

“Born into the World”

1564–1571

A woman when she travaileth hath sorrow, because her hour is come. But as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish for joy that a man is born into the world.

(John 16: 21, from the Gospel lesson for 26 April 1564,
Book of Common Prayer 1559)

Birth and Baptism

The Stratford-upon-Avon parish register states that William Shakespeare was baptized into the Church of England on Wednesday 26 April 1564. The register does not give his date of birth, and it does not show how committed his parents were to the church into which they brought him, one that would have been heretical only six years earlier. The Book of Common Prayer does, however, give the words that would have been read on the occasion. Some of them appear above as the epigraph to this chapter.

The children baptized on the 26th would have been those born between the 22nd and the 25th, if they were considered strong enough to be brought to church. Traditionally, Shakespeare’s birthday has been 23 April, which was the feast of St. George, the patron saint of England. A major holiday after 1415 (the year of Henry V’s victory at Agincourt), St. George’s Day was once celebrated with pageants depicting his most famous act, the killing of a dragon. For the select few belonging to the Order of the Garter it was an important feast, at which their attendance was required. St. George was the Red Cross Knight of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and his red

cross on a white background is the official flag of England. He is now considered a mythical figure, and when 23 April is celebrated it is because of Shakespeare, who sometimes seems almost equally mythical.

It is natural to be suspicious of the too convenient link between national poet and national saint, especially since 23 April is also the day on which Shakespeare died in 1616. Still, it may well be right. In the sixteenth century, Catholics and some Protestants believed that infants who died unbaptized could not go to heaven, so clergymen were supposed to warn parents to perform the ceremony no later than “the Sunday or other holy day next after the child be born.”¹ The Sunday before the 26th was 23 April. The next holy day, Tuesday 25 April, was the feast of St. Mark, which had the reputation of being unlucky.² There may have been another reason why it was not chosen. Since the minister was required to use the Book of Common Prayer, finalized in 1559, the congregation on St. Mark’s day would have heard a Gospel reading in which Jesus tells his disciples that “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered. And men gather them, and cast them in the fire, and they burn” (John 15: 5–6).³ This reading would have been particularly divisive in 1564, only a year after the publication of John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (usually called “Foxe’s Book of Martyrs”), with its vivid woodcuts of Protestants being burned at the stake by Catholics. It was a time when many still remembered those on both sides who had been burned for their faith.

John Bretchgirdle, vicar of Stratford for the past three years, had every reason to be tactful. When Elizabeth I succeeded her sister Mary in November 1558, the incumbent Catholic vicar refused either to conform to the Protestant religion or to resign from his post, so the Corporation of Stratford forced him out by withholding his salary. His departure left the town with no resident clergyman for some time. The local congregation must have been divided and perhaps resentful. Bretchgirdle, an unmarried man with an Oxford MA, was the kind of well-educated preacher that the Reformation leaders wanted to establish in every parish, and would not have offended those who disapproved of married clergy. He died only a year after this christening, requesting in his will that his possessions should be sold, and the proceeds given to various charities.⁴ This learned and charitable man was no doubt perfectly capable of gloating over the burning of those outside the true faith. Still, he does not sound like someone who would provoke his congregation by baptizing the son of a leading citizen on a day when the readings were bound to antagonize supporters of the old religion. He had some reason to like the baby’s father in any case: as chamberlain or acting chamberlain of Stratford-upon-Avon from 1561 to 1565, John Shakespeare had been heavily involved with maintenance and improvement of Corporation buildings, including the vicar’s house.⁵ Bretchgirdle might also have felt sympathy for a man about to witness the baptism of his first son after losing his first two children in infancy.

So it was on 26 April, at the end of either morning or evening prayer, that the baptismal party gathered round the font. It was probably the midwife who held

the baby.⁶ Mary Shakespeare would be confined to her house for about a month, and then, in a special ceremony known as the Churching of Women, would come to the church to give thanks for a safe delivery and present the “chrisom” cloth in which the child had been wrapped, along with a sum of money. The Prayer Book put the desire for baptism into the mouth of the baby’s godfather, who said, on its behalf, that he renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil with all his works, that he believed in all the articles of the Creed, and that he wished to be baptized in that faith. It was to the godparents that the priest directed his questions; until 1552 the child had been questioned directly, though someone else gave its answers, a kind of play-acting of which the Reformers disapproved.⁷ The godparents’ task was to name the child, though they had probably discussed the choice with the parents. John and Mary Shakespeare did not give their own names to any of their children. A child was often named after a godparent, someone trusted by the parents and perhaps someone they hoped would be of financial as well as moral help. Possible godfathers include William Smith, a haberdasher who lived, like the Shakespeares, in Henley Street, and served on the town council alongside John Shakespeare,⁸ and William Tyler, a butcher in Sheep Street (John Shakespeare was a glover, and butchers provided the hides that glovers used).⁹ William may even have been named after a relation, if William Shakespeare of Snitterfield, mentioned in a document of December 1569, was an otherwise unknown brother of John Shakespeare.¹⁰ As the map (Figure 1) shows, the church was at the far end of town from the Shakespeares’ house, and from most Stratford residents.

The relatives of the parents probably attended as well. John’s father had died in 1561, but Henry Shakespeare, John’s one identifiable brother, lived in the next village. Mary Shakespeare’s relatives were more numerous. She was born Mary Arden, a family name derived from the forest of Arden, which contains the villages in which all the pre-1500 Shakespeares lived.¹¹ Her father Robert had recently died, but she had numerous siblings from her father’s two, or possibly three, marriages. Robert Arden had owned the land that John’s father had farmed, so the Shakespeares and Ardens must have seen something of each other while Mary was growing up. When Robert Arden made his will he may well have known and approved of the impending marriage between his daughter and his ex-tenant’s son. Among Mary’s siblings, her sister Joan and Joan’s husband Edmund Lambert are the most likely to have attended this baptism. All the Shakespeare daughters were named after Mary’s sisters, but Joan’s name was reused for a younger girl after an older one died, so the family must have felt particularly close to her.

