

Who Wrote the first Shakespeare Biography? It was not Nicholas Rowe in 1709!¹

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Early in every biography of Shakespeare, writers advance two unfounded claims: firstly, that more is known about Shakespeare's life than is commonly realised. The second claim, which I examine here, is that the earliest biography about Shakespeare was written by Nicholas Rowe in 1709. Rowe's apparent biography is an essay entitled *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear* which prefaces his critical edition of Shakespeare's plays. The *Account* (as it was spelt in the 1709 edition) originally contained about 8,200 words, most of which concern his judgment as to Shakespeare's merit. Only about 1,020 words are biographical (approximately 12% of the total). Alexander Pope reprinted Rowe's essay in 1725 but omitted some small sections amounting to about 1,165 words, none of which refer to Shakespeare's life. It was this Rowe-Pope *Account* (as it was now spelt) which was frequently reprinted for the next 150 years. Despite Pope's cuts, the biographical content of the abridged version is about 1,000 words out of 7,000 (approximately 14%).²

In his entry for Shakespeare in the British *Dictionary of National Biography* (1897), Sidney Lee referred to Rowe's *Account* as "a more ambitious memoir than had yet been attempted." E. K. Chambers believes that Rowe made "the first attempt at a systematic biography of the poet." Samuel Schoenbaum states that Rowe made the "first attempt at a connected biography of Shakespeare." Gary Taylor calls it the "first substantial biography of Shakespeare ever published."³

These adjectives — ambitious, systematic, connected and substantial — afford far greater authority to Rowe's essay than it actually merits. Such claims, however, continue to be repeated in this century: Michael Dobson calls it a

“pioneering biography.” Stanley Wells refers to it as the “first formal biography.” Peter Ackroyd states that Rowe was Shakespeare’s “earliest biographer,” while Lois Potter claims that Rowe “compiled the first biography of Shakespeare.” Even David Ellis, who is normally dismissive of Shakespearean biographies—he called them bricks without straw—refers to Rowe’s *Account* as “the first real attempt at a biography of Shakespeare.”⁴

So, by the sound of things, we should all be studying Rowe’s biography of 1709. Yet a modern editor of Rowe’s *Account* comes to a very different view. Samuel Monk prepared his edition in 1948 and said this in his introduction:

The biographical part of Rowe’s *Account* assembled the few facts and most of the traditions still current about Shakespeare a century after his death. It would be easy for any undergraduate to distinguish fact from legend in Rowe’s preface; and scholarship since Steevens and Malone has demonstrated the unreliability of most of the local traditions that Betterton reported from Warwickshire.⁵

At this point we need to consult some definitions: the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* calls a biography “the story of a real person’s life written by someone other than that person.” The keyword is “story.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* similarly defines it as “a connected narrative of a person’s life.”

How did Rowe’s essay come to prominence?

By about the year 1700, the publisher Jacob Tonson had acquired the rights to publish all the plays of Shakespeare. Tonson invited a prominent playwright, Nicholas Rowe, who was enjoying success with plays such as *The Fair Penitent* (1703), to act as editor. Between them, Rowe and Tonson issued an edition of the plays in eight volumes, octavo—a handy format for carrying around in the pocket, rather than the cumbersome format of the folios. Certain useful additions were made to the text: lists of *dramatis personae* for each play, stage directions, act and scene divisions, and illustrations based on contemporary stage performances of the plays. The enterprise was successful: it was immediately reprinted (1709/10), and reissued in 1714 in an even smaller, duodecimo, format,⁶ the first volume of which comprised the texts of the first seven comedies in sequence from the Fourth Folio of 1685, preceded by two letters or addresses: a dedication to the Duke of Somerset, Charles Seymour, and a preface entitled *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear*. Most people ignore the “&c” in the title and simply accept the first five words: “*Some Account of the Life*” amounts to forty pages in octavo format, at twenty-eight lines per page, a little over 8,000 words in total.

