and two years later, on February 2, 1585, William and Anne's twins, Hamnet and Judith, were christened. By 1587, Shakespeare's father's fortunes, which had been on the decline for at least ten years, had fallen so low that he was expelled from the corporation of Stratford. By 1592, when Shakespeare was twenty-eight, he was clearly a force to be reckoned with in the London theatre because he was attacked as an "upstart crow" in *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit*, a book purportedly written by Robert Greene. Shakespeare had secured the patronage of the Earl of Southampton by 1593, and the earl was the dedicatee of the narrative poem of that year, *Venus and Adonis* and, in the following year, of *The Rape of Lucrece*. By 1595, Shakespeare was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, who were engaged for royal performance. In 1596, tragedy struck, and his son, Hamnet, was buried on August 11. On his father's behalf, in the following year, Shakespeare applied to the College of Arms for a patent of gentility, and in 1597 he purchased New Place, the finest house in Stratford. Also in 1597 he was mentioned by Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* as, at that point in time, the author of twelve plays and a number of unpublished "sugar'd sonnets," which were in restricted manuscript circulation. In Warwickshire in 1599 he was reported by the borough survey as hoarding eighty bushels of malt during a period of dearth. Meanwhile in London that year, the Globe theatre was built in Southwark on the south bank of the Thames. On September 8, 1601 his father was buried. In 1603 Shakespeare was still working as an actor, playing a leading role in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*. In 1602 and 1608 he pursued two of his debtors in Stratford, for a total of less than £10.

He purchased tithes in the Stratford area in 1605 for £440, and records of 1614 show his involvement in William Combe's attempts to enclose common land in the parish of Welcombe near Stratford. In 1607, his daughter Susanna married the physician John Hall, while the following year saw the death of his mother. In 1609, his *Sonnets* were published, long after the English sonnet craze of the 1590s had passed. He gave evidence in a lawsuit at the Court of Requests in 1612 in relation to a marriage contract which he had facilitated while lodging at the home of Christopher Mountjoy and his family in Silver Street. In 1613, the same year that the Globe was razed to the ground by a fire ignited during a performance of *Henry VIII*, he purchased the gatehouse at Blackfriars, although he never lived in the property. The Globe reopened the following year. Two months before his death, Shakespeare's youngest daughter, Judith, married Thomas Quiney, who had already fathered a child upon another woman, Margaret Wheeler, and was sentenced by the consistory court for his offence. Wheeler was buried with her infant on March 15, 1616. A month later, Shakespeare was buried himself, on April 25, 1616. Anne Shakespeare, his wife, survived him and died in 1623. Although he remembered both of his children in his will, the bulk of his property went to his eldest daughter, Susanna.

In a life begun and ended in Stratford, Shakespeare had chosen not to shake the dust from his native place but rather to consolidate his status there. As he put it in the narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), "The aim of all is but to nurse the life / With honour, wealth and ease in waning age" (ll.141-2). These lines strike a decidedly Elizabethan note with their articulation of the relatively modest aspirations to social respectability and comfort in a poem set just before the dawn of the Roman republic where imperial and dynastic ambitions rather exceeded the desire to amass sufficient wealth to stave off destitution in old age.

That said, wealth and ease were hardly negligible considerations in Shakespeare's world.

The popular fascination with Shakespeare's life has, if anything, increased in recent years, despite the ostensible paucity of documentary evidence. Similarly, interest in the so-called authorship controversy remains unabated. If it strains the credibility of those skeptical about Shakespeare's authorship that a man who never went to university and who did not have an illustrious aristocratic background authored his plays, we might do well to consider the case of Shakespeare's friend and fellow-dramatist, Ben Jonson, about whom there is no authorship controversy. We do not know the Christian names of either of Jonson's biological parents, and his stepfather's name, Robert Brett, was only uncovered in the latter part of the twentieth century. The absence of such material is neither unusual nor mysterious given the survival rate for early modern documents. Nor was Shakespeare's social standing or education unusual for a writer in his day. Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's great contemporary and rival in the late sixteenth century, was the son of a Canterbury cobbler. Unlike Shakespeare, Marlowe had attended Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, but the immensely learned Jonson, who notoriously charged that Shakespeare had "small Latine and lesse Greeke," did not attend university at all. After receiving his elementary education at the school of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, Jonson attended Westminster School under the great antiquary William Camden. The stepson of a bricklayer, he followed his adoptive father into the trade, and indeed maintained his right to work as a paid-up member of the Tylers and Bricklayers Company even at the height of his literary career, when his identity as a playwright and poet was thoroughly established. Understandably wishing to avoid arguments that purport to unseat the "man from Stratford" as the author of Shakespeare's works, instructors

are sometimes reluctant to engage with the issue of Shakespeare's life at all. Unfortunately, this works to cut off one of the main reasons that readers are initially interested in Shakespeare and one of the primary reasons that students sign up for Shakespeare classes. What underlies this fascination with the authorship issue is the perfectly legitimate interest in the contours of Shakespeare's life. Readers are right to want to know how it came to be that Shakespeare wrote so many of the world's literary masterpieces and to ask precisely what kind of life he was living while he was writing them.

I begin with three of the most significant issues that shaped Shakespeare's identity: these are education, religion, and social status. Indeed, the last two of these were inescapably conditions of every Elizabethan life, and, of these, social status, the fundamental hierarchy of Shakespeare's world, based on wealth, property, and lineage, was by far the most important force in determining the trajectory of all lives in early modern England. For Shakespeare personally, of course, education, the very real and substantial source of his literary achievements, was the most important factor in allowing him as a gifted individual to become a writer. Access to that education, however, was also a direct index of status. A boy in Elizabethan England did not need to be from an exalted or aristocratic background to receive a grammar school education, but he still needed at least modest means, which, small though it might be, was nonetheless far beyond the mass of the laboring population. The remaining category, religion, was, of course, a vexed, highly fraught dimension of life in the post-Reformation era of Shakespeare's time, as English Christianity, splintered by schism, took new and unprecedented forms. That church attendance, far from being a voluntary expression of devotion, was mandatory, while heresy and atheism were subject to severe legal