The group may have included colleagues, friends, and neighbors, since by 1564 John Shakespeare had lived in Henley Street for at least ten years and was a member of Stratford’s governing body. Those most likely to come were this year’s bailiff, George Whateley, also of Henley Street, and his chief alderman, Roger Sadler of

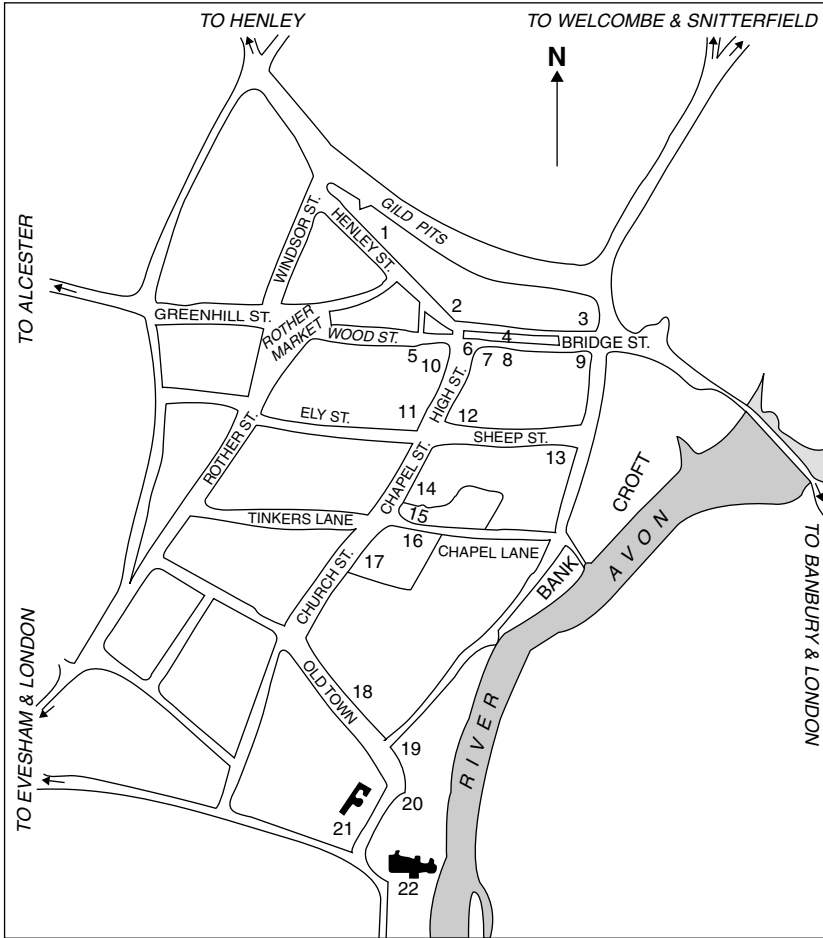


Figure 1 Elizabethan-Jacobean Stratford-upon-Avon

1. Two of John Shakespeare's houses (WS was probably born in one of them). JS also owned rental property in Greenhill St. 2. Bridge Street. House of Henry Field, tanner, father of the printer Richard Field 3. Swan Inn. This, and the Bear Inn across the street, are where prestigious guests were entertained. Its owner, Thomas Dixon/Waterman, a glover, may have been JS's master 4. Middle Row, where most shops were located 5. Wood Street, where Richard Hill and Abraham Sturley lived 6. High Cross, where markets were held 7. The Cage, a former prison, now a house; home, after 1616, of Thomas and Judith Quiney 8. Crown Inn 9. Bear Inn 10. High Street, and the Bear Inn across the street, where the Quiney family lived 11. House of Thomas Rogers (butcher): now called Harvard House after his grandson John Harvard 12. House of Roger Sadler (baker), then of Hamnet and Judith Sadler 13. House of William Tyler (butcher) 14. House of July Shaw (later witness of WS's will) 15. New Place 16. Guild Chapel 17. Guild Hall and grammar school 18. Hall's Croft, possible residence of John and Susanna Hall from 1608 to 1616 (though they may have lived continuously at New Place) 19. House of William Reynolds, one of WS's legatees 20. Thomas Greene, town clerk of Stratford, lived here from 1612 to 1616, after moving out of New Place 21. The College, formerly a religious institution, then the Stratford home of Thomas Combe, father of William and Thomas, WS's friends 22. Holy Trinity Church, where the Shakespeare family are buried

Church Street. Some of the twenty-seven other councilors might also have found time to attend the baptismal service, particularly Adrian Quiney, who had already served as bailiff of Stratford and would do so on two more occasions. He lived in the High Street, round the corner from John Shakespeare's house, and their two families would be closely connected for over fifty years.

A healthy child was dipped in the holy water, while a sickly one might be gently sprinkled on the head. The heavy font cover was designed to prevent people from stealing the water, which was normally replenished and blessed at Easter in Catholic times. Health-conscious parishes changed the water regularly; perhaps a child born three weeks after Easter – it fell on 2 April in 1564 – had an advantage in being exposed to relatively fresh water. Bretchgirdle probably made the sign of the cross on the child's forehead, to show that William was not ashamed of the faith of the crucified Christ; this was a controversial gesture, a relic of Catholicism, and some parents refused to allow it. The priest then exhorted the godparents to teach the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments in English as soon as the child was capable of learning them, and the group went back to Henley Street for a celebratory feast. Some guests would have visited the child's mother, who was supposed to remain in a quiet, dark room for several days after giving birth. They brought her their christening gifts, usually silver spoons or, from the more affluent, pieces of plate.¹² Sometimes these celebrations became rowdy. They were also expensive, since the mother was supposed to be given sweet, strengthening food and drink, as well as ointments, and many delicacies were also provided for guests.

William would have heard the words of the baptismal ceremony on many occasions. He may have been too young to go to the christening of his brother Gilbert in 1568 or that of Joan in 1569, but he probably attended those of his siblings Anne (1571), Richard (1574), and Edmund (1580). By the time Edmund was born, Shakespeare himself was about to father a child. The language of the Bible and Prayer Book is the first stratum of the many strata that make up the so-called Shakespearean style.