The need for some kind of preface offering both a biography and an appreciation was probably required by the publisher. When Tonson published *The works of Mr Abraham Cowley* in 1668, Thomas Sprat had supplied a biography titled

“An Account of the Life and Writings of Abraham Cowley.” Similarly, John Dryden wrote a substantial *Life of Plutarch* for his 1683 edition of *Plutarch’s Lives*.⁷ Whereas Sprat had known Cowley personally and was his literary executor, Dryden was forced to find out about Plutarch’s life from various small asides scattered throughout the *Lives* and in other written documents. However, in the case of Shakespeare, there was no contemporary memoir of Shakespeare and (unlike Jonson’s texts) there were no explicit comments by the author about himself. So, to discover more about Shakespeare’s life Tonson placed advertisements in the *London Gazette* and in the *Daily Courant* in March 1709. He requested materials that may be “serviceable to this Design” and that “it will be a particular Advantage to the Work, and acknowledg’d as a favour by the Gentleman who has Care of this Edition.” However, the ads were not very helpful as little or nothing seems to have been forthcoming about Shakespeare’s life.⁸

What kind of text is Rowe’s Account?

A simple reading clearly shows that Rowe did not attempt to write a continuous narrative of Shakespeare’s life. For his prefatory essay, Rowe had little to comment on beyond the works himself. Rowe refers to thirty-three plays from the First Folio as well as *Pericles* and *Venus and Adonis*. He also refers to almost forty named characters in the plays, which demonstrates his great interest in appreciation rather than biography.⁹ He mentions Shakespeare’s genius six times and also admires his “Fire, Impetuosity, and even beautiful Extravagance” (iii). At the outset, he expresses doubts as to the value of his own or any other literary biography: personal descriptions are offered out of “Respect due to the Memory of Excellent Men,” but he dismisses such curiosity as “trifling,” adding that only sometimes does knowledge of an author “conduce to the better understanding his Book.” Rowe’s *Account* is mostly a critical review of the works (more than seven-eighths of the essay) rather than a biography (less than one-eighth). His purpose is to support Dryden’s view of Shakespeare as the “epitome of excellence” (*Of dramattick poesie*, an 1668 essay) against the censure expressed by Thomas Rymer in his *Short View of Tragedy* (1693).

Although he asserted that he had “resolv’d not to enter any Critical Controversie” (xxxiv), Rowe devotes most of his *Account* to answering adverse criticisms: “If he [Rymer] had a Pique against the Man, and wrote on purpose to ruin a Reputation so well establish’d, he has had the Mortification to fail altogether in his Attempt, and to see the World at least as fond of Shakespear as of his Critique” (xvi). He concedes Rymer’s point about Shakespeare not following the classical unities in his plays, and accepts the dubious proposition: “It is without Controversie, that he had no knowledge of the Writings of the Antient Poets” (iii).

However, Shakespeare is the poet of nature and to show this Rowe quotes the “All the world’s a stage” speech (xxi). He emphasises Shakespeare’s poetic abilities: “His Images are indeed ev’ry where so lively, that the Thing he would represent stands full before you, and you possess ev’ry Part of it” (xxii). At the end, Rowe

answers some of Jonson's adverse comments (xxxviii-xxxix). Overall, Rowe's *Some Account of the Life &c of Mr. William Shakespear* is a disjointed collection of critical judgments interspersed with a little biographical material. It does not merit the title of "biography" because it is not a coherent narrative of the life of Shakespeare. It is a commendation or literary puff intended to persuade casual readers to buy the edition. Out of the total 8,000 words only one-eighth of Rowe's original *Account*, as little as 1,000 words, is concerned with the life, about 12% of the total. Thus we cannot say that Rowe attempted a biography. He wrote a critical appreciation with a few biographical statements, most of which are either wrong or cannot be verified from other sources.

How reliable is the biographical element?

Rowe only mentions one authority, his friend, the actor Thomas Betterton, who was by this time in his seventies and suffering from gout. In line with his own inclination for an aesthetic approach to Shakespeare, Rowe clearly values Betterton for his acting:

I cannot leave *Hamlet*, without taking notice of the Advantage with which we have seen this Masterpiece of *Shakespear* distinguish itself upon the Stage, by Mr. *Betterton's* fine Performance of that Part. A Man, who though he had no other good Qualities, as he has a great many, must have made his way into the Esteem of all Men of Letters, by this only Excellency.

(1709, xxxiii-xxxiv)

He adds that Betterton had contributed to the biographical record but is not specific:

I must own a particular Obligation to him, for the most considerable part of the Passages relating to his Life, which I have here transmitted to the Public; his Veneration for the Memory of *Shakespear* having engaged him to make a Journey into *Warwickshire*, on purpose to gather up what Remains he could of a Name for which he had so great a Value.

