

How to be a Shakespearean Atheist

Alec Ryrie

The state of the controversy then is this: which of the parties is in the wisest way? The Atheist thinks that the Religious is a fool; the Religious, that he is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God; the Atheist, that the souls of men are mortal, as the souls of beasts; the Religious, that the Atheist is a beast to say so, etc.

Seth Ward, *A philosophical essay* (1652)

I. The stereotypical atheist

II. Some real unbelievers

III. A question of morals

I. The stereotypical atheist

THE
ATHEIST'S
TRAGEDIE:
OR

The honest Man's Reuenge.

As in diuers places it hath often beene Acted.

WRITTEN

By *Cyril Tourneur.*



AT LONDON,
Printed for *John Stepneth*, and *Richard Redmer*, and are to
be sold at their Shops at the West end of Paules.

Sketches for the West Yorkshire Playhouse production

‘The Atheist’s Tragedy’

Costumes



Pleasure only flows
Upon the stream of riches ...
Let all men lose, so I increase my gain
I have no feeling of another's pain.

D'Amville, in Tourneur,
Atheist's Tragedy, I.i

Incest? Tush, these distances affinity observes are
articles of bondage cast upon our freedoms by our
own subjections. Nature allows a gen'ral liberty of
generation to all creatures else.

D'Amville, in Tourneur,
Atheist's Tragedy, IV.iii

The Punish'd Atheist:

Or, The Miserable End of a North Country Gentleman, who, to obtain his lewd Desires on a Lady, his own Sister, deny'd that there was either Heaven or Hell, GOD or Devil; when at the same time of his uttering those Blasphemous Expressions, he was made a sad Example of God's Justice. Tune, *Jealous Lover*. Licensed according to Order.



An Atheist lived in the North,
Who underwent God's heav'ly Wrath,
Though his blasphemous words he spoke,
Which did his Maker much provoke.
He having left his lawful Wife,
Led such a lewd and wicked Life,
That he was clearly void of fear,
The like of him you ne'er do hear.
His Sister was a Lady fair,
Whose Beauty shou'd beyond compare,
A pious Woman, she was she,
And wedded to a high degree.
At length he plac'd his chief delight,
In his fair Sister's Beauty bright,
And likewise was resolv'd to try,
If she his will would satisfy.
To her he went upon a day,
And found her in the Garden gay,
There walking with her all alone,
His base Desires he made known.

He being then with Lust inflam'd,
It seem'd, he want'd the least shamm'd
To tempt this fair and virtuous Bride;
But Christian-like, she thus reply'd,
You strike me with astonishment,
The Lord forbid I should consent,
To such a Hellish crying Sin,
Which none but Sodom wallow'd in.
Dear Brother, hear me what I say,
Consider with yourself, I pray,
Can you endure the pains of Hell?
Or with eternal Torments dwell?
For that you may expect indeed,
If true Repentance now with speed,
Does not God's gracious Pardon gain.
He stoop'd at that with proud disdain,
Said he, I loathe Sister dear,
No God or Devil need you fear.
For there is no such thing I'm sure,
Nor any Torments to endure:

Tho' you are pleas'd to relate,
A Story here of Torments great,
And of a latter Judgment-day,
I'll not believe what any say.

I know they are but fancies then,
Till by the wiser sort of Men,
To keep poor silly Souls in awe;
I'll ne'er be govern'd by that law.

Now, further still, he did reply,
Do not the least my suit deny,
And then if any Hell there be,
The flames I will endure for thee.

These words did so provoke the Lord,
That straight he sent him his reward
For while his Sister from him turn'd,
A furious fire round him burn'd,

The fire a m'like Whimstone blew,
And straight above his knees it flew,
All round him blaz'd on every side;
Then he with bitter howlings cry'd,

Dear Sister, now I wish in vain,
That I had not been so profane,
As to deny there was a God,
I feel this day his burning Rod.

The Lady then was in a fright,
To see this dreadful dismal sight,
No time at all she then delay'd,
But ran immediately for aid.

With staves they came to pull him forth,
But lo! his hands and fingers both
Were so burn'd and swell'd withal,
He could not help himself at all.

He fill'd the skies with groans and cries,
Till his blasphemous Tongue and Eyes,
With anguish dropt out of his Head,
At length the Wretch fell down for dead.