William Shakespeare's Name

Whether or not Shakespeare's godfather William turned out to be a profitable choice, his name was a gift to a boy with a taste for puns. According to Camden, "This name hath been most common in England since king *William* the Conqueror,"¹³ an association that would inspire one of the few contemporary anecdotes about Shakespeare (see Chapter 7). "Will" is a crucial word in Christian doctrine, since the extent to which human beings had free will was one of the main Reformation controversies. "Will" was also a slang term for the penis, the physical

means by which men commit sexual sin. The name, in full, can be broken down into “Will I am,” as in the seventeenth-century riddle:

My lovers will
I am content for to fulfil;
Within this rhyme his name is framed;
Tell me then how he is named?

Solution. – His name is William; for in the first line is *will*, and in the beginning of the second line is *I am*, and then put them together, and it maketh *William*.¹⁴

The poet would later pun on it obsessively in his sonnets, giving some point to his admission “That every word doth almost tell my name” (76.7).

Shakespeare’s surname, too, lent itself to sexual symbolism. A fifteenth-century fellow of Merton College, Oxford, is recorded as having changed his name from Shakespeare to Saunder because the earlier name was “*vile reputatum*” – perhaps “vulgar” is the best translation, since it has been interpreted as both “vile” and “common.”¹⁵ The dramatist’s contemporaries usually emphasized its military meaning (Jonson punned on shaking a lance – to rhyme with “ignorance” – in his verses for the 1623 Folio). Thomas Fuller jokingly suggested, in *Worthies of England* (1662), that Shakespeare had been channeling the classical writer Martial in “the warlike sound of his surname (whence some may conjecture him of a military extraction) Hasti-vibrans, or Shake-speare.”¹⁶ When his contemporaries referred to Will as “gentle Shakespeare” they may have intended a paradox: one does not expect a spear-shaker to be gentle.

Odd as the surname was, it was surprisingly common. The existence in Warwickshire of a second John Shakespeare, a shoemaker who lived both in Warwick and in Stratford, has complicated the search for relations,¹⁷ and the Stratford records show that the same person could be known by more than one name. People sometimes assumed the name of someone from whom they expected a legacy. In a culture that was still largely oral, people wrote down what they heard or remembered and did not ask how to spell it. The Hugh Saunder who was once Hugh Shakespeare is named elsewhere as “Saunder alias Shakespere alias Brakespere,” and Richard Shakespeare, the poet’s grandfather, is recorded as Shakstaff in 1541–2.¹⁸ A “Thomas Greene, alias Shakspere” was buried in Stratford in 1589/90,¹⁹ and a later Thomas Greene would call himself Shakespeare’s “cousin.”

John and Mary Shakespeare

The long genealogical tables of traditional biographies make one valuable point: family and ancestry were important to all classes, not just to the aristocracy. People

looked first to their family for friends and allies; they looked to their ancestors for models. The poet had many relations in the Midlands, though he probably did not know as many of them as later scholars have found in the parish registers and civic records of Warwickshire and beyond.²⁰ Through his mother and the Ardens he could claim long descent and distinguished military service. The Ardens descended from men who had fought in the Wars of the Roses, and a distant branch of the family lived in Park Hall, in Castle Bromwich, near present-day Birmingham. The application for a coat of arms made on behalf of John Shakespeare in 1596 refers to valiant service on the part of his ancestors on behalf of Henry VII, presumably at Bosworth. Despite his military name, John Shakespeare's side of the family lacked this history of wartime service. The poet's grandfather, Richard Shakespeare, was a farmer in Snitterfield, nearly four miles from Stratford on the way to Warwick. He rented his property, as opposed to owning it, but it was substantial: at his death in 1561 his goods were valued at "almost £5 more than the vicar's."²¹

His son Henry, Shakespeare's uncle, also farmed. Most of what survives on paper from the sixteenth century consists of legal documents and court records, so Henry is known mainly for the trouble he got into: he was accused of "making a fray" or fighting, excommunicated in 1580 for refusing to pay tithes on crops in Snitterfield, and fined in 1583 for wearing a hat to church, thus disobeying the Statute of Caps, which was intended to help the declining industry of wool knitting.²² This statute was apparently widely resented; the Stratford historian Edgar I. Fripp discovered that in 1596 the whole population of a nearby village was accused of disobeying it.²³ As this case illustrates, it was easy to accumulate a criminal record. Since fines were used to raise money for the borough (and for the person who informed against the delinquent), every possible offense was carefully followed up: failing to clean the gutters or the pavement in front of one's house, letting animals run loose, reviling one's neighbors.²⁴ As one historian puts it, "where there were so many laws to break, lawlessness was not the prerogative of the poor, and not necessarily a shameful thing."²⁵ This is the context in which to note the first mention of John Shakespeare in 1552, when he – along with two other highly respectable residents of Henley Street – was fined a shilling for having an unauthorized muck-heap.

At some time before then, clearly, either John Shakespeare or his father decided that the young man should leave the Snitterfield farm to seek a career in the nearby market town. Young men often left home in their teens – to study, to go into the service of another family, or to learn a trade. It has been suggested that this practice was a way of dealing with "the adolescent peer-group problem" by displacing the natural rebelliousness of teenage males onto a surrogate family, whether as apprentices or students.²⁶ It was also a practical necessity. This may have been an era of social mobility, but communities regarded as a foreigner anyone who arrived without connections to an existing social group. In order to have the rights of citizenship in another town, which included the right to buy and sell, a man

had to have been apprenticed there or to show that he was part of some corporate entity, a craft guild, or a religious fraternity.

Apprenticeships were essential for aspiring craftsmen, but they were also popular with their masters, as they provided cheap labor, often for much longer than the training process required. Since there were limits on the number who could be apprenticed to any one master, they were in relatively short supply, and not normally available to farmers' children. Stratford had had a cluster of leather-workers since the thirteenth century,²⁷ and John Shakespeare learned the skilled trade of whittawyer (or white-tawyer) – working with alum and salt to soften the white leather (deerskin, horsehide, goatskin, sheepskin, and even dogskin) that was used for making gloves, belts, and other small leather goods. It is unlikely that he could have turned up in Stratford without some previous arrangement. Among the various possible master glover-whittawyers who might have trained him, historians suggest Thomas Dickson, alias Waterman, whose wife came from Snitterfield.²⁸ The fact that Dickson became an alderman in 1553 might have helped his former prentice's rapid rise in the borough.

