

EVIDENCE FOR A LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

DIANA PRICE*

The criteria used by historians to assess evidence are essentially the same as those used by attorneys. For example, both distinguish between personal and impersonal, and contemporaneous and posthumous evidence. Both make judgments about the reliability of witnesses and testimony to ensure that their cases meet the burden of proof. Documentary biographers are bound by the same rules of evidence, but for Shakespeare's biography, they have made exceptions. Writers in Elizabethan and Jacobean England left behind records of their professional activities. Shakespeare left behind documentation of his professional activities, but none is literary. If Shakespeare was the writer the title pages proclaim him to be, then there should be evidence of his literary career. He is the only alleged writer of any consequence from the time period who left behind no personal evidence of his career as a professional writer. His biographers must rely instead on posthumous, ambiguous, impersonal, and non-literary evidence to make their case.

* Some of the material in this Article is adapted from my *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography: New Evidence of an Authorship Problem* (2001). In quotations from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, I have regularized the spelling and typography where appropriate and noted when I have done so.