

Question 38

Does the memorial bust of Shakespeare tell us anything about his profession?

Paul Edmondson

A memorial bust for Shakespeare was erected in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon between his death in 1616 and 1623, when Leonard Digges refers to it as Shakespeare's 'Stratford monument' in a poem at the front of the First Folio.

The bust was installed during the lifetime of his widow, two daughters, and his son-in-law. Anne Shakespeare died in 1623.

Its inscription starts with two lines in Latin comparing Shakespeare with famous classical writers: calling him 'a Socrates' in mind (after the Greek philosopher) and 'a Virgil in art' (after the Roman poet).

In English we go on to read that 'all that he hath writ, leaves living art but page to serve his wit.' Shakespeare is here honoured as a great writer. 'Living art' refers to his work as a dramatist, and the image of a page serving him is also a pun the page of a book.

The monument and its inscription were presumably approved by the vicar, the surviving members of Shakespeare's family, and many townspeople who had known Shakespeare.