On Shakespeare. 1630

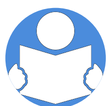
POEM TEXT

1 What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones,
2 The labor of an age in pilèd stones,
3 Or that his hallowed relics should be hid
4 Under a star-ypointing pyramid?
5 Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame,
6 What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
7 Thou in our wonder and astonishment
8 Hast built thyself a live-long monument.
9 For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavouring art,
10 Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
11 Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book
12 Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
13 Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
14 Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;
15 And so sepúlchred in such pomp dost lie,
16 That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

SUMMARY

Why would Shakespeare need his sacred remains or his life's work commemorated by a stack of stones that has taken a lifetime to build? Why should his holy corpse be hidden beneath some pyramid-shaped tomb that points up toward the heavens? Shakespeare, you are the son of memory and the heir of fame itself—so why would you need such a pitiful tribute to your name? You've already built yourself an eternal monument in the awe-struck imaginations of your audience. That's because, much to the embarrassment of painstakingly created art, your graceful poetry flows effortlessly. And the mystical lines in the pages of your precious work have left a deep impression on every reader's heart. Thus you, the one who makes our imaginations mourn their own loss, turn us into marble monuments to yourself as we absorb your work into our minds. And so you rest in glory and splendor—and even kings would long to die if they could have a tomb like yours.

THEMES



ART, TRANSFORMATION, AND IMMORTALLITY

"On Shakespeare 1630," John Milton's first published literary work, leans into a classic Renaissance trope: that great artists live on through their work, and that creating art is thus a means of achieving immortality. (Shakespeare himself argued as much in many of his famous sonnets!) Milton's speaker takes this idea a step further, in fact, arguing that the greatest art has the power to *transform* its consumers into living monuments to an artist.

Musing on how to honor the greatness of William Shakespeare, the speaker of Milton's poem rejects "star-ypointing pyramids" and "pilèd stones"—those impressive tributes that take a "labor of an age" to build. Shakespeare doesn't need any physical monument, the speaker declares, because he lives on forever in readers' hearts and minds—a fate even kings can only wish for.

Yet kings, for all their power, can't claim such lasting fame and renown. That's because Shakespeare's immortality rests on his artistic genius—something that money can't buy and armies can't conquer. He's carved himself an eternal place in "our wonder and astonishment." Each new generation keeps Shakespeare alive in their imaginations, which is a far superior tribute to anything made out of stones; "powerful rhyme" can "outlive" "marble" and "gilded monuments."

In fact, the speaker declares that Shakespeare's work has created—and still creates—such a "deep impression" on its readers that it transforms *them* into "marble." In other words, his readers and audiences *are* his monument. Art, this poem argues, thus not only keeps the artist eternally alive but also fundamentally changes those who consume it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-16

THE PARTICULAR GENIUS OF SHAKESPEARE

In addition to broadly commenting on the immortalizing power of art, "On Shakespeare, 1630" celebrates the singular genius of British playwright and poet William Shakespeare. While other poets (and artists) might be commemorated by statues or flashy monuments, the speaker argues that these are insufficient specifically when it comes to honoring Shakespeare's unique talent.

The speaker contrasts the "slow-endeavouring art" of other poets with Shakespeare's "easy numbers"—that is, the beauty and grace of his writing ("numbers" gestures towards poetic meter). Shakespeare thus puts other writers to "shame." Most poets labor and agonize over their work, the speaker implies, but they've got nothing on Shakespeare.

And while those *other poets* might long to be commemorated in "piled stones" (that is, some sort of statue) or a "star-y pointed pyramid," Shakespeare doesn't need that. No physical monument would do justice to the Bard, this poem's speaker argues. In fact, those lavish tombs would bear only "weak witness" to the "name" of Shakespeare. Even a "star-ypointing pyramid" would, the poem implies, be an embarrassment next to the easy genius of Shakespeare's art—art so "astonish[ing]" that it makes other creations pale in comparison.

In short, Shakespeare's art speaks for itself, and the Bard thus lives on in a way that only he can: in a category of his own. Kings, for all their power and riches, "would wish to die" if only they could be remembered so fondly. All in all, then, the poem argues quite simply that Shakespeare was the greatest of all time!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones,
The labor of an age in pilèd stones,
Or that his hallowed relics should be hid
Under a star-ypointing pyramid?

