

## Chapter One

William was not the first-born of John and Mary Shakespeare, for two baby daughters had died back in 1558 and 1563, but he was the first to survive infancy. Our post-Romantic, post-Freudian idea that the child maketh the man is anachronistic to a Tudor boyhood, but there were aspects of William's early years which necessarily shaped the adult and writer he would become.<sup>1</sup> Class was one of them. What the Elizabethans called "degree" mattered in Shakespeare's time. Baby William and his four surviving siblings grew up in a substantial house in a busy market town, Stratford-upon-Avon. His father John, making good money, was able to buy the house next door as well, and at some point linked the two to make "a single, imposing, close-timbered building" (Schoenbaum 1991, p. 7) Mary, William's mother, who brought land to the marriage, came from a nearby village, her family being prosperous, well-established farmers, the Ardens.

The "intimacy of daily life" (Edmondson and Wells 2015a, p. 329) in the Shakespeare household in Henley Street can be hard to imagine: the manicured buildings in Stratford-upon-Avon today now give very little sense of the dirt and chaos of a sixteenth-century house and thoroughfare. It's a valuable corrective to read that "the first reference to the father of the National Poet occurs in April 1552, when he was fined a shilling for making a dungheap (*sterquinarium*) before his house" (Schoenbaum 1991, p. 7). The dung-heap maker, John, made his money in various ways: glove making, tanning, dealing in wool and corn, and some moneylending. The last two were the most lucrative for him, despite or because of his lack of a dealer's licence and his tendency to charge in excess of the legal rate of interest (Fallow 2015). John was, suggests Potter (2012, pp. 42–43), adept at illegal wool-brogging, "buying wool outside the town, smuggling it in so as to avoid paying duty on it, and undercutting the official market, known as the Staple of Wool, by selling it more cheaply." The wealth he accrued, never mind how, came with responsibilities.

Men of John Shakespeare's financial standing were expected to involve themselves actively in the civic life of the town. This John did, being elected chief burgess three years before William's birth and then High Bailiff (the name for the Stratford-upon-Avon mayor) in the year his son turned four. So, we can place young William in a fairly prosperous, comfortable, and locally influential household as a child. What is more, John Shakespeare's status gave him the right to have his sons educated without charge at the King's New School in Stratford.

Records don't survive from the period, but most assume that William went there, "because otherwise how could he have learned about Ovid and Plautus?" (Garber 2004, p. 163). Marjorie Garber's question reveals that education didn't mean quite the same in the 1570s as it does in our own time. Lessons focused primarily on classical texts, Ovid and Plautus amongst others, and the curriculum was demanding. Garber (*ibid.*), for one, is amused that William, who would later be mocked for his "small Latin and less Greek" still learned "far more Latin and Greek than is commanded by most college graduates today." The "intense concentration on language" meant that "boys from the age of eight onwards spent around nine hours a day, six days a week, in all but seven weeks a year on literary exercises such as learning by rote, writing according to formulae, reproducing *sententiae*, imitating classical authors, and constructing arguments for and against set propositions" (Van Es 2013, p. 4). A boy could not fail to become good at the construction of arguments and have an armory of literary tropes and figures to draw upon when instructed to create compositions of their own. This emphasis on eloquence and rhetorical skills would stand many other playwrights in good stead. George Chapman, Thomas Kyd, John Webster, Michael Drayton, and Ben Jonson all relied on their "schoolboy training" and no wonder.

William's education was strikingly different to that of his parents. Neither John nor Mary could write, although both clearly functioned successfully in daily life and business, whether in the home or workshop. And yet, William's parentage was not unusual for a professional playwright, indeed it was "entirely typical" (Van Es 2013, p. 2). The list of Shakespeare's contemporaries' fathers' occupations provides a roster of artisan trades: Christopher Marlowe (shoemaker); Anthony Munday (stationer); John Webster (cartwright); Henry Chettle (dyer); Thomas Kyd (scrivener); Robert Greene (cordwainer or saddlemaker).