(1709, xxxiv)

So Rowe is relying on Betterton, who made a special trip to Stratford to find out more about Shakespeare. If he did do so, it is strange that nobody seemed to notice this visit by the leading actor of the Restoration Stage. The Rev. John Ward makes no mention of Betterton (or any other visitor to Stratford) enquiring about Shakespeare in his journal up to 1681. However, there is doubt whether Betterton himself made the journey at all. William

Oldys consulted a member of Betterton's company, John Bowman, who denied that Betterton had ever been to Stratford. Edmond Malone noted:

If Betterton the player did really visit Warwickshire for the sake of collecting anecdotes relative to our author, perhaps he was too easily satisfied for such as fell in his way, without making any rigid search into their authenticity.

(1790 vol. i. pt. ii. 121n)

A little later, Malone expands this note:

Mr. Betterton was born in 1635, and had many opportunities of collecting information relative to Shakespeare, but unfortunately the age in which he lived was not an age of curiosity. Had either he or Dryden or Sir William Davenant taken the trouble to visit our poet's youngest daughter, who lived till 1662, or his grand-daughter, who did not die till 1670, many particulars might have been preserved which are now irrevocably lost.

(1790 vol. i. pt. ii. 154n)

Malone was right to be doubtful. Betterton's friend and biographer, Charles Gildon (1710), did not mention a visit to Stratford, nor does his modern biographer, David Roberts (2010).¹⁰ Overall, Rowe's citation of Betterton as the authority for the Stratford records is not very strong. Nevertheless, somebody was able to provide information about Shakespeare from an inspection of the parish register at the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

Malone then evaluated each of Rowe's claims and established which could be accepted (1821, ii. 69). Only a few of Rowe's statements about Shakespeare's life can be verified from contemporary documents:

- He was the Son of Mr. John Shakespear, and was Born at Stratford upon Avon, in Warwickshire, in April 1564.
- William was young when he married a yeoman's daughter.
- Shakespeare dedicated *Venus and Adonis* to the Earl of Southampton.
- His father obtained a coat of arms.
- He Dy'd in the 53d Year of his Age, and was bury'd on the North side of the Chancel, in the Great Church at Stratford, where a Monument, as engrav'd in the Plate, is plac'd in the Wall.
- He had three daughters, two of whom were married. There is a slight error here as Shakespeare fathered two daughters and one son, Hamnet.

Rowe offers the following statements about Shakespeare's life which have not been verified in any contemporary records:

- He was sent by his father to a “free-school” for some time.
- his father withdrew him due to straitened circumstances.
- He joined “the company,” but the top of his Performance was the Ghost in his own Hamlet.
- Shakespear commended an early work of Jonson (xii) to the Company, but Rowe does not state which play, which company or which year.
- Shakespeare’s apparent retirement to Stratford is described at length.

Rowe offers the following statements about Shakespeare’s life which have been demonstrated as wrong:

- His father was a “considerable dealer in wool,” whereas in fact he was a glover, who may have had small dealings in wool.
- William was caught deer-poaching and punished.
- William wrote a ballad against Sir Thomas Lucy by way of revenge and was forced to leave Stratford.
- He came to the attention of the Queen, who commanded him to portray Falstaff in love, which was “said to be the Occasion of his Writing the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.”
- Southampton gave him a gift of £1,000 with a certain scepticism: he would not repeat it but for the fact that “the Story was handed down by Sir *William Davenant*, who was probably very well acquainted with his Affairs.”
- Shakespeare composed an epitaph for his neighbour, Mr Coombe, the only acquaintance at Stratford that Rowe mentions. George Steevens noted that the epitaph about John Combe had been published by Richard Braithwaite in 1618 without reference to Shakespeare. Moreover, he noted that two of the lines had previously appeared in 1608 and 1614 (reported by Malone 1790, vol ii. 496-497).

From this analysis we can dismiss claims that Rowe was responsible for the earliest biography of Shakespeare: he merely made some comments about Shakespeare’s life, most of which have been proved wrong or at least unverifiable.