"On Shakespeare, 1630" was published at the start of a collection of Shakespeare's plays known as the Second Folio. As such, it's no surprise it sets out immediately to sing Shakespeare's praises! Just like a modern-day collection of poetry might feature gushing words from fellow poets on its book jacket, this poem hypes up its subject in order to get readers excited and engaged. Milton was pretty young at the time of writing, so readers might think of this as him doffing his hat to one of his major literary influences.

The poem itself opens with a rhetorical question: why should someone as singularly great as Shakespeare need a stone monument built to commemorate him (to house his "honoured bones")? There is no need, the speaker implies, to toil and sweat to make a physical tribute. A pile of stones seems kind of pathetic when weighed against the sheer longevity and majesty of Shakespeare's total output.

Note, too, how the speaker says "**my** Shakespeare." The word "my" suggests familiarity and intimacy; rather than treating Shakespeare like some distant, lofty literary figure, the speaker suggests that Shakespeare belongs to all his readers. (As the speaker will go on to argue, Shakespeare doesn't need a monument because he lives in the hearts and minds of his readers and audience members. We, the people, are his *living* monument.)

Lines 3 and 4 reiterate the point made in the first two. Why should Shakespeare's holy bones ("hallowed relics") be hidden away under a "star-ypointing pyramid" (by which the speaker means a pyramid-shaped tomb pointing towards the sky; it's also possible that Milton here is riffing on an epitaph for Sir Edward Stanley that Shakespeare may have written himself, which mentions "sky-aspiring Piramides"). The broader point is that however impressive and expensive, no stone monument is sufficient to commemorate Shakespeare's genius.

"On Shakespeare 1630" is written in iambic pentameter, the classic Shakespearean meter. This means each line contains five iambs, poetic that follow an unstressed-stressed syllabic pattern (da-DUM). The poem is also written in heroic couplets, meaning the iambic pentameter fall into in rhymed pairs. Here are the first two lines to show this pattern at work (take note that "pilèd" is *two* syllables, not one):

What **needs** | my **Shake-**| speare **for** | his **hon-**| oured **bones**,
The **lab-** | or **of** | an **age** | in **pi-** | lèd **stones**,

The steady meter and quick, full rhymes make the first sound confident and forceful.

LINES 5-8

Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame,
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a live-long monument.

Lines 5 and 6 comprise another rhetorical question: why would the great Shakespeare require "such weak witness of [his] name" as a commemorative statue or gaudy tomb? Here the speaker shifts into apostrophe, addressing Shakespeare directly through the use of words like "thou" and "thy," further strengthening this sense of a deep, personal bond between the speaker and their hero.

These lines again lavish praise on Shakespeare, calling him the "son of Memory" and the "great heir of fame." The "son of Memory" alludes to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and mother of the nine Muses in ancient Greek myth. (The Muses were originally linked specifically with poets and provided creative inspiration.) If Shakespeare is *Mnemosyne's* son, then poetry is in his blood—he's the direct descendant of the original source. "Great heir of fame" presents the Bard as the "heir," or rightful inheritor, of great renown and honor. His work was so good that he doesn't need a pile of stones to make him immortal.

The whispy alliteration of "What [...] weak witness" subtly mirrors the feebleness of such physical monuments: these slippery /w/ sounds glide into one another, almost as if the foundations of the line are collapsing. And that's the point: physical matter, in terms of eternity, has nothing on

Shakespeare's words.

In the following couplet, the speaker digs into precisely *why* these monuments are so inadequate:

> Thou in our wonder and astonishment
> Hast built thyself a live-long monument.

In other words, Shakespeare's work is so brilliant, so captivating, and so awe-inspiring, that he's already built himself an everlasting tribute in "our wonder and astonishment"—our minds/imaginations. Culturally speaking, Shakespeare will live on in great renown as long as there are people on the planet to read his poems and watch his plays.

LINES 9-12

> *For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavouring art,*
> *Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart*
> *Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book*
> *Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,*

The speaker takes aim at inferior poets' work, comparing it unfavorably to Shakespeare's genius. In effect, Shakespeare puts others to "shame." The phrase "slow-endeavouring art" simply *sounds* laborious. Other poets labor and agonize over something that simply pours out of Shakespeare. One can sense the tedium that went into their work.

Not so with Shakespeare, whose "easy numbers flow." In other words, his writing is so graceful as to seem effortless, as if, perhaps, it's always existed and always will. "Numbers" here specifically to metrical writing (Shakespeare was a master of prosody). "Flow" could be taken as a metaphor, suggesting a naturalness on par with the running water of a stream.