The fire quench'd when as he fell,
His Carcase sent forth such a smell,
That no one could the place endure;
Which was Heaven's Vengeance sure.

When sinful Portals have deny'd,
The being of a Deity,
They may expect that in the end,
God will his fearful Vengeance send.

Let all Wags be more far and near,
That talk this last Relation hear,
Repent, and bear these things in mind,
So may thy Grace and Mercy find.

Printed for J. Blare, on London-bridge.

These are devised fables, to keep poor fools in fear
... These things are nothing so:
No God nor devil is biding, no Heaven nor Hell I know.
All things are wrought by Nature, the earth, the air, and sky:
There is no joy nor sorrow after that man doth die.
Therefore let me have pleasure, while here I do remain:
I fear not God's displeasure, nor Hell's tormenting pain.

*The wonderfull example of God
shewed upon Jasper Coningham* ([ca.
1600])



The Dreadfull Tempest in Devonshire



I. The stereotypical atheist

- Male
- Rich
- Educated
- Healthy
- Less certain than he pretends

Atheism is rather in the *Lip*, than in the *Heart* of Man. ... Atheists will ever be talking of that their Opinion, as if they fainted in it, within themselves, and would be glad to be strengthened, by the Consent of others.

Sir Francis Bacon, *Essays* (1612)

I respite thee not till the day of thine own death ...
I respite thee but a few hours, but six hours, but till
midnight. Wake then; and then dark, and alone,
hear God ask thee then, remember that I asked
thee now, Is there a God? and if thou darest, say
No.

John Donne, *LXXX Sermons* (1640)

Men become first Atheists in their life and conversation [and] wallow in their sins and sensuality. ... When they are constrained sometimes to think that there is a God, they become Atheists in their desire and affection, wishing that there were not a God to be avenged upon them for their wickedness; and in end the Lord giveth them up to Atheism in their judgement and opinion.

Alexander Henderson, *A sermon preached to the honourable House of Commons* (1644)