Since John Shakespeare was able to buy Stratford property in the early 1550s, his apprenticeship must have ended some years before that date. Mary was still single in March 1556, when her father died, and was married by the time their first child was born in September 1558, but her exact marriage date is not known. Some complications may have gone unrecorded. In June 1557 John was fined for missing three of the fortnightly sessions of the court of record; he was also excused jury service in April of that year. On the other hand, he was very much present in September/October, when he served on a jury and brought three lawsuits.²⁹ The evidence suggests either that he was away from Stratford in the spring, perhaps on Corporation business, or that some event required his full attention – perhaps Robert Arden's will and its implications for the marriage settlement. Mary and her sister Alice had been made joint executors of their father's estate. In Alice's case, this task included another responsibility – she was to live with her widowed mother – but Mary received not only the same share of her father's wealth as her brothers and sisters, but also a substantial amount of land and a house in Wilmcote. Perhaps John, seen as a desirable marriage prospect, drove a hard bargain. If she was her father's favorite, the rest of her family may have resented this arrangement, but there is no evidence of the fact except perhaps what happened later when the Shakespeares got into a controversial financial entanglement with Mary's sister and brother-in-law.

Shakespeare's parents were born before the start of the Stratford parish registers, but John must have been considerably older than his wife, even allowing for the fact that most sixteenth-century women married late. In the early years, Mary may have helped her husband with his work – for instance, as one of the "stitchers" who made up the leather goods after he had tawyed the skins. He continued to farm in Snitterfield until 1561, but he soon realized that selling the work of one's own hands was less profitable than buying goods and reselling them at a profit. He also found that

what people most wanted was ready money, and that they were prepared to pay for it. In the early 1570s he would be accused both of illegal dealing in wool and of charging excessive interest for money-lending. It has been argued that few medieval tradesmen could have made a living if they had practiced only the craft for which they had been trained.³⁰ The same seems to have been true in the early modern period.

It seems unlikely that either John or Mary could read, since there was no school in Snitterfield or Wilmcote. John's usual signature was a mark that probably symbolized his trade as a glover: a pair of compasses or, on one occasion, something that Samuel Schoenbaum interpreted as "a glover's stitching-clamp"³¹ and another biographer took rather optimistically as evidence of literacy.³² Park Honan, looking at Mary's "SM," saw evidence that she was used to holding a pen and might have been capable of teaching her son.³³ Inability to write did not necessarily mean illiteracy. Children who had spent only a short time in school were often able to read but signed with a mark, as did even literate men like Adrian Quiney, to save time.³⁴ Reading and writing were taught separately, with a writing master who worked with individual students. Schoolmasters were reluctant to teach writing too early, not only because they felt that the pupils might not be ready for it, but also because some parents pulled their children out of school once they had this knowledge.³⁵ What John clearly did have was basic numeracy, since at several points in his career he was given important tasks that required it.

The year itself had two alternative birthdays, because the Elizabethans were using a calendar established by Julius Caesar and modestly rectified by his successor Augustus. A number of alternative calendars had used dates in the Christian year to replace the Roman ones, but the most important reform of the system, by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, was not adopted in the British Isles until 1752, apparently because it would have meant changing the Prayer Book, which contains elaborate tables for finding the date of Easter.³⁶ In the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, most countries on the European continent, even the Protestant ones, gradually adopted the Gregorian calendar, with the result that their dates were some ten days ahead of those in Britain. Increasingly, too, Europe was beginning the year on 1 January (a practice that Scotland also adopted in 1600), while in England commercial records and many others still started on 25 March (Lady Day, the Feast of the Annunciation).³⁷ This is why dates are often given as "February 1601/2."

Thus the year was still new on 23 April, and up-to-date almanacs were just appearing. As usual, they tried to stay on the safe side by predicting disaster, assuming that the eclipses of the moon in June and July of the previous year would continue to have after-effects. The almanac that exclaimed over "the goodness of God that warneth us by the heavens, his ministering angels,"³⁸ was right in predicting plague in 1564. Stratford saw the first cases in June of that year and the sickness, exceptionally virulent, continued through the late fall, possibly killing as many as one-sixth of the population.³⁹ The Shakespeare household was fortunate to be spared, particularly as John Shakespeare had taken on a number of civic duties that

compelled him to stay in the town. Though no one knew this, the epidemic was to be the last one for twenty years, a period “remarkably free of serious epidemics and harvest failures, during which life expectancy reached its highest level in all of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”⁴⁰

At the time of William’s birth, the couple had been married for at least seven years, and had had two other children, Joan and Margaret. Margaret had died after only a few weeks, and Joan must have died early as well, since another daughter would be christened Joan in 1569. As William was the first son, the first child to outlive infancy, and the only child for his first two years, it is natural to assume that he would have been loved and even spoiled by parents still grieving for two early deaths. Moreover, he was born just before plague struck the town, and his survival would have made him all the more valued. There is considerable evidence that being the eldest child is a common factor among unusually successful adults,⁴¹ and William was in effect the eldest in his family. Joan, five years younger than her brother, survived all her siblings, dying just before the outbreak of the English Civil War. The rest of the family, by contrast, was relatively short-lived, especially considering that both John and Mary had long life-spans for their time. Joan and William were, moreover, the only ones to marry and have children. Remaining single was, however, a surprisingly common choice. Despite the closure of monasteries and convents and extensive Protestant propaganda in favor of the godly married household, popular literature generally depicted marriage as an unhappy state, especially for men. By the time a young man had become financially able to think of it, he may well have become afraid that it would mean a change for the worse.

