

QUESTION 29

Did Shakespeare have an aristocratic patron?

Michael Holroyd

Shakespeare had a romantic view of the aristocracy. They seemed to inhabit an altogether different world from his own. The obsequious dedications he wrote to his patron, the Earl of Southampton, for his narrative poems have disturbed some of his admirers (especially when compared with Webster's dedication of *The Duchess of Malfi* to Baron Berkeley – "I do not altogether look up to your title"). But there was calculation as well as deference in Shakespeare's "well-sugared" words. It was rumoured he had been given money by Southampton to join the Chamberlain's Men, and he received 44 shillings in gold for designing the impresa which the Earl of Rutland wore in the annual Accession Tilt at Whitehall. Though he appears to have regretted crooking "the pregnant hinges of the knee" for aristocratic patronage, his posthumous First Folio was dedicated to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery.