

QUESTION 16

Should we be concerned that there are gaps in the historical record?

Andrew Hadfield

It always astonishes me that people are so surprised at gaps in the records of the lives of early modern people and that they demand, often stridently, that these be explained, or else they will assume that there has been some sort of cover up. But we know so little about most people outside the very upper echelons of society. And what biographies were written were designed to tell exemplary stories so hardly any survive of writers until things changed in the later seventeenth century. Hardly any personal letters survive, paper being scarce and invariably reused, so we should not read anything into the lack of a cache of Shakespeare letters. Nor should we be surprised that Shakespeare's will does not include some objects, such as books, as wills tended to mention only important and valuable items, everything else going to the next of kin. My favourite non-fact is that, although Thomas Nashe is, I think, the only English writer ever to have forced the authorities to close down the theatres and printing presses, making him something of a celebrity, we do not know when or how he died. Traces of Shakespeare, although scanty, do not require special explanation. Or, alternatively, we could imagine that a whole host of writers who emerged in the late sixteenth century, were imposters.