There is considerable evidence that highly creative men, in common with dictators and military heroes, tend to have “dominating, possessive, or smothering mothers.”⁴² All anyone can deduce about Shakespeare’s mother is that she must have been healthy, since she survived the births of eight children, not counting possible miscarriages that would not appear in the parish records. Germaine Greer, annoyed by biographers’ tendency to idealize this woman, suggests that she was probably “spoiled rotten” by her father and may have ruined her husband’s life by encouraging him to give up the messy but reliable trade he had learned for “cleaner” and more prestigious activities that would eventually get him into legal and financial trouble.⁴³ Mary might have felt that she had married beneath her, like Mrs. Morel in D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, and become obsessed with getting her eldest son to make the most of himself. Since the connection with the old and distinguished Arden family would later be an important part of the claim for the family’s right to bear arms, it might have been discussed at home as well. Some scholars have imagined that she resembled Volumnia, the terrifying mother of Coriolanus. On the other hand, there may not have been so much of a gap between the status of husband and wife as used to be thought. It was recently discovered that her family home at Wilmcote was not the

same place identified since the eighteenth century as “Mary Arden’s house,” but a somewhat smaller one nearby.⁴⁴ John’s father was not poor and, though some of John’s prosperity probably came through his marriage, his rapid rise in Stratford was due to his own efforts.

Stratford

Stratford was the most substantial borough in its district, with an important market. The town’s government had originally been a religious foundation – the Guild of the Holy Cross, Blessed Mary the Virgin, and St. John the Baptist – which dated from the thirteenth century. Like other religious guilds, it provided insurance to cover the cost of burial for its “brothers” and “sisters” and encouraged solidarity among them. The many gifts and legacies from its members made it the wealthiest and most important local institution before the Reformation. Its chapel, conveniently located in the center of town, was reconsecrated in 1428 and further beautified after a bequest in 1496 from Stratford’s most famous benefactor, Sir Hugh Clopton.⁴⁵ The walls of the chancel were painted with stories relevant to the guild, including the Last Judgment and the legend that gave the guild its name, the finding of the True Cross by St. Helena. The nave had wall paintings of the Dance of Death: a skeleton seized partners from all ranks of life – king, merchant, minstrel, artificer – and scrolls emerging from their mouths reminded those who could read that death comes to everyone. Next to the chapel were an almshouse and a free grammar school, both of which dated from the mid-fifteenth century.

Shortly before Edward VI’s death in 1553, he granted a charter to the Corporation of Stratford, which replaced the guild as the town’s governing body. The town retained the privileges to which it had been accustomed: a market every other week, two annual fairs, a perpetual vicar in the church and a perpetual free school. Funds originally used for candles and prayers for the dead were redirected to the grammar school and to the maintenance of Sir Hugh Clopton’s other major gift, Clopton Bridge. Stratford became part of the diocese of the Bishop of Worcester, who was responsible for ensuring that the vicar and schoolmaster were teaching appropriate doctrine. Each was to have an annual salary of £20 – double what it had been, to show the reformers’ seriousness about the value of education.⁴⁶ The borough when it was chartered belonged to John, Earl of Northumberland, who went to the block in 1553 after his unsuccessful attempt to place the Protestant Lady Jane Grey on the throne in place of Mary Tudor. It then passed to a series of other aristocrats, until the Earl of Warwick (Ambrose Dudley, brother of the Earl of Leicester) became its Lord of the Manor between 1562 and 1590. He had the right to choose the vicar and schoolmaster, though he often left the task to the Corporation.

The Corporation consisted of a bailiff (the equivalent of a mayor), fourteen aldermen, and fourteen capital burgesses (chief citizens). The minutes of its meetings show it making more and more rules: citizens were forbidden to engage in bowling in their own homes and were fined if their servants played cards; to the laws against unmuzzled dogs, sheep and pigs in the streets, it added one against ducks in 1555.⁴⁷ Special attention was given to punishing anyone who sheltered unmarried pregnant women – partly for fear that these women were trying to prevent their children from being baptized by Protestant clergymen, but mostly from anxiety that a fatherless child would be a charge on the parish.⁴⁸ Both the midwife and parish priest were supposed to persuade the mother to divulge the name of the child's father so that the sinner could be suitably punished. It was a society that believed in controlling all aspects of life in the interest of the general good, but also one in which individuals strongly resisted such control. Some of the council meetings must have become heated: reviling other members and refusing to go forth "in brotherly love" was punishable by a fine of 6s. 8d.⁴⁹

By the time of William's birth John Shakespeare had become a solid and respectable member of this governing body. His first official post, in 1556, was as one of its two ale-tasters, inspecting the two most important foodstuffs, ale and bread, whose price, weight, and quality had been centrally regulated since the thirteenth century.⁵⁰ He moved on to other appointments in 1558 and 1559, and at some point before 1564 was elected a capital burgess. His chief service at this time was as the borough's chamberlain, administering its property and finances. In 1565 a vacancy occurred among the aldermen. William Bott, who lived in New Place, was reported "by credible persons" to have spoken evil words of the bailiff and to have added that "there was never a honest man of the Council or the body of the corporation of Stratford." Bott refused to attend the election meeting to clear himself, so he was expelled from the council.⁵¹ In his place, John Shakespeare became an alderman, and hence "Master Shakespeare," with a special ring and a black gown trimmed with fur.⁵² Two years later, he was one of three candidates for bailiff, the town's equivalent of mayor. He nearly had to take on the role, as the alderman who received the most votes refused to serve. John's own refusal was, however, accepted, possibly after he promised that he would accept the job in the following year. In 1568–9 he was duly elected as the sixteenth bailiff of Stratford. At the age of 5, William Shakespeare would have been known as the bailiff's son.

This election may have been the high-water mark of John's career, but any satisfaction it brought him was probably short-lived. Local government was time-consuming, since meetings took place at 9 a.m. on working days. There were fines for missing meetings, and the entire council had to attend the funeral of every alderman or burgess, or of his wife; there must have been resentment, since in 1557 the regulation was expanded to say that members should wear appropriate clothing and remain until the end of the service.⁵³

The Imaginative World

Is it worth attempting to reconstruct what Wordsworth called “the growth of a poet’s mind”? All normal children use metaphorical language and engage in imaginative activity, often in the form of games or story-telling. Yet, as Howard Gardner acknowledges, “a central mystery” remains: “These aspects of literary imagination seem to be universal. But it is an entirely separate matter to determine which of the millions of children who engage in these activities will later in life somehow be impelled, on their own, once again to create new worlds, to invent new realms of fiction into which other people can be invited and about whose reality they may be convinced.”⁵⁴ It may be difficult to draw conclusions from developmental research that focuses on children in developed societies with resources unavailable even to the wealthiest sixteenth-century child, such as plentiful supplies of paper and tools for writing and drawing. Perhaps a closer analogy would be with the opening of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which shows young Stephen Dedalus’s pre-literate mind being planted with the seeds of his later literary career: a story told by his father in baby-talk; dancing and singing “his song” while changing the words a little; making up a rhyme to words that he hears older people use; hearing a ballad sung by the maid. In addition, he is present at family arguments over politics and religion. A sixteenth-century child could have been exposed to the same kinds of stimulus, including bitter religious arguments. There might have been more music than in most families today. On the other hand, John and Mary Shakespeare may have been too busy to sing songs and too cautious to discuss public events. By the 1570s William, as the eldest of five, might have taken over the task of making up stories for his siblings. Being starved of imaginative food might have been as important to a gifted child as being glutted with it.