His schooling may have exposed a young Shakespeare to classical literature, but everyday Stratford town life exposed him to popular drama. Robust traditions of playing in provincial England ranged from the acting companies who performed under the protection of a member of the nobility, and took his name, through to informal local groups of actors, neighbors, or

guilds gathering to make theater in domestic or communal spaces.<sup>2</sup> Much of this playing went on under the radar since the 1572 Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds (and an even more draconian measure passed in 1598) stipulated that all traveling players had to be attached to a “baron of the realm or any other honourable person of greater degree.”<sup>3</sup> The Queen’s Men, formed as the result of a Privy Council directive designed to take back control of the anarchic world of playing, were expected to entertain their patron, the queen, of course, but also spent much of the year touring. It was a relentless life on the road, with limited runs in each town: only three shows for the Queen’s Men, even less for other companies.<sup>4</sup> But stars were born and occasionally fortunes made: the renowned comedian dancer Richard Tarlton left the magnificent sum of £700 at his death and had Sir Philip Sidney as godfather to his son. And when the players did come to town, civic leaders would get the best seats in the house, good news if you were the High Bailiff’s son, as William was.

Until the late 1570s that is, when John Shakespeare stopped attending council meetings. William was in his early teens and would have lost his privileged entrance to the Guild Hall, although he, like everyone else, could still have joined the paying customers for the players’ shows in the town. John’s fortunes determined William’s and those fortunes were becoming dangerously troubled according to some. The crisis was precipitated for a whole range of reasons depending on which biographer you consult: “rash business practices, a general economic downturn in the Midlands, changes in the licensing and practice of wool merchants, an obdurate commitment to Catholicism that led to fines and harassment, and perhaps a drinking problem for good measure” (Tromly 2010, p. 246).

However, the family’s financial crisis has been downgraded recently. Examining the year 1586, when John was expelled as alderman, Potter notes that most men did not really *want* to serve their community because corporation business was “expensive and time-consuming,” pointing out that none of John’s sons would contribute to local government (Potter 2012, pp. 46–47). Moreover, 1586 was not a good year for anyone, with “dearth” in Stratford and beyond bringing to an end a 20-year period of relative prosperity and, more problematically for John Shakespeare, the calling in of debts. John mortgaged his wife Mary’s inheritance to meet the short-term financial challenge, but this was standard practice in a volatile, debt-heavy system. It may well be that John Shakespeare’s financial problems have been exaggerated by posterity and, in the first instance, by the man himself in order to avoid his debtors (Fallow 2015).

It is a biographical stretch, therefore, to argue that young William was motivated by the desire to reverse his father’s and his family’s decline, but it is

certain that John, as father, would have determined the course of his son's life as a teenager. More than that, "in Elizabethan families the eldest son stands in a special relationship to the father as the primary inheritor of property and as the transmitter of patrilineal values," the father's "legal successor and meta-physical continuation" (Tromly 2010, p. 248). Simply by virtue of the patriarchal control invested in him by church and state, John had almost total sway over his son's future (Fallow 2015, p. 38). And that future did not include university.

Biographer Jonathan Bate (2008, p. 75) views this as significant, contrasting Shakespeare with his almost exact contemporary Christopher Marlowe. As a student at Cambridge University, Marlowe was drawn into a dangerous intellectual world of philosophy, Machiavellian thinking, even atheism and, for Bate, this was a natural route to the edgy life of poet and playwright. Bart van Es (2013, p. 14) sees things differently. "A playwright's literary accomplishment was in practice little affected by attendance at university: Oxford and Cambridge specialized in the teaching of theology, philosophy, history, and similar branches of exact learning, and not in literature of a kind that a poet might readily apply."

So, no university for William – but how *did* he spend his youth? Some suggest he was informally apprenticed to the family business. Both John and Mary "were capable and tough-minded business people" (Edmondson and Wells 2015a, p. 330), unlikely to employ other people when there was a healthy eldest son to be trained up: there's a "logical possibility" therefore that William was apprenticed to "the unregulated family business" (Fallow 2015, p. 38). This apprenticeship would not necessarily preclude an engagement with the acting world, whether in Stratford, its surroundings, or even in faraway London, the business capital. Indeed, as Bart van Es (2013, pp. 9–10) points out, we don't need to make a choice between William the apprentice and William the actor, because so many actors had their "roots in practical professions," the theater industry itself having its foundations in medieval guilds and corporations.