II. Some real unbelievers

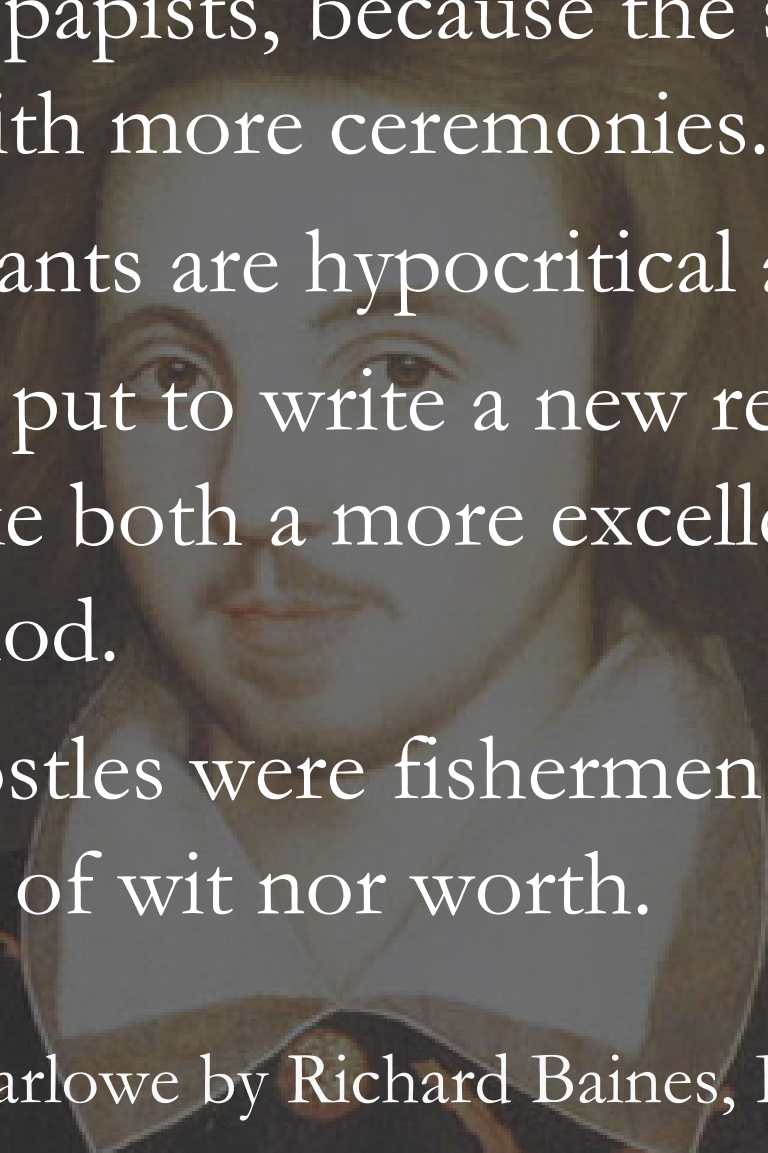


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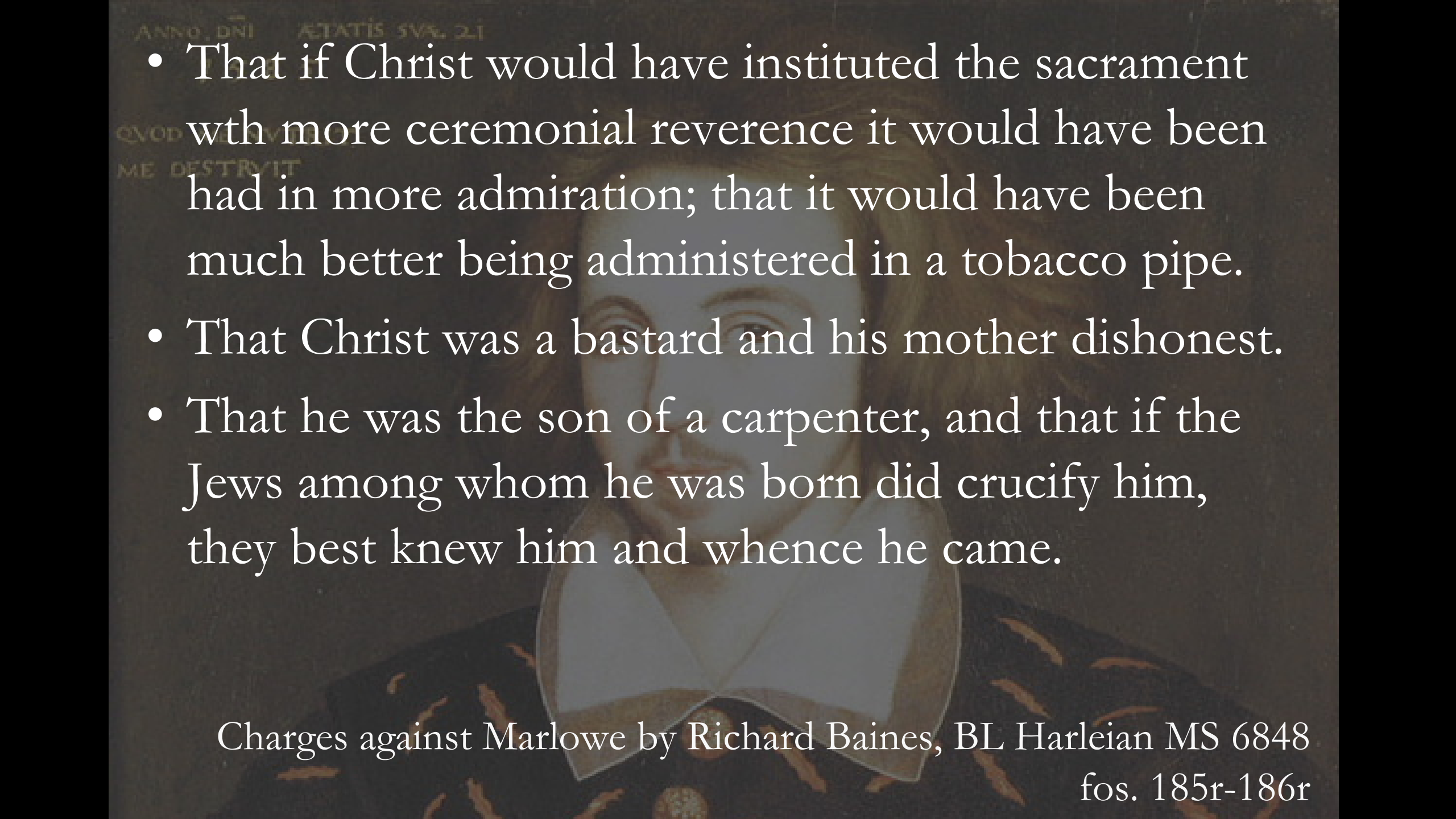
ETATIS SVÆ 21