Imagination literally means the ability to create images. One of the most passionately felt differences between Catholics and Protestants was their interpretation of the commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” Although it is the second commandment in Catholic bibles, in Protestant translations it was often merged with the first, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” thus equating images with false gods. While the early Christian church had been hostile to the depiction of the supernatural, the rules had relaxed, especially in the west, several centuries before the Reformation. In defense of religious images it was sometimes argued that stained-glass windows and wall-paintings were “layman’s books”: a way of teaching the illiterate. The Reformers, however, seized on the prohibition of idols in the Commandments and, especially in England, took it as a command for wholesale destruction.

The Reformation in Stratford had its most visible results in the borough’s treatment of its Guild Chapel paintings. The town’s famous benefactor, Hugh Clopton, was still honored in local memory. Thus, even though the royal injunctions of 1559 ordered the removal of idolatrous images on “walls, glasses, windows,” and

so on, it was only in 1564 that they were covered with whitewash, and even then the whitewashing was confined to the most obviously Catholic images.⁵⁵ John Shakespeare was one of the members of the Corporation who saw this task carried out. Like many other acts of this period, it can be read either as enthusiastic rejection of an idolatrous past or as half-hearted placating of the government – whitewashing did not damage the work underneath and could be removed if religious policy changed again. The Dance of Death, with its grim message, was apparently not considered explicitly Catholic. The paintings remained in the nave, where a visitor saw them in 1574, and later disappeared under paneling.⁵⁶ They may already have been hard to read by the 1560s, but Shakespeare might have been able to see the minstrel's farewell to his harp, pipe, lute, and fiddle, among other reminders that death strikes all classes and professions.

The Reformers saw idolatry not only in inanimate images of artists and craftsmen but also in the impersonations of divine figures by living actors. Performances of the scriptural story from Creation to Doomsday had been a highlight of the church year in many communities. The "riding" on St. George's Day was particularly popular in the Midlands. Stratford in the sixteenth century had both a dragon costume and a set of armor. The procession was suppressed under Edward VI, like other events not based directly on the Bible, but revived during the reign of Mary Tudor. It probably had its last showing in 1557. John and Mary Shakespeare could have seen this show, and John might even have made a little extra money – the records show that someone did – by "Scouring the harness," or repairing the leather costume.⁵⁷ With Elizabeth's accession, the procession was suppressed again. The inextricable connection between traditional drama and repudiated beliefs meant that, after some attempts to "reform" the guild plays, most city fathers eventually banned them altogether.

Even so, Shakespeare's childhood probably included a good deal of theatrical experience, since Stratford was large enough to be a venue for traveling players. The Statute against Rogues and Vagabonds (1572), designed to control the mobility of unattached travelers, required touring performers to prove (with a license) that they were someone's servants. Since an aristocratic patron often preferred that his players, when not needed, spent their time living at someone else's expense rather than his, many of them existed primarily to tour the provinces. There were thirty-five such companies, with patrons, in the period between 1572 and 1583. Touring routes were well worked out and companies were licensed to perform in both public and private locations. Arriving in a town with drums and trumpets, the players would send their representative to show the license to a city official and get permission to perform. Some offered plays, others tightrope walking, tumbling, and other circus-like entertainment.⁵⁸ According to Sir John Harington, traveling actors got themselves an audience by going "up and down with visors [masks] and lights . . . till all the town is drawn by this revel to the place . . . and all be packed in together so thick, as now is left scant room for the Prologue to come upon the stage."⁵⁹

A number of the noblemen most active in theatrical patronage (such as the Dudley brothers, Earls of Leicester and Warwick) had properties in Warwickshire and were therefore likely to offer hospitality to players. Elizabeth's favorite, the Earl of Leicester, had players from 1559 on and they benefited from their patron's position on the Privy Council: James Burbage is among those named in a patent in 1574, exempting them from the Statute against Vagabonds.⁶⁰ Shakespeare, who would be associated with the Burbage family in the 1590s, could thus have known them from much earlier. Before 1570 it was customary for the mayor and council of each town to view the play before deciding whether to license it for general viewing. Licensing eventually became the prerogative of the Master of the Revels at court, but the custom of the mayor's private showing died out slowly. When the council chose not to give the company its support, the actors performed in coaching inns; sometimes they were paid not to play.⁶¹ The first performances of traveling players in Stratford took place in 1568. A 4-year-old was probably too young to see a play in this year, although another writer later recalled standing between his father's knees at the mayor's performance in Gloucester of a moral play, *The Cradle of Security*, which made an unforgettable impression on him.⁶² That was in about 1572, the year when Leicester's Men played in Stratford. William, at 8, might have attended with other council members on this occasion. Two other companies came in 1574, Leicester's Men returned in 1576, and four others performed in Stratford between 1578 and 1579. Later, Shakespeare may have seen plays in Coventry – a city with a population more than twice the size of Stratford's, about twenty miles away. It was the most popular touring venue in Warwickshire because it paid better than anywhere else.⁶³