The phrase starting after the caesura in line 10 might seem hard to parse. Basically, the speaker is saying that Shakespeare's writing has embedded itself in the "heart[s]" of everyone who has read from the pages of his "unvalued book" (that is, his precious, invaluable body of work).

Those are "Delphic," the speaker says, making another allusion to classical mythology: Delphi was a religious sanctuary in ancient Greek myth, a holy place where the "Oracle of Delphi" prophesized and gave advice about the future. The term again links Shakespeare with the divine (remember, the speaker earlier called him the "son of Memory") and conveys the complexity and wisdom of his art.

His "Delphic lines" have left a "deep impression" on people's very souls. Notice how the bold alliteration of "Delphic" and "deep" conveys the power of Shakespeare's writing and its ability to affect people.

LINES 13-16

> *Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,*
> *Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;*
> *And so sepúlchred in such pomp dost lie,*
> *That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.*

Shakespeare's genius makes our imaginations mourn for themselves—perhaps because our "fancy," as a kind of personified creature, only has a finite amount of Shakespeare's work to gorge on (now that he is dead). Alternatively, the speaker might be saying that a part of humanity's *collective* imagination dies with Shakespeare.

Either way, Shakespeare's legacy lives on through the people who consume his art. The speaker concludes that Shakespeare doesn't need a fancy statue or tomb because we, the readers and viewers of Shakespeare, *are* his monument. We absorb so much Shakespeare—his words and ideas—that we become metaphorical "marble" (the shining stone often used to carve an honorary statue or tomb). Shakespeare's art becomes the sculptor of its own monument.

He lies "so sepúlchred" (that is, buried like this) "in such pomp" (pomp refers to pageantry, splendor, opulence, etc.). The sibilance of this line—"so sepúlchred in such pomp dost lie"—has this whispery, ghost-like quality that evokes the hush of death. The quiet of the line also suggests reverence, as though the speaker is telling readers to hush in the presence of such greatness.

The speaker ends the poem by declaring that kings would love "such a tomb," to the extent that they would even "wish to die"—that is, cut their life short—in order to secure it. But they can't, of course—because it's the *genius* of Shakespeare that created that fate, and no bounty of jewels or show of military power can claim that.

SYMBOLS

THE PYRAMID

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker rejects the need for a "star-ypointing pyramid" when it comes to honoring Shakespeare. In the poem, pyramids and monuments/tombs more generally reflect human attempts to immortalize the power and greatness of those buried within. Stars, meanwhile, typically symbolize the heavens and the immortal afterlife; the fact that the pyramid the speaker mentions points *towards* the stars thus hammers home the idea that such monuments are meant to testify to rulers' *everlasting* glory. (Not coincidentally, ancient Egyptians once believed that their rulers would become stars after death; the Egyptian pyramids point to the sky essentially as a way of saying, "This is where the great leaders go to become immortal.").

But Shakespeare, argues the poem, needs no such symbolic tribute. His works live on *here on earth* in the present day, making him immortal in a way that no king or pharaoh could ever be. The symbolism of the pyramid soaring up toward the

sky, in this context, thus seems at once inadequate and inauthentic.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Or that his hallowed relics should be hid / Under a star-ypointing pyramid?"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"On Shakespeare. 1630" uses alliteration to bring its images and ideas to life on the page.

Take, for example, the rhetorical question posed to Shakespeare in line 6:

> What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?

Those whispy /w/ sounds make the line seem to slip and stumble, as though it's built on wobbly foundations. The alliteration helps to highlight the relative *impermanence* of objects like statues and monuments, which won't last as Shakespeare's works.

Line 12 then demonstrates the power of the Bard's words to create their own everlasting monument within the minds of readers and theatergoers:

> Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
> Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book
> Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,

The thudding /d/ sounds impress themselves upon the line just as Shakespeare's writing imprints itself on people's hearts. The /d/ has a forcefulness that speaks to the power of Shakespeare's genius.

The speaker expands on this idea, explaining how Shakespeare makes people themselves into a monument for his work:

> Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
> Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;

The alliteration draws attention to the poem as a *made* object, something that uses the raw materials of sound and language to create art. More simply, the alliteration just makes the poem itself sound more poetic and emphatic!