I suggest that the following myths or legends, which have not been verifiable according to contemporary documents, constitute Rowe’s biogra-fictions regarding Shakespeare:

- He spent his childhood in Stratford, where he attended the local school. There is no evidence as to where Shakespeare spent his childhood or that he ever attended school in Stratford or anywhere else. From his baptism in 1564 until the issuance of his marriage licence in 1582, there is no mention of William Shakespere in the public records. The suggestion by Arthur Gray (1926) that Shakespeare was brought up at an aristocratic household is tenable in the absence of evidence to the contrary.¹¹

- He was caught deer-stealing and punished, writing a ballad in revenge against Sir Thomas Lucy. Malone, however, showed that there was no deer park at Charlecote at this time (1790, vol. ii, 145). This myth is sometimes downgraded to rabbit-catching.
- He enjoyed the patronage of the Earl of Southampton. There is no evidence that Southampton ever knew Shakespeare or ever patronised any writer during the reign of Elizabeth. Rowe's description of the patronage enjoyed by Shakespeare from the Queen and from the Earl of Southampton is a thinly disguised appeal for patronage from Queen Anne and the Duke of Somerset.
- He inspired envy in Jonson. Jonson is very dismissive at times about Shakespeare's works, but there is no evidence that Jonson was ever jealous, which is different. The association of envy with Jonson may have arisen from the words of the dedication to the 1623 Folio: "To draw no envy (Shakespeare) on thy name," which expressly refute the accusation of Jonson's envy.
- He retired to Stratford. Rowe seems to be arguing from norms in asserting his retirement "as all Men of good Sense will wish theirs may be." The latest evidence of Shakespeare's home is the testimony in the Belott-Mountjoy case that he "laye in the house" of Mountjoy c. 1604. After this, there is no record as to where he lived. A retirement to Stratford in 1611 is difficult to reconcile with his purchase of the Blackfriars Gatehouse in London on 10 March 1613.

Whereas none of these bio-fictions has been confirmed by any contemporary record, they have remained in the standard account of Shakespeare's life and constitute essential elements of the "bio-mythography" of Shakespeare (as noted by Michael Benton).¹²

Dr. Johnson's Unwritten Life of Shakespeare

During the next hundred years after Rowe, there were three great editors of Shakespeare: Samuel Johnson, George Steevens and Edmund Malone. However, these editors were very dismissive of Rowe's *Account* and never referred to it as "biography." Over 150 biographies were published in the eighteenth century, but nobody ever called Rowe's *Account* biography. It was customary for editors (or perhaps for the publishers) to reprint the prefaces of predecessors. It was reprinted in Johnson's edition of 1765, but with little enthusiasm, and only at the end of a string of other prefaces:

I have likewise borrowed the author's life from Rowe, though not written with much elegance or spirit; it relates however what is now to be known.

(Johnson 1765, i. sig. C8^r).

It is astonishing that Dr. Johnson did not attempt his own Life of Shakespeare. He had been commissioned to prepare an edition of Shakespeare's works by the Tonson family in the 1760s. Whereas Rowe had been a noted dramatist and Pope a noted poet, Johnson was approached as a celebrated essayist and lexicographer. His *Dictionary* of 1755 showed that he had the depth of reading and understanding to explain obscure meanings and expressions. His edition of Shakespeare eventually appeared in 1765. The great doctor was lauded for the brilliant prefatory essay, but the edition produced little new biographically (Murphy 2003, 80-81). It was reprinted in 1766, 1768 and 1771 and the first revised edition appeared in 1773. After his own critical preface (in over seventy unnumbered pages), the prolegomena included the prefaces of Pope, Theobald, Hanmer and Warburton. Only placed after these, i.e., in the least prominent position, did Johnson retain Rowe's preface, somewhat apologetically, as noted above. Finally, he added the text of the anecdote about holding horses but without comment. Johnson might have been tempted to include this anecdote as an example of "diligence and fidelity," praiseworthy qualities which he had discerned in his early life of Drake (1740/1).

Despite gaining fame and fortune from his *Dictionary* and his edition of Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson preferred biography to any other form. In 1750 Dr. Johnson celebrated the writing of biography with a number of precepts that became widely accepted.¹³ He defined biography as a mixture of history with romance (i.e., fiction) and moralising: "Biography is, of the various kinds of narrative writing, that which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life." Johnson himself wrote many biographies, beginning with the *Life of Sir Francis Drake* (published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* 1740/1) and the full-length *Life of Mr Richard Savage* (1744). Later in his career, he returned to biography by writing fifty or so *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical to the Works of the English Poets*, which were soon reprinted as *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* in six volumes (1779-81). With this publication, Johnson established literary biography as an important genre.