QVOD ME NVTRIT
ME DESTRVIT

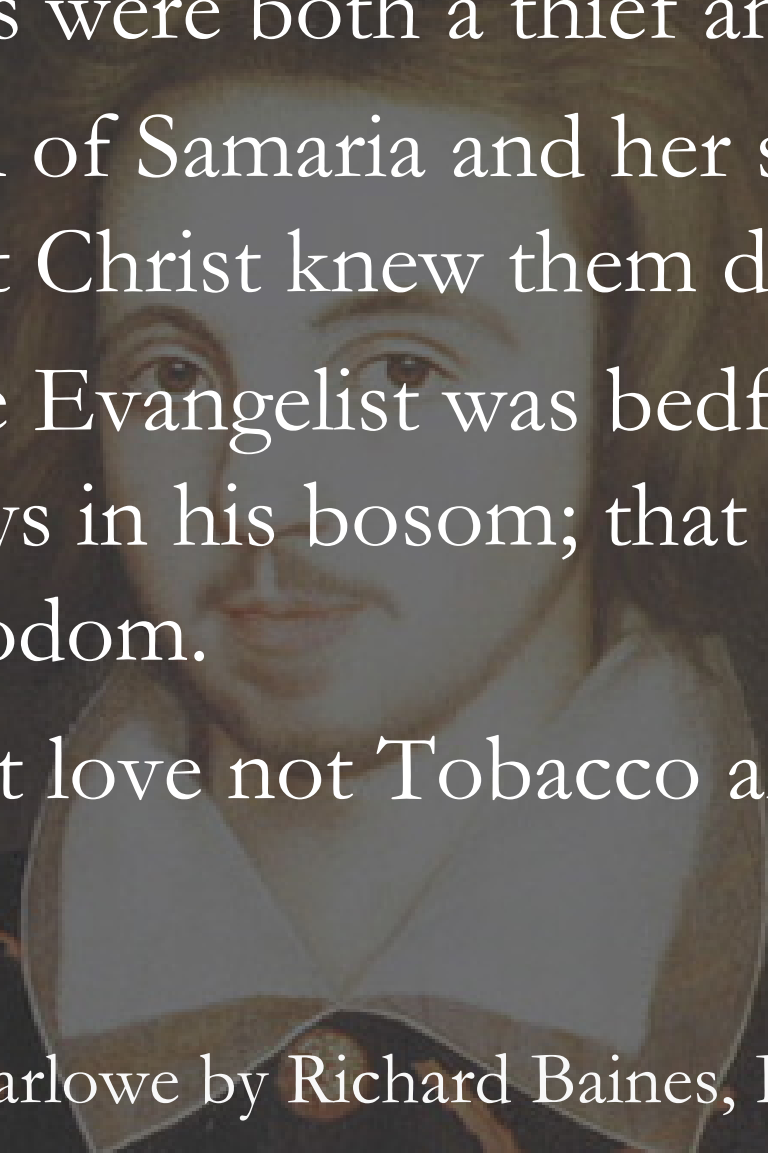


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- That if there be any God or any good religion, then it is in the papists, because the service of God is performed with more ceremonies.
 - That all Protestants are hypocritical asses.
 - That if he were put to write a new religion, he would undertake both a more excellent and admirable method.
 - That all the apostles were fishermen and base fellows, neither of wit nor worth.

Charges against Marlowe by Richard Baines, BL Harleian MS 6848
fos. 185r-186r

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- That if Christ would have instituted the sacrament with more ceremonial reverence it would have been had in more admiration; that it would have been much better being administered in a tobacco pipe.
 - That Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest.
 - That he was the son of a carpenter, and that if the Jews among whom he was born did crucify him, they best knew him and whence he came.

Charges against Marlowe by Richard Baines, BL Harleian MS 6848
fos. 185r-186r

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- That Christ deserved better to die then Barabbas ... though Barabbas were both a thief and a murderer.
 - That the woman of Samaria and her sister were whores, and that Christ knew them dishonestly.
 - That St John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned always in his bosom; that he used him as the sinners of Sodom.
 - That all they that love not Tobacco and Boys were fools.