In line 15, the speaker describes Shakespeare as "so sepùchlred in such pomp." Those sibilant /s/ sounds (which join up with the /s/ of "dost") add a hush to the line, as though the speaker is telling readers to be quiet out of respect for the sleeping Shakespeare.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "his hallowed," "hid"
- **Line 4:** "pointing pyramid"
- **Line 6:** "What," "weak witness"
- **Line 8:** "live-long"
- **Line 12:** "Delphic," "deep"
- **Line 13:** "Then thou"
- **Line 14:** "make," "marble," "much"
- **Line 15:** "so sepúlchred," "such"
- **Line 16:** "such," "would wish"

ALLUSION

"On Shakespeare. 1930" is packed with allusions. The whole poem, in fact, essentially alludes to a common trope in Shakespeare's sonnets (and Renaissance poetry more generally) that compares the immortality of art to that of physical monuments. In "Sonnet 55," for example, Shakespeare famously claims that his words will "outlive" any "marble" or "gilded monuments" (even if stone seems heavy and permanent).

The "star-ypointing pyramid" might be an allusion to an epitaph written for English nobleman Sir Edward Stanley (possibly by Shakespeare himself) that mentions "sky-aspiring Piramides." But the reference to pyramids also subtly compares Shakespeare's brand of immortality with the great achievements of the ancient Egyptians. Shakespeare, according to the poem, doesn't need the whole pharaoh treatment, even if those pyramids are very impressive and take "the labor of an age." He's got his immortality sewn up through the enduring qualities of his work.

Indeed, the speaker practically considers Shakespeare a god and uses allusion to suggest so. Line 4 calls Shakespeare the "Dear son of Memory," referring to Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses. Shakespeare's inspiration is *so* divine it's as if he is a direct descendant of that creative source itself. This is a major compliment, especially given that many poets use to ask the muses for help in their endeavors (see Milton's own request in *Paradise Lost*: "sing heav'nly muse"). Shakespeare, in other words, has a closer affinity with the muses than any other poet—and that's why he writes such "Delphic" (god-like/holy) work.

"Delphic" specifically refers to Delphi, a religious site in Greek myth where the Oracle (a kind of holy seer or prophet) would offer predictions about the future and offer advice. The word further implies the wisdom and power of Shakespeare's writing.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "a star-ypointing pyramid"
- **Line 5:** "Dear son of Memory"
- **Line 12:** "Those Delphic lines"

METAPHOR

"On Shakespeare. 1630" uses metaphor to illustrate the singular genius and lasting legacy of Shakespeare. The speaker declares that Shakespeare's work had such a powerful impact on humanity that it is people, not statues, who form his living "monument." People aren't *literally* turning into big blocks of stone; the speaker is using a metaphor to conceptualize the transformative power of Shakespeare's work. Like a sculptor, he "hast built [himself] a live-long monument" in the human imagination ("our wonder and astonishment"). Shakespeare's readers are made "marble" (turned into beautiful statues) by his work.

There are a couple of other metaphors too. The speaker describes how "each heart" (line 10) has been left with a "deep impression" of Shakespeare's "Delphic lines." Shakespeare, in other words, burrows deep into his readers' very being; his wise lines etch themselves on people's souls.

There's another metaphor in line 10:

> For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavouring art,
> Thy easy numbers flow, [...]

"Easy numbers" refers to poetry/metrical writing. While other, inferior poets labor over their art, Shakespeare's words seem to "flow." This word could suggest the flow of water—suggesting that Shakespeare's work is, at its best, so graceful and seemingly effortless as to be on a par with nature itself.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Thou in our wonder and astonishment / Hast built thyself a live-long monument."
- **Line 10:** "Thy easy numbers flow," "each heart"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving, / Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains two rhetorical questions that essentially ask the same thing: why would someone as great as Shakespeare need a physical statue or monument to commemorate them?

Again, these questions are rhetorical, raised only to prove a point. Shakespeare does not need any such thing, the speaker insists. The first rhetorical question implies that his work stands more proudly and permanently than any "pilèd stones" ever could. Even a pyramid-shaped tomb, pointing towards the sky (and thus gesturing towards immortality), wouldn't be worthy of the Bard.

The speaker develops this line of reasoning in the second rhetorical question, which appears in lines 5 and 6:

> Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame,
> What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?

Again, this says pretty much the same thing as the lines before—only it smuggles in two compliments about Shakespeare and further criticizes physical monuments as nothing more than "weak witness[es]." The re-iteration of the question, though, only makes the speaker's point more forceful: it's absurd to commemorate Shakespeare with a statue when he's already taken care of his own immortality through his work.