Few commentators have noted that Johnson, who so promoted the genre of literary biography, never attempted a Life of Shakespeare. He certainly knew the works and quoted from them 17,000 times in his *Dictionary* of 1755. Furthermore, Johnson also came from the English midlands, Stratford being only slightly off the main route from Litchfield to London. Stratford was becoming something of a tourist attraction in the 1760s, mainly due to the success of Johnson's former pupil, David Garrick, as the foremost Shakespearean actor of his age. Indeed, Garrick was planning the Stratford Jubilee from the mid 1760s, which greatly enhanced the popularity of Shakespeare. Moreover, Johnson had previously been commissioned (almost certainly with a cash advance) to write such a life by the literary publisher,

Thomas Coxeter (1689-1747), according to Sir John Hawkins. Regarding criticism made in 1762 about his long-awaited edition of Shakespeare, Hawkins noted:

[Johnson] confessed he was culpable, and promised from time to time to begin a course of such reading as was necessary to qualify him for the work: this was no more than he had formerly done in an engagement with Coxeter, to whom he had bound himself to write the life of Shakespeare, but he could never be prevailed on to begin it.¹⁴

Johnson's procrastination over the life of Shakespeare stands in stark contrast to his *Lives of the Poets* in which he gave short literary biography of about fifty other English authors (1779-1781). Johnson gave as his reason for this omission the lack of information about Shakespeare, saying that Rowe's *Account* gave all that was to be known about the life. No doubt, Johnson would have adopted a moralistic tone as he had done in his life of Sir Francis Drake, where he found in the early life signs of future achievement noting that "virtue is the surest foundation of reputation and fortune, and that the first step to greatness is to be honest." In a later paragraph Johnson adds: "Diligence in employment is the most successful introduction to greater enterprises." (*Gentleman's Magazine*, x. 1740, 389). However, in the case of Shakespeare, there were no documented instances of Shakespeare's early virtue or diligence. Dr. Johnson's friend and biographer, James Boswell, reported a lament by Johnson about the loss of personal knowledge on Shakespeare and Dryden:

How delighted should we have been if thus introduced into the company of Shakespeare and of Dryden, of whom we know scarcely anything but their admirable writings! What pleasure would it have given us to have known their petty habits, their characteristic manners, their modes of composition, and their genuine opinion of preceding writers and of their contemporaries! All these are now irrecoverably lost.

(James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 1785, 522-523).

Dr. Johnson's inability to write a Life of Shakespeare simply derived from the lack of biographical material, which as he noted, tended to diminish with time:

History can be formed from permanent monuments and records; but Lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost for ever. What is known can seldom be told; and when it might be told, it is no longer known.

(Johnson *Biographical* 1781, v. 5, 71-72)

This observation seems to have had a profound impact on Boswell's friend Edmond Malone, who was able to find enough material about Dryden for a biography

which was published in 1800, but not, as we shall see, for a life of Shakespeare.

What did later eighteenth century authorities think of Rowe?

Johnson's younger contemporaries and assistant editors, George Steevens and Edmond Malone, were equally unimpressed with Rowe's biographical claims. George Steevens stated:

All that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakespeare is – that he was born in Stratford upon Avon, –married and had children there, went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays, – returned to Stratford, made his will, died and was buried.¹⁵

Edmond Malone lamented the lack of research by previous writers:

That almost a century should have elapsed, from the time of his death, without a single attempt having been made to discover any circumstance which could throw a light on his private life, or literary career; that, when the attempt was made [by Rowe in 1709], it should have been so; and that for a period of eighty years afterwards, during which this “god of our idolatry” ranked as high among us as any poet ever did in any country, all the editors of his works, and each successive biographer, should have been contented with Mr Rowe's meagre and imperfect narrative.

(Malone, ed. Boswell, 1821 ii. 10-11)

Malone had hoped to be able to write his own Life of Shakespeare, but never achieved this ambition. Like previous editors, Malone included Rowe's *Account of the Life &c.*, in his own edition (1790 i. ii. 102-154) but “endeavoured, in some degree, to supply the defects of Mr. Rowe's short narrative, by adding to it copious annotations” (as reported in 1821, ii. 11n). These notes are printed in a smaller font and are so extensive that some pages have no running text. About half the notes were the result of Malone's own researches, the other half are attributed to other writers, especially Lewis Theobald. Malone further elaborated these comments “for the purpose of demolishing almost every statement [by Rowe] which it contained” (1821, i. xix). Malone's literary executor, James Boswell, Jr., however, offered an apology in the prolegomena: “I have printed the prefaces which have been prefixed to the modern editions of the poet, among which Mr. Rowe's life, as being partly prefatory and partly biographical may be classed.” Rowe's *Account* had been repeated so often and its content had become so ingrained in the study of Shakespeare that Boswell conceded: “Notwithstanding its defects in the second point of view, I should not have thought myself justified in omitting it altogether” (1821, i. xix).