Charges against Marlowe by Richard Baines, BL Harleian MS 6848
fos. 185r-186r

II. Some real unbelievers

- Defiance of moral authority
- Clerical hypocrisy and its consequences
- Reassuringly depraved?

III. *A question of morals*

Sketches for the West Yorkshire Playhouse production

‘The Atheist’s Tragedy’

Costumes



EASTVVARD
HOE.

As

It was playd in the
Black-friers.

By

The Children of her Maiesties Reuels

Made by

GEOR. CHAPMAN. BEN. IONSON. IOSH. MARSHAM.

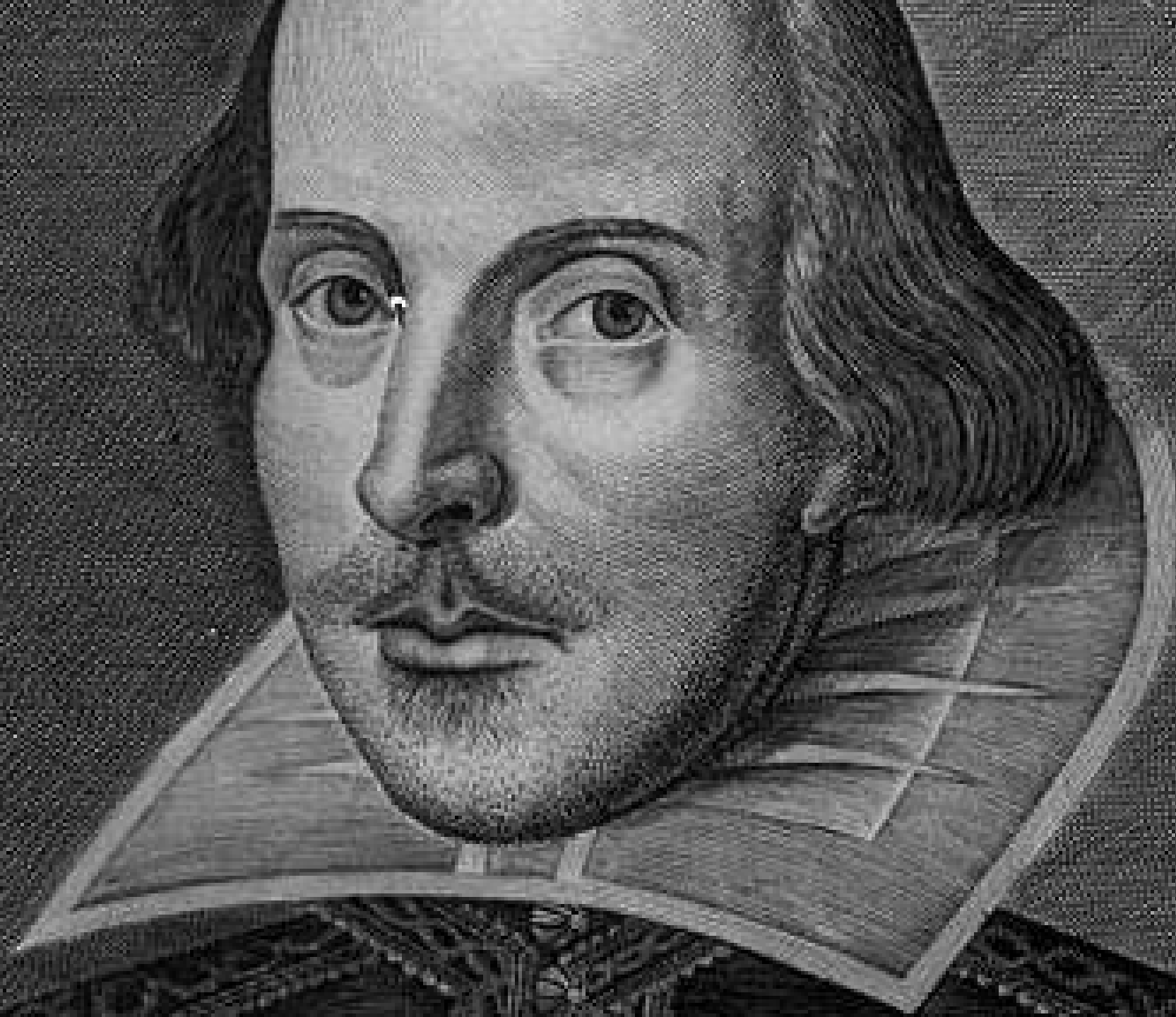


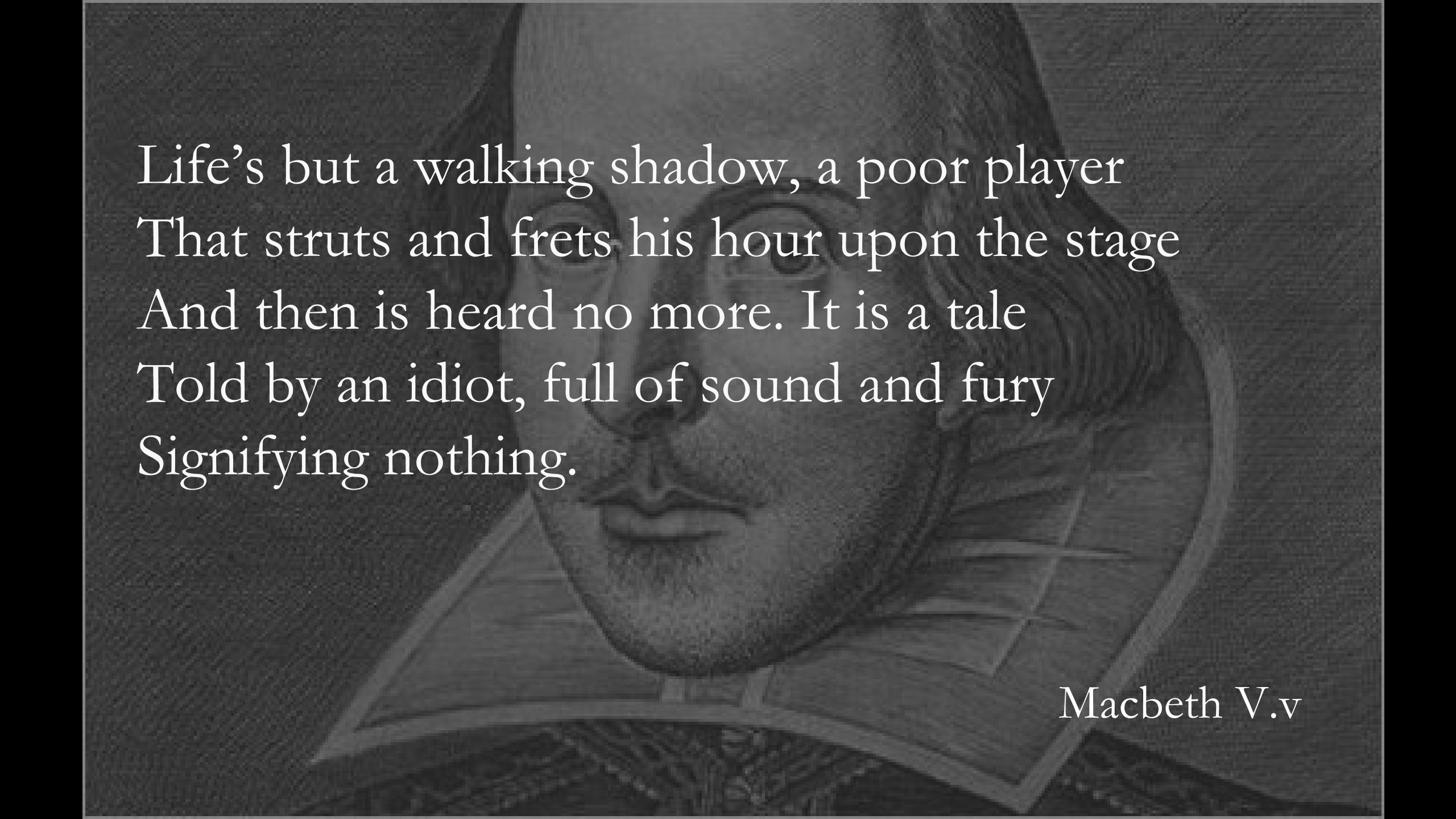
AT LONDON
Printed for *William Aspley.*
1605.

‘... all religions i’the land, as
papist, Protestant, puritan,
Brownist, Anabaptist,
Millenary, Family o’Love,
Jew, Turk, infidel, **atheist**,
good fellow, etc.’