The truth is, we just don't know whether Shakespeare was apprenticed to the family business. Nor do we know much about his or his family's religious practices, let alone beliefs, but there is nevertheless a noisy debate as to whether the Shakespeares were closet Catholics in a Protestant England.<sup>5</sup> Hard evidence is elusive, although one can argue that it would be. The religious changes over the course of John Shakespeare's life did not help the quest of future generations seeking insight into any individual's belief. The Reformation made it easier to be labeled a heretic, as there was no longer a unified church to guide the faithful, and, especially in countries such as England, the authorities who determined religious policy changed at an alarming rate.

Those with Catholic sympathies were wise to conform outwardly in an era where opposition to the established Protestant Church of England was punishable by, at best, fines, and at worst – at least for those who actively supported the pope’s command to overthrow Queen Elizabeth I in the name of the Catholic religion - torture and execution. In the 15 years or so prior to William’s birth, England had gone from a country in the grip of a zealous Protestant Reformation under the young king Edward VI to an equally zealous return to Roman Catholicism under his sister Mary, only to be returned to Protestantism with the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558. Put another way, it became ever more important to think about individual salvation but equally dangerous to declare one’s confessional allegiance (Hadfield 2019, p. 18). In an era of traumatic religious change, caution was wise.

We do know that when William was 19, two Catholic members of his mother’s Arden family, Mary and Edward, were arrested for conspiring to kill the queen. Mary was pardoned. Edward was executed, his head displayed on London Bridge as was the custom of the time. There are, furthermore, two pieces of evidence to suggest that William’s father, John, was Catholic. A “Testament of Faith” with his name written on it was found hidden in the rafters of the Henley Street house in 1757. Crypto-Catholics kept these documents, a profession of their faith, close by them to be used if they faced death and there was no priest available for the last rites. The second piece of evidence shows that, in 1592, by which time William was approaching 30, his father got in trouble twice for recusancy, that is, failing to attend church. Did Shakespeare’s – possible – Catholic heritage, beliefs, or merely “sympathies” result in a body of works which lack an “overt polemical edge,” result in a writer’s life of caution, as Dutton (1989, p. 10) argues?

The evidence for John’s beliefs is not entirely reliable. The “Testament” was found some 150 years after Shakespeare senior lived in Henley Street, and was then promptly lost. Those recusancy records of 1592 ascribe his avoidance of church to fearful pragmatism, rather than religious nonconformity. John Shakespeare owed money; it was far too easy to be found at church; he thus kept away “for fear of process for debt.”

Moreover, it is all too easy to impose reductive labels on what was a fluid belief system. As James Shapiro (2005a, p. 167) writes, “to argue that the Shakespeares were secretly Catholic or alternatively, mainstream Protestants misses the point that except for a small minority at one doctrinal extreme or other, those labels failed to capture the layered nature of what Elizabethans, from the queen on down, actually believed.” The Elizabethan Church Settlement was, in part, designed to accommodate this, tolerating “a wide range of spiritual and religious beliefs among those who were happy outwardly to conform” (Edmondson and Wells 2015b, p. 9).

Old beliefs and habits died hard, much harder than historians in the past believed.

Yet, despite the tenuous evidence, we remain fascinated by Shakespeare's possible Catholicism. Maguire and Smith (2012) argue that the fascination stems at least in part from the glimpse it offers of a

Shakespeare who is not simply accumulating wealth and property but who apparently suffers inner conflict, a struggle with his conscience, and whose writing is shaped by the mechanisms he has developed for his own psychological and physical self-protection. In this model, Catholicism registers as much as an act of individual assertion and defiance – the poet at an angle to establishment values – as it does as a specific doctrinal allegiance. While the question of whether Shakespeare was a Catholic is unlikely to be definitively answered, we can certainly affirm that we want him to have been.

Whether we want him to be an apprentice is another matter. Some have seen 18-year-old William's activities in the summer of 1582 as evidence that he would do anything to avoid joining the family business. An apprentice was not allowed to marry. To escape apprenticeship, therefore, William has sex with Anne Hathaway, perhaps six years his senior and, almost as soon as she finds she is pregnant, marries her, welcoming the marriage and pregnancy "as ways to break free of an enforced apprenticeship" (Orlin 2016, p. 39).<sup>6</sup>