Note, however, that a subtle shift takes place between the first and second questions. In the second, the speaker starts using "thou" and "thy," addressing Shakespeare himself through apostrophe. This continues throughout the rest of the poem and demonstrates a level of intimacy and familiarity between the speaker and Shakespeare. Such was the Bard's impact on the speaker that the latter talks almost as if he knew him personally.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones, / The labor of an age in pilèd stones, / Or that his hallowed relics should be hid / Under a star-ypointing pyramid? / Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame, / What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?"

VOCABULARY

Labor of an age (Line 2) - Hard work over a long period of time.

Pilèd (Line 2) - Stacked up high. The "è" makes this a two-syllable word.

Hallowed relics (Line 3) - Holy remains.

Star-ypointing pyramid (Line 4) - A pyramid that points towards the sky (stars are often a symbol of immortality).

Heir (Line 5) - Inheritor (as a prince would be to a king).

What needs thou (Line 6) - What need do you have of?

Weak witness (Line 6) - Insufficient tribute.

Thy (Line 6, Line 8, Line 10, Line 11) - Archaic form of "your."

Hast (Line 8) - Archaic form of "have."

Thyself (Line 8) - Yourself.

Live-long (Line 8) - Everlasting.

Slow-endeavouring art (Line 9) - The kind of poetry that inferior poets spend ages laboring over, which nevertheless can't touch Shakespeare's genius.

Easy numbers (Line 10) - Poetry/metrical writing.

Hath (Line 11) - Archaic form of "has."

Leaves of thy unvalued book (Line 11) - Pages of your invaluable works.

Delphic (Line 12) - Related to the mythological greek site Delphi; God-like and prescient.

Lines (Line 12) - Poems and plays.

Fancy (Line 13) - The imagination.

Dost (Line 14) - Archaic form of "do."

Marble (Line 14) - A hard crystalline limestone prized for its beauty and durability (and therefore a good material for statues and monuments).

Conceiving (Line 14) - Forming of ideas/imagination; use of the imagination.

Sepúlchred (Line 15) - Entombed (the "ú" indicates a stress).

Pomp (Line 15) - Glory or splendor.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On Shakespeare. 1630" consists of eight heroic couplets: rhyming pairs of lines written in iambic pentameter. The quick rhymes and steady meter create a predictable pattern and a confident tone throughout. The speaker doesn't stumble in their praise of Shakespeare.

If readers are familiar with Shakespeare's writing, then they're familiar with heroic couplets. Shakespearean sonnets traditionally end with one such couplet, closing things out on a clever, memorable note. Filling the poem with these couplets is thus a subtle nod to the Bard's own work.

"On Shakespeare. 1630" was also originally published as part of the introductory material to the Second Folio edition of Shakespeare's collected plays. Milton calls it an epitaph, which often refers to words printed or inscribed on a grave or tomb. To give the poem its original title: "An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke poet, W. Shakespeare."

Yet the poem is, in a way, an *anti-epitaph*. Its main point is that Shakespeare *doesn't* need a monument (on which a true epitaph might appear). This is more like an *encomium*: a speech or piece of writing that sings the praises of someone or something. The poem places Shakespeare on a *cultural* pedestal above everyone else, rather than a *physical* one.

METER

"On Shakespeare. 1630" uses iambic pentameter throughout: each line contains five metrical feet called iambs, which follow an unstressed-stressed syllabic pattern (da-DUM).

Iambic pentameter was the inevitable choice for a poem about Shakespeare in a book of Shakespeare's works, given that it's the same meter Shakespeare himself turns to most often. Milton's metrical choice, though common for the era, is thus a mini tribute in and of itself.

The meter gives the poem a steady, stately tone that fits with the seriousness of the subject. Here it is at work in the first two lines:

> What **needs** | my **Shake-** | speare **for** | his **hon-**| oured **bones,**
> The **lab-** | or **of** | an **age** | in **pi-** | lèd **stones,**

There are some variations in the meter here and there, which keep the poem from sounding too rigid or becoming boring. For example, lines 13 and 14 feature extra unstressed syllables at the end of the line ("be**reav**ing," "con**ceiv**ing"), There are technically too many syllables in the line, suggesting that Shakespeare's genius is overwhelming and awe-inspiring.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses heroic couplets throughout, meaning rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is thus AABBCCDDEEFF and so on. The heroic couplet form was pioneered in English by Geoffrey Chaucer and has a strong association with epic poetry. The rhyme scheme subtly gestures toward what the speaker thinks of Shakespeare: namely, that he's a hero of the English language.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a major Shakespeare fan. This person feels a certain kind of ownership over and/or kinship toward Shakespeare, calling him "**my** Shakespeare" in line 1 and addressing the Bard directly with words like "thou" and "thy" elsewhere in the poem.