That players first acted in Stratford in the year that John Shakespeare was bailiff may be a coincidence, but it is possible that he took some interest in the profession. As a man with connections in the clothing and leather trades, he might have made a little extra money by helping with costume repairs or replacements. Gloves, his speciality, were an important accessory for performances, especially at court.⁶⁴ If Shakespeare attended not only the mayor's performance but also the one given for the general public, he could observe how a play changes in harmony, or in conflict, with the audience's response to it; he could also watch actors respond to this response and – effectively or not – to other contingencies. As a space for performance, the Guild Hall at Stratford resembled many others – college dining halls or the largest rooms in inns and country houses – to which players were accustomed. Typically, there was a raised platform at one end where the most distinguished guests could see and be seen while they dined. At the opposite end were two doors, allowing servants with dishes of food to enter by one and leave by the other. Above the doors was a gallery for musicians. The actors may have performed in front of the two doors, possibly using the gallery as well, but they may also have played on the floor of the hall, so as to be closer to the spectators at the high table, in which case the actors made their entrances through the audience.⁶⁵

Even a child might become aware of the rhythm of entrances and exits and the changes in the theater space created as characters enter and leave the stage – what Emrys Jones has called “scenic form.”⁶⁶ The importance of this rhythm is easy to miss if one is accustomed mainly to the conventions of film, which rarely shows how characters get from one place to another. Most public events, however, were about movement to or from a place, and processions were as important a part of civic life as the dramatizations that sometimes accompanied them. The sight of fine clothes, whether on an ambassador and his train or on the cast of a play, was a pleasure in its own right. Actors began a play by “going about the stage” to let the entire audience see them before they began the story itself. The first appearance of an actor in costume had the potential to surprise and delight. Sometimes it was heralded by other speakers on stage (“Look where he comes!”). Sometimes the audience was kept in suspense waiting for him, especially if he was a popular character like the clown, and sometimes (if the audience was as “packed in” as Harington claimed) he had to fight his way into the acting space. Sometimes the entering character and those already on stage were imagined to occupy separate spaces, unable to hear or see each other. Entrances and exits could be used to make a point about characters’ social status, if one insisted on preceding the other, or to waive that precedence (as when Prince Hamlet says, “Nay, come, let’s go together”). Since the stage was unlocalized, actors came and went when they needed to, without explaining why. Even in performances of modern plays with representational scenery, the audience normally assumes that actors, once they leave the stage, cannot hear what is said there. This is a vestige of a theatrical tradition in which the actors entered, not into a room, but into a space for acting, and went out (or rather “within”), not into another room, but into a space for something else. A theater audience absorbs these “conventions” unconsciously, as it learns a language.

The typical mid-century touring company was small, judging from the number of plays that say on their title page (not always truthfully) that they can be performed by five actors. The five actors were usually four men and a boy who played female roles as well as children. They probably acted moral interludes, a genre that had existed before the Reformation, adapted to reinforce Protestant doctrine. These plays usually incorporated a good deal of comedy in the behavior of the bad characters, who demonstrated their worthlessness by crowd-pleasing songs and dances before finally repenting. To ensure that the story was properly understood, a presenter, sometimes costumed as a doctor, explained the moral at the beginning and end. By the late 1560s, however, there are records of plays on classical and romantic subjects, some of them calling for larger casts.

The sort of spectator who becomes an actor or playwright will be thrilled by the theatrical experience but will also want to understand how it works. If Shakespeare took advantage of his status as the son of an alderman, it is likely that he talked to the boy actors in the company and asked what their life was like. Unique to English theater (though boys had played in Spain until recently), they represented an uneasy

compromise.⁶⁷ Letting men play women's roles, as in Greece and Rome, was considered better than allowing women to display themselves in public, but, as preachers had said for centuries, it was a transgression of Deuteronomy 22: 5, which forbade men to wear women's clothes and women to wear men's. Boys in school plays were used to taking male and female roles of all ages. Thinking of them as sexless or androgynous was a way of evading the prohibition. The small-cast moral interlude could manage without them, but they must have been a great asset to the plays based on romance material, with their exquisite and virtuous heroines. Depending on the company and its leaders, they may have been cosseted and admired or they may have led a miserable life. They were sometimes the children of company members, but often they were orphans or at least fatherless children. Shakespeare would have felt no temptation to become one of them.

He would soon, however, have something in common with the boy actors: literacy and the ability to memorize and recite. The craftsmen who performed in the biblical plays may sometimes have learned their roles through constant repetition with the help of a literate organizer, but a professional theater company had no time for something so labor-intensive. (Even the craftsmen actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are told to memorize their parts in time for rehearsal on the next evening.) By definition, then, the theater was a world of literate people. Literacy was also important to Protestants, who aspired to a church in which everyone would be focused on the words of the Scriptures. Although they often attacked Catholicism for its theatricality, they insisted on the importance of public speaking. The 1559 Prayer Book specified that "all Ministers and Readers of public Prayers, Chapters, and Homilies shall be charged to read leisurely, plainly and distinctly, and also such as are but mean readers shall peruse over before once or twice the Chapters and homilies, to the intent they may read to the better understanding of the people, and the more encouragement of godliness."⁶⁸

At the age of 7, assuming that he and his family conformed to the practice of the Church of England, Shakespeare would have had to do a substantial amount of memorizing for his first public performance, Confirmation. On this occasion, he had to "confirm" the promises that had been made for him at his baptism by demonstrating his knowledge and understanding of basic Christian beliefs. The parish priest, if he was conscientious, had already prepared the children by drilling them in the catechism. Now they were questioned by the bishop. After the boy had recited the commandments, he was asked the most important thing he had learned from them, to which he replied, "My duty towards God, and my duty towards my neighbour." The dialogue continued:

Question. What is thy duty toward thy neighbour?

Answer. My duty towards my neighbour is to love him as myself: And to do to all men as I would they should do unto me. To love, honour, and succour my father and mother. To honour and obey the King, and his ministers.

To submit my self to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters. To order my self lowly and reverently to all my betters. To hurt nobody by word, nor deed. To be true and just in all my dealing. To bear no malice nor hatred in my heart. To keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue from evil speaking, lying and slandering. To keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity. Not to covet nor desire other men’s goods.

The children may not have understood what they recited, but words memorized at an early age tend to stay in the memory and to explode into meaning at a later date. They may have joked among themselves about the picturesque phrase about “picking and stealing”; Hamlet would later refer to his hands as “these pickers and stealers” (3.2.334).