John Shakespeare gave his consent to the marriage of William and Anne in November 1582, that consent necessary because his son, at 18, was still a minor. The Hathaway family appeared content with the marriage, providing the "bondsmen" to safeguard the wife's interests, as was conventional (Schoenbaum 1991, p. 12). Anne received 10 marks on her wedding day, the equivalent to £6 13s 4d, probably a bit more than a playwright in the next decade received for a completed play (Potter 2012, p. 56). And she duly gave birth to a baby girl the following spring. Susanna Shakespeare was baptized on 26 May 1583, in Holy Trinity Church, as her father had been just over 19 years earlier. Around a year later, Anne was pregnant again. The Shakespeare twins, Hamnet and Judith, were christened on 2 February 1585, probably named for close friends of their parents, the baker Hamnet Sadler and his wife Judith. Richard Barton, a new minister in Stratford, a man unreservedly praised by the more vocal Protestants of the town, baptised the twins. This might offer a glimpse of Shakespeare's religious position: "either a good Church of England Protestant or doing his best to look like one" (Potter 2012, p. 59). His "distinctive anonymity" (Dutton 2010, p. 11) is the one thing that is certain, although whether this was a reaction against his parent's alleged crypto-Catholicism, a product of having been brought up in a household which was not fervidly religious or simply all that emerges from a sparse archive, is a matter for debate.

Married at 18, and to an older woman. A father of three children before he was 21. We might think these are crucial events in the formation of William Shakespeare, the man. Yet Alan Stewart (2016, p. 38) has demonstrated how thoroughly the “marriage was effaced by Shakespeare’s seventeenth century ‘biographers’ who constructed for him not a familial but a theatrical dynasty” (Traub 2016, p. 38). These earliest accounts of Shakespeare’s life are almost completely silent about family – and more specifically, silent about women. “Aubrey gives us a father, but only as the representation of a trade that Shakespeare rejects; and there are no women, except an unnamed sister” (Stewart 2016, p. 68). This is normal for seventeenth-century life-writing, so it should not be surprising that only in 1693 is Shakespeare represented as married. Twentieth-century literary critics are, ironically, equally unwilling to consider Shakespeare the married man, not because of a lack of interest in these trivial, domestic (feminine) matters but because of a distrust of the biographical turn. Marjorie Garber (2004, p. 20), for example, is typical in her pronouncement that there has been much “speculation” about William’s marriage to Anne. She does not mention the matter again.

Dismissing talk of marriage at least avoids the at times unedifying biographical feeding frenzy that surrounds William and Anne Shakespeare’s marriage when it *is* considered. Part of the problem is that the biographers are feeding on nothing. There is no direct evidence to show how William felt about Anne, or vice versa. And nature and biographers abhor a vacuum.

That there were no more children born to Anne and William after the twins prompts the normally cautious Lois Potter (2012, p. 59) to wild speculation, an “if” leading to a “might”: “If Shakespeare did indeed have Catholic sympathies, he might have been unable to envisage any way except separation to avoid having more children.” Potter is determined to discredit an alternative interpretation – that William was repelled by sex with women and the resultant babies. We will return to Shakespeare’s sex life later.

For others, the vacuum itself is viewed as telling. The “supremely eloquent” Shakespeare does not write anything to or about Anne, no “signs of shared joy or grief, no words of advice,” not even any financial transactions (Greenblatt 2004, p. 125). This proves that William “could not find what he craved, emotionally or sexually, within his marriage.” Assuming the Shakespeare family’s Catholicism, and that William’s earliest sexual experiences would have been with other boys at school, Greenblatt goes on to try to work out why Will would have found Anne attractive. She is different: Protestant to his Catholic, straight to his queer. Anne (Greenblatt 2004, p. 119) represents an antidote, “a reassuringly conventional resolution to his sexual ambivalence and perplexity.” And because the great writer is so complicated, tortured, and bisexual it can’t possibly last. In this scenario, William becomes a “reluctant, perhaps highly reluctant” bridegroom (Greenblatt 2004, p. 123), trapped in a marriage that he cannot escape.

It's an old, old story, as Lena Cowen Orlin (2016, p. 42) points out in her reassessment of the evidence. "By the early nineteenth century, the narrative of Shakespeare's relationship with Anne Hathaway was fixed: the eighteen-year-old William was trapped by the pregnancy of a twenty-six-year-old into a marriage that he fled as soon as possible, years later confirming his disaffection for his enforced wife in the derisory dying bequest of a second-best bed."