Who was the first biographer of Shakespeare?

Nicholas Rowe was the first critical *editor* of the works, but he was not Shakespeare's first "biographer." Neither Johnson, Steevens nor Malone attempted a Life of Shakespeare; nor did any of the other major eighteenth-century Shakespeare scholars, such as Alexander Pope, Lewis Theobald, or Edward Capell. The first biography of Shakespeare did not in fact appear until 1843, over 100 years later than Rowe and almost 300 years after the birth of Shakespeare. Charles Knight included a narrative account of Shakespeare's life as volume VIII of his *Illustrated Edition of Shakespeare's works*. Here is a heavily romanticized passage, needed to establish a turning point in the narrative, but for which there is nothing in the historical records:

The happy days of Shakespeare's boyhood are nearly over. William Shakespeare no longer looks for that close of day when, in that humble chamber in Henley Street, his father shall hear something of his school progress, and read with him some English book of history or travel.¹⁶

All this and many other such descriptions were pure imagination as contemporaries noted. Victorian intellectuals were not impressed. One reviewer stated:

[Charles Knight] the author did not tie himself down to bare facts, but gave free rein to his imagination. As a chronicle of what might have happened to the poet and what he probably did, the people he was likely to have met, etc., this is not surpassed by anything which has been written on the subject. But those who wish to ascertain what we really know of Shakespeare must consult other books.¹⁷

Whereas Knight eked out his biography with his own conjectures and speculations, John Payne Collier in 1844 resorted to fabricating documents for his 1844 biography, fabrications which were not exposed for another ten years. The use of conjecture, speculation and, yes, even fabrication, in the biography of Shakespeare was thus not established until Victorian times.

Conclusions

Nicholas Rowe did not write a biography of Shakespeare. He wrote an appreciation within which he made some biographical statements. A majority of these comments, however, turn out upon inspection to be unfounded or undocumented. Modern biographers are therefore erroneous in claiming that Rowe was Shakespeare's earliest biographer. They clearly derive this idea from Sidney Lee, who first advanced it in 1897. It was not repeated until Samuel Schoenbaum in *Shakespeare's Lives* in 1970. Since then, almost all biographers of Shakespeare repeat it, presenting their own efforts as coming at the end of a respectable tradition of

Shakespearean biography stretching back to 1709, and not to Knight's biography of 1843, which was not written until almost three hundred years after Shakespeare's birth. For authorship sceptics, it is further interesting to note that the earliest articulated doubt about the authorship of the Shakespeare canon occurs in the 1850s, soon after the first large-scale biographies by Knight and Collier in the 1840s.

