

Question 15

Did Shakespeare become famous in his life-time?

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Shakespeare was first known as an erotic poet – because of *Venus and Adonis*, *Rape of Lucrece* and his ‘sugred sonnets’: in 1595 he’s heralded as ‘sweet Shakespeare’ and ‘Honie-tong’d Shakespeare’.¹

But from 1598 onwards, Shakespeare’s name is found on playbooks. Known as an actor-writer, ‘Mr. ... Shakespeare’ was lauded for having ‘plaide ... Kingly parts in sport’, while being ‘our English Terence’ (Terence was a famous classical playwright).²

He was seen, however, as not highly educated. Fellow playwright, Beaumont, ‘would ... from all Learninge keepe these lines as [cl]eere as Shakespeares’; more positively, *Returne from Pernassus* maintains ‘Few of the university pen plaies well’ and concludes ‘Shakespeare puts them all downe’.³

Though thought less brilliant than Ben Jonson, Shakespeare had a solid reputation. By 1630, a jest book calls ‘Stratford upon Avon, ... remarkable for the birth of famous William Shakespeare’.⁴

¹ Frances Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (1598), 281; William Covell, *Polimanteia* (1595), R2r; John Weever, ‘Ad Gulielmum Shakespeare’, *Epigrammes* (1595), E6r.

² John Davies, ‘To our English Terence, Mr. Will: Shake-speare’, *The Scourge of Folly* (1611), 76.

³ Francis Beaumont, ‘To Mr B: J.’ (c. 1615), Holgate MS, Pierpont Morgan Library, f. 110, quoted in E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 2: 222-5; *The Returne from Pernassus* (1606), G2v.

⁴ *A Banquet of Jeasts* (1630), 157.