The petty (*petit*, or small) school offered a mixture of written and oral learning, including regular catechizing. Shakespeare probably learned basic reading there, and perhaps writing and ciphering. He would have learned from a primer, usually a single sheet containing the alphabet and then the syllabary (the five vowels, then a consonant affixed to each of them, as “ba, be, bi, bo, bu,” and so on), followed by the Lord’s Prayer, which could be “spelled out” (read aloud) by this method. According to John Brinsley’s *Ludus Literarius or, The Grammar School* (1612), children started school at the age of 7 or 8; if they were sent earlier, it was “to keep them from troubling the house at home.”⁶⁹ Being able to recite the Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Creed, and to answer questions on them, was considered evidence that a child was rational, so Shakespeare probably entered the King’s Free School in Stratford in the same year that he was confirmed. As he had said at the end of his confirmation speech on the message of the Ten Commandments, Shakespeare’s task was to “learn and labour truly to get mine own living, and to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me.” The object of both religion and education was to ensure uniformity of belief and practice. The boy who would become a classic example of “original genius” was about to receive an education designed to prevent him from being original in any way.

Notes

1. *Book of Common Prayer 1559*, 277. For attitudes to unbaptized infants, see Bromley, *Baptism and the Anglican Reformers*, 49–59.
2. Schoenbaum, 25.
3. *Book of Common Prayer*, 226.
4. His will is reprinted in Fripp, *Shakespeare Studies, Biographical and Literary*, 23–9.
5. *Ibid.*, 17.
6. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 165.

7. Bromley, *Baptism and the Anglican Reformers*, 130.
8. Suggested by Edgar I. Fripp in *Minutes*, I: lii.
9. Katherine Duncan-Jones argues that confusion of “godfather” with “father” would explain the belief of early biographers that Shakespeare was a butcher’s son. See Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare: Upstart Crow*, 3.
10. M. Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 12. The godparent did not necessarily give his own name. Laurie Maguire draws attention to Regan’s words to Gloucester in *King Lear*: “What, did my father’s godson seek your life? / He whom my father named? Your Edgar?” (2.1.91–2): Maguire, *Shakespeare’s Names*, 26–7.
11. M. Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 3.
12. Cressy, *Education in Tudor and Stuart England*, 152–66.
13. Camden, *Remains Concerning Britain*, 79, lines 22–3.
14. Riddle 51 in *The Book of Merry Riddles* (1629), first cited by J. O. Halliwell, in *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, ed. Kerrigan, 367–8, also note to 121: 9 (“I am that I am”), 342.
15. Chambers, *WS*, 2: 375, quoting the college register of 23 June 1487: *mutatum est istud nomen eius, quia vile reputatum est*. Chambers speculates that the scholar may have been a bondman who fled his village to take orders. Schoenbaum (13 and 324n.) thinks that he changed his name because it was “so commonplace.”
16. Fuller, *The Worthies of England*, 590.
17. Fripp, *Shakespeare’s Haunts*, 67–8.
18. Chambers, *WS*, 2: 375; Schoenbaum, 112, 114. The roll has to do with property in Snitterfield, recorded in the College of St. Mary, Warwick.
19. M. Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 11.
20. e.g. *ibid.*, 3–23.
21. Schoenbaum, 228, 15.
22. M. Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 9–10.
23. Fripp, *Shakespeare’s Haunts*, 61–2.
24. *Minutes*, I: xxii.
25. Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants*, 220.
26. See Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*, 376.
27. Veale, *The English Fur Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, 36.
28. *Minutes*, I: xxxiii.
29. M. Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 25.
30. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 6.
31. Schoenbaum, 37.
32. *Minutes*, IV: xl.
33. Honan, 14.
34. Schoenbaum, 37.
35. Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius*, F3^v–F4^v.
36. Sohmer, *Shakespeare’s Mystery Play*, 20.
37. See C. R. Cheney, ed., *A Handbook of Dates for Students of British History*, esp. ch. 1, “Reckonings of Time,” and appendix (p. 236).
38. Cunningham, *A Prognostication for the Year of our redemption, 1564*.
39. Schoenbaum (p. 26) agrees with Edmond Malone’s deduction, based on the burial register for 1564.

40. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, 36.
41. Simonton, *Genius, Creativity and Leadership*, 26.
42. Ibid., citing V. Goertzel and M. T. Goertzel, *Cradles of Eminence* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 29.
43. Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife*, 27–9.
44. Alcock, with Bearman, “Discovering Mary Arden’s House.”
45. Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings at Stratford-upon-Avon*, 3.
46. *Minutes*, V: xv.
47. *Minutes* I: 26–7, 43.
48. René Weis stresses the anti-Catholic motive, while David Cressy emphasizes the need to avoid a charge on the parish. See Weis, *Shakespeare Revealed*, 15–17, and Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 74–9.
49. *Minutes*, I: 65.
50. *Minutes*, I: 30, 58.
51. *Minutes*, I: 144–5
52. M. Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 27.
53. *Minutes*, I: 68
54. Gardner, *Art, Mind, and Brain*, 183.
55. Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings*, 10.
56. They were rediscovered in the 1950s, in very poor condition, only to be hidden again behind restored paneling (Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings at Stratford-upon-Avon*, 11, 13–14).
57. Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings*, 4–5, 30–1, 5.
58. Ingram, *The Business of Playing*, 237–41.
59. [Harington], *An Apologie for a new discourse of a stale subiect, called the metamorphosis of Ajax*, Bb1^v.
60. Wickham, 206.
61. Gurr, *The Shakespeare Company, 1594–1642*, 64.
62. R. Willis, *Mount Tabor* (1639), in Chambers, *ES*, 1: 333.
63. Tiner, “Patrons and Travelling Companies in Warwickshire.”
64. Chambers, *ES*, 1: 225.
65. See Burkhart, “The Playing Space in the Halls of the Inns of Court,” and Arlidge, *Shakespeare and the Prince of Love*, 118–19.
66. Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare*.
67. Thacker, *A Companion to Golden Age Theatre*, 130.
68. *Injunctions given by the Queenes Maiestie anno Dom. 1559*, 53.
69. Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius*, C1.