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Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to thank Professor William Leahy and R.E.M. Jolly for their advice and support in preparing this essay. It is based mainly on Chapter 3 of my thesis, *Shakespearean Biogra-fiction: How modern biographers rely on context, conjecture and inference to construct a life of the Bard*, for which I was awarded a Ph.D. by Brunel University London in July 2015. The essay was presented to the meeting of the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship, Ashland, Oregon, in September 2015.
- ² Nicholas Rowe's essay can be found in many publications and on many websites, most usefully in *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare* edited by David Nichol Smith (Glasgow: James MacLehose (1903)), which contains very useful notes.
- ³ Sidney Lee (DNB entry 1897; republished as a monograph in 1898, 363; repeated verbatim 1917, 642). Lee's entry to the DNB for Shakespeare amounted to 63,000 words, the longest to date, in line with his cultural significance, not with the level of biographical material available. It was only ever exceeded by the entry for Queen Victoria. E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: a Study of Facts and Problems* (1930, vol i. 12). S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (1970), 131. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*. London: Hogarth Press (1989), 74.
- ⁴ Michael Dobson, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (2001, 423). Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for all Time* (2002, 200). Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (2005, 476). Lois Potter, *The Life of William Shakespeare: A Critical Biography* (2012, 432). David Ellis, *That Man Shakespeare: Icon of Modern Culture* (Sussex: Helm International, 2005), 37.
- ⁵ Samuel H. Monk, ed. *Nicholas Rowe: Some Account of the Life of William Shakespeare (1709)*. Los Angeles, CA: Augustan Reprint Society (1948), 5.
- ⁶ Andrew Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print: A History and Chronology of Shakespeare Publishing*, CUP (2003) 57-61.
- ⁷ John Dryden, ed., *Plutarch's Lives. Translated from the Greek by several hands. To which is prefixt the Life of Plutarch* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1683).
- ⁸ Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (1970), 129-132.
- ⁹ Rowe mentions the following characters in the plays of Shakespeare: Falstaff, Mistress Quickly, Prince Hal, Ford, Slender, Ann Page, Malvolio, Parolles, Petruchio, Benedick, Beatrice, Rosalind, Thersites, Apemantus, Shylock, Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, Jaques, Caliban, Prospero, Ferdinand, Juno, Ceres, Antony, Cleopatra, Beaufort, Gloucester, Henry VIII, Wolsey, Katherine (of Aragon), Coriolanus, Brutus, Romeo, Juliet, Hamlet, and Macbeth. Rowe also refers to the following unnamed characters: the Pedant, the Ghost of Hamlet's father, fairies, and witches, as well as quoting from various scenes and speeches involving the Queen (Gertrude) or a Maid in Love (Viola).

- ¹⁰ Charles Gildon, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, the late eminent tragedian*. London: R. Gosling (1710). David Roberts, *Thomas Betterton: the Greatest Actor of the Restoration Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2010). A text dated 1715 entitled *Some Further Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear*, purporting to include reports of Betterton's conversations at Stratford, has been dismissed as a forgery by Holderness, "Some Further Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear, with Corrections Made to the First and Second Editions, and with the Supplementation of New Matter Acquir'd from Diligent Researches in the Publick Records, and from Conversations Mr. Betterton had with the people of Stratford-upon-Avon (1715)." *Critical Survey* 21.3, 112-118 (2009).
- ¹¹ Arthur Gray, *A chapter in the early life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1926).
- ¹² Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction*. London: John Wile, 2009 (47-66). Establishing the life of a national hero with little or no regard to verifiable facts has been termed "biomythography" by Benton. He notes that these heroes are often literary figures, such as Byron and Dickens, and that biographers continue to exalt their subjects charting their subject's moves from success through celebrity and martyrdom to idolatry. He offers a five-stage paradigm for this process of biomythography:
- (i) selection and 'spin' of facts: an early biographer selects and establishes a factual history with his or her own interpretation;
 - (ii) fact into fiction: the facts become fictionalised through reference to the subject's writings;
 - (iii) fiction into myth: the fiction becomes mythologised as its characters and landscape become symbols;
 - (iv) myth into 'Faction': stories with a basis in fact but embellished with invented elements;
 - (v) demythologising: biographers return to primary sources.

The Shakespeare Authorship Question clearly relates to the final stage, demythologizing Shakespeare.

- ¹³ Johnson's principles began to appear in a succession of articles in *The Rambler* 60 (13 Oct. 1750), 28-33, and are reprinted in James L. Clifford, James L., *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960* (Oxford: at the University Press, 1962), 39-45.
- ¹⁴ Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: Chambers, 1787), 440. I am indebted to Dr. Paul Tankard of the University of Otago for bringing this allusion to my attention. The criticism in 1762 had been made by Charles Churchill: "He for subscribers baits his hook / and takes your cash, but where's the book?" *The Ghost*, London, i. 800-801.
- ¹⁵ This note is buried in Malone's commentary to Sonnet 93. The name "STEEVENS" occurs in upper case according to the customary practice at the time of indicating the author of such a note. Edmond Malone, *Supplement to the edition of Shakspeare's plays published in 1778 by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens. In two volumes.* (1780 ii. 653).
- ¹⁶ Charles Knight, *Life of Shakespere* (1851, 64). Quoted by Julia Thomas, *Shakespeare's Shrine: The Bard's Birthplace and the Invention of Stratford*. University of Pennsylvania (2012, 23).
- ¹⁷ J. Parker Norris, "The Editors of Shakespeare." *Shakespeariana: a critical and contemporary review of Shakespearian Literature* 5, January 1888, 72-75.