According to the idea of ‘late style’, in their last few years, certain great artists, writers or composers enter a rejuvenated phase of serene, abstract, archaic or childlike creativity, a phenomenon held to result from the proximity of death. Gordon McMullan reads late style, however, not as a transhistorical phenomenon but as a critical construct, taking Shakespeare as his exemplar. He maps the development of the idea of ‘late Shakespeare’ from the later eighteenth century to the present, showing the mismatch between what he calls the ‘dis-course of lateness’ and the actual conditions of production and of authorship in early modern theatre and suggesting the generativity of the idea of late Shakespeare for late work by subsequent writers (notably, James and Conrad). In the course of his analysis, he addresses subjects from gerontology to anti-Stratfordianism and from art history to eschatology, highlighting the negotiations required to sustain the discoursive of lateness and demonstrating the ongoing productivity of ‘late Shakespeare’ for the self-fashioning of actors, directors and critics. In the process, he offers the first full critique of the idea of late style, which will be of interest not only to literature specialists but also to art historians and musicologists and to anyone curious about the relationship of creativity to old age and death.

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SHAKESPEARE AND
THE IDEA OF LATE WRITING

*Authorship in the Proximity of Death*

GORDON McMULLAN
In memory of
Sasha Roberts (1966–2006),
Shakespearean and salsa dancer
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