What happens when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse, and messy? . . . The answer, I will argue, is that it tends to make a mess of it.
—John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*¹

Arthur had jammed himself against the door to the cubicle, trying to hold it closed, but it was ill fitting. Tiny furry little hands were squeezing themselves through the cracks, their fingers were ink-stained; tiny voices chattered insanely.

“Ford!” he said, “there’s an infinite number of monkeys outside who want to talk to us about this script for Hamlet they’ve worked out.”

So we’re awake. Feeling very refreshed, we must say (all that sea air). Never slept so soundly. Can’t fathom it. Ready, in fact, to take on something that thus far we have avoided: the question of authorship, of who or what it was that is said to have written all those plays and poems attributed to “William Shakespeare.”

The candidates, you may remember, run as follows: William Shakespeare, the actor turned writer from Stratford-upon-Avon; Francis Bacon, the writer, scientist, philosopher, and statesman; Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, who has proved the most popular alternative candidate to Shakespeare since the 1920s. Then, of course, there are the outliers, the multiplied host of collaborators (Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, and so on) as well as the other variously textual remains that now augment the contents of the First Folio and complicate matters further, such as the lost play, *Cardenio*, which was performed apparently by the King’s Men in 1613 and may, in some shape or form, find itself archived (or not) in Lewis Theobald’s *Double Falsehood, or The Distrest Lovers* (1728).³

Of course, in the case of *Cardenio*, things are a bit of a mess. No manuscript. No print record. No play. But still, the compulsion to return what goes or went missing (even if it did not) to its supposed source proves overwhelming. Such is the force to the bio/bibliographical yoking of texts and persons that the proper name become author or author function fixes in place, organizing, so to speak, successive relays in our archives, libraries, and imaginary realms. Such is the
compulsion to bear witness, to serve as archon to the impression, the traces, the archive that the First Folio (1623) as “monument” and money/mint represents, to recall Ben Jonson’s lines from his memorial to Shakespeare as bio/bibliographical entity. But that question of witnessing, of finding oneself recruited and so caught up in a massy, messy ongoing transubstantiation of the bio/bibliographical proves exhausting. There’s just too much to do, too much to consider, too much still “out there” to be found—when we have the technology. Must the whole world, finally, bear witness, in Jonson’s sense, for Shakespeare to live on?

John Milton’s anonymous and untitled dedicatory poem “On Shakespeare” that appears in the Second Folio (1632) addresses this need, or the lack of a need, for a witness to Shakespeare’s name. Answering the question as to why Shakespeare’s lack of a pyramid for a tomb or “Star ypointing pyramid” to house “his honour’d bones” poses no problem, Milton restates the opening line of the poem as a problem of witnessing before proceeding to spend the rest of the poem answering it:

What needst thou such weak witnes of thy Name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.
For whilst to th’ shame of slow-endeavouring art,
Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu’d Book,
Those Delphick lines with deep impression took,
Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving,
Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;
And so Sepulcher’d in such pomp dost lie,
That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

Shakespeare does not need the weak witness of a “pyramid” for his “name” not only because of his “fame” but because the Folio is his tomb. Yet Shakespeare’s name is not self-evident; Shakespeare still needs a witness; or, his own witness (the Folio) recruits them. Milton posits a closed circuit in which the “live-long Monument” sustains itself by the “flow” of “easie numbers” (poems, poetic lines) that impress each reader. These “numbers” migrate from the “leaves” of the book to the minds and bodies of his readers as we come to serve as the substrate or backing, the wetware, to Shakespeare.

But these readers are not all that different from pyramids. Our excessive receptiveness (“too much conceaving”) makes the reader an archive, a storage unit in which the Folio is “sephulcher’d” as its deep impressions become as unreadable as the lines of his unvalued book. The impressions we take have the effect of killing off our “fancy” or imaginative powers. And so we become “marble,” tomb-like, immobile. The referent of “sepulchered” is slightly unmoored, referring to what—the circuit that the Folio forms between readers and numbers? Milton’s anonymous sonnet implies that reading the Second Folio will not exactly constitute a witnessing of Shakespeare’s name since the reading or impression taking petrifies the witness. We become, if you like, a living tomb—but as we do so we