Ben Jonson, *Eastward Ho!*

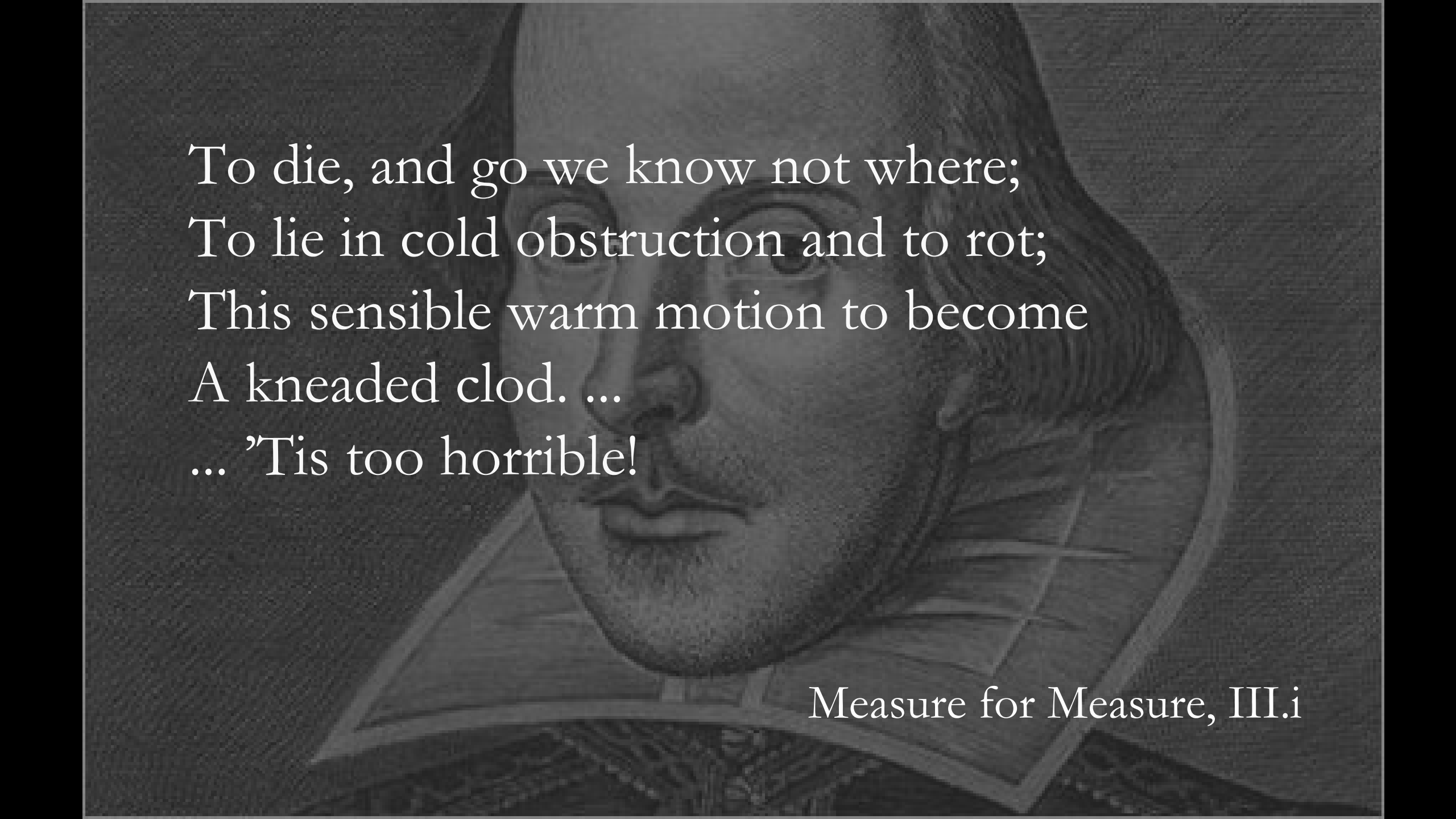
(1605)





Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

Macbeth V.v



To die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod. ...
... 'Tis too horrible!

Measure for Measure, III.i



THE
True Chronicle Hi.

story of King LEIR, and his three
daughters, Gonorill, Ragan,
and Cordella.

As it hath bene diuers and sundry
times lately acted.



LONDON,

Printed by Simon Stafford for Iohn
Wright, and are to bee sold at his shop at
Christes Church dore, next Newgate-
Market. 1605.



How to be a Shakespearean Atheist

Alec Ryrie