

CHAPTER III

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CANONIZES THE "LITTLE LATIN" TRADITION

BY THE BEGINNING of the eighteenth century one would find only the single opinion on Shakspeare's learning. If one turned to the editions of Shakspeare, he found at their portals the statement of Jonson. If he turned to any of the reference works, he would find Jonson's statement interpreted with much embroidery as "little Latin," the impression being that the Latin was so small as to have been of no value whatever.

The time was ripe for canonization of the tradition of Shakspeare's "little Latin" in yet another of Rowe's collection of current Shakspeare myths, which is accepted to this day as resting on valid evidence, when all it rests on fundamentally is the tradition which had developed from Jonson's pronouncement on Shakspeare's "small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*." Rowe in 1709 said of Shakspeare's schooling

His Father, who was a considerable Dealer in Wool, had so large a Family, ten Children in all, that tho' he was his eldest Son, he could give him no better Education than his own Employment. He had bred him, 'tis true, for some time at a Free-School, where 'tis probable he acquir'd that little *Latin* he was Master of: But the narrowness of his Circumstances, and the want of his assistance at Home, forc'd his Father to withdraw him from thence, and unhappily prevented his further Proficiency in that Language.¹

For one thing Rowe is to be commended; he has bethought himself of the Parish register, even if he does misinterpret its statistics. Malone, indeed, points out that Rowe alleges eleven facts concerning Shakspeare, of which only the dates of christening and death, being from the parish registers, are certainly correct. Of a third, Malone is doubtful; the other eight he condemns as false.² One of the condemned eight, that John Shakspeare was a "woolman," is probably not wholly erroneous. Malone also justly tosses aside Rowe's inference concerning Shakspeare's interrupted education. For, notice that Rowe is explicit that it was the ten children which prevented John Shakspeare from giving his son William any better education than his

¹ Rowe, N., *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709; first issue, corrected; copy in U. of Ill. Library, Vol. I, pp. II-III.)

² Malone, Edmond, *The Plays and Poems of William Shakspeare* (1821), Vol. II, p. 69, n. 9.