That said, the speaker doesn't feel like Shakespeare belongs to them and them alone! Indeed, the speaker identifies with the general public rather than a specific individual (note how the speaker says "**our** wonder," "**our** fancy," and "make **us** marble"). They're speaking on behalf of *anyone and everyone* who has the pleasure of consuming Shakespeare's work.

It's fair to say that the speaker's fandom mirrors the poet John Milton's own love of Shakespeare. Milton was a young man when he wrote "On Shakespeare," and readers can sense his admiration for one of his earliest and most profound influences.

SETTING

"On Shakespeare. 1630" takes place, presumably, in 1630, less than two decades after Shakespeare died. Remember, too, that this poem was part of the introductory material in the Second Folio of Shakespeare's collected plays. It's thus set *within* a book

(hinted at in line 11, when the speaker refers to "the leaves," or pages, "of thy unvalued book").

That said, the poem's argument is meant to be timeless: Shakespeare, the speaker argues, will forever live on in the hearts and imaginations of those who read his work.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Milton is one of the foremost poets in the English language, second only perhaps to Shakespeare himself. Best known for his 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton was a prominent public figure at a time of great political and religious turmoil. He knew multiple languages and was extremely well and widely read.

"On Shakespeare. 1630" appears early on in Milton's career—in fact, it's the first poem he published (and it was published anonymously!). It forms part of the introductory material to the 1632 Second Folio of Shakespeare's collected plays alongside other similarly complimentary tributes to the Bard, including Ben Jonson's "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare." Milton's father, also named John, had written a similar piece for the First Folio.

Shakespeare was a great influence on Milton's writing (which in turn went on to inspire countless others over the centuries). Milton likely had Shakespeare's own sonnets in mind when he wrote this poem. "Sonnet 55," for example, makes the claim that Shakespeare's words will "outlive" any "marble" or "gilded monuments."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

William Shakespeare wrote most of his poetry between 1590 and 1609. John Milton wasn't born until 1608 and never met Shakespeare, who wasn't as famous during his own lifetime as he would go on to become.

By 1630, the elder writer had been dead for 14 years. The inclusion of tributes like Milton's in the Second Folio suggests that the Bard was becoming more widely acknowledged and well on the way to establishing his reputation as the greatest poet in the English language. (While certainly a popular figure in Elizabethan England, Shakespeare wasn't outright revered as a kind of literary deity until the mid-1700s.)

Meanwhile, Milton himself was still a student at Cambridge University when he wrote this particular poem (his most famous work, *Paradise Lost*, wasn't published until 1667). This was the Carolinian Era, named after King Charles I (who ruled until his execution in 1649). King Charles I was a harsher ruler than his father, King James I (a.k.a King James VI of Scotland), under whom art and culture had flourished (Shakespeare wrote some of his best-loved plays during the Jacobean period, in fact).

Milton later famously opposed the monarchy, and, true to form, quarreled with his peers and superiors while at university. This disdain for royalty perhaps informs the poem's concluding line, drawing a clear distinction between artistic greatness and inherited power.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Second Folio — Check out scans of Shakepeare's Second Folio to see how Milton's poem originally appeared. (https://digital.lib.miamioh.edu/digital/collection/wshakespeare/id/11670)
- Shakespeare's Influence on Milton — Read an interesting article about a recent discovery: Milton's own annotated copy of the Second Folio. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/16/when-milton-met-shakespeare-poets-notes-on-bard-appear-to-have-been-found)
- The Shakespeare vs. Milton Debate — Watch an interesting discussion comparing Milton with his literary hero. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IskEx0tgoo4)
- Milton's Biography — Dive into more of Milton's poetry and learn about his life story via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-milton)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN MILTON POEMS

- Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent (On his blindness)
- Sonnet 7: How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*On Shakespeare. 1630.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Oct 2022. Web. 12 Oct 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*On Shakespeare. 1630.*" LitCharts LLC, October 3, 2022. Retrieved October 12, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-milton/on-shakespeare-1630.