The marriage is, however, a blessing in disguise, because these nuptial disappointments prompted Shakespeare's migration to London. Shakespeare, in other words, needed to cast off an unfortunate marriage in order to realize his destiny.

Archeological evidence (Scheil 2015) discovered in William and Anne's marital home, New Place in Stratford, suggests a different picture. Anne Shakespeare ran a large and wealthy household. In the absence of any evidence of abandonment, let alone complaint from Anne regarding support, perhaps we should see her as the trusted partner in the marriage, the one keeping the home fires burning. Equally, that the Shakespeares had three children, then no more is not necessarily a sign that they were no longer sexually active. Miscarriages and stillbirths were distressingly common and most were unrecorded. What is more, Shakespeare remained involved in Stratford life as a family man and landowner during the years in which he achieved success on the London stage.

Even those biographers who do not see the marriage as an active evil nevertheless view Shakespeare escaping pleasant but provincial Stratford and seeking his fortune in dangerous but exciting London. This too may be based on a false premise, that somehow Stratford was a rural, pastoral idyll in comparison to the dirty, gritty capital. Nowhere was safe from the everyday catastrophes of life in late sixteenth-century England, whether political and religious regime change, fire, plague, and poor harvests, or infant (and maternal) mortality. Like all his contemporaries, Shakespeare was engaged with a complex web of loyalties grounded in the household or extended family, the sprawling social unit that characterized late Elizabethan life, but this did not mean that Warwickshire and London represented two entirely separate existences. Gilbert, William's closest brother in age, would act as his agent in Stratford during his frequent absences in London, whilst William would look out for his much younger brother Edmund in London (Richardson 2015).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, one's immediate family was important but not exclusively so. Other networks could be, and would be, just as important to William Shakespeare, not least those of the theater world.

For it is as an actor in London that William next appears in the archive, but only in 1592. After the christening of Hamnet and Judith, seven long years pass before their father's name appears again in any document. Most assume he had

been in the city for some time before 1592. Park Honan has Shakespeare settled in London by 1589 or 1590 at the latest, living in Shoreditch, and remaining there during some of his apprentice days in the theater, close to his fellow playwright (and exact contemporary) Christopher Marlowe. Honan vividly evokes the streets of Shoreditch – until 1588 also Richard Tarlton’s home turf – with its “jutting, far-overhanging storeys of shops” which “often broke off the sunlight so that, on a good day, the lanes were in shadow” (2005, p. 186).<sup>8</sup>

There’s a gap to be filled between Shakespeare’s christening in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford, and the seedy streets of Shoreditch, and biographers duly fill it. The goal is to get William to the big city and many and various are the routes by which he arrives.

One story goes that the return of the Queen’s Men to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1589 changed the course of Shakespeare’s life. The company were a man down after an unfortunate incident in Thame, Oxfordshire: their leading actor was killed in a street fight. Perhaps the 23-year-old William stepped in to fill the gap? It’s a nice idea, but implausible, not least because he would have had to have been remarkably impressive to take over a leading role.

More plausible is seeing young Will as a strategic rather than reluctant bridegroom. “Let us suppose that Shakespeare did not want to spend his life – or any more months than he already had done – as a Stratford artificer. The wedding would have been a means of escaping the life that had been organized for him”: Orlin (2016, p. 56) argues that this “new way to cluster the evidence” suggests that William’s marriage “may have been not one from which Shakespeare had to break free but instead the means by which he was able to break free.” The marriage remains a significant factor pushing him to London, his goal to support (not escape) his young family. Rather than a delusional act of self-destruction built on a fantasy from which Will had to escape as soon as possible, the marriage might have been a thoroughly sensible decision for an aspiring actor, intrinsic to his future success rather than an impediment to it.

Or perhaps William’s marriage in fact allows him to be an actor. An apprenticeship (and university for that matter) could not be combined with marriage, an actor’s life could. And that life could run parallel “with a very different life in Stratford” (Potter 2012, p. 55). Anne and the couple’s three very young children could and did live in there with William’s parents, while he – perhaps – toured the provinces with an acting troupe, moving in and out of the great houses of England, before ending up in London, his semi-permanent base, in 1588.<sup>9</sup>

William may disappear from the records for seven years, but it is quite possible he did not disappear from Stratford at all. According to David Fallow, despite his marriage precluding a formal apprenticeship, John Shakespeare was not going to let his eldest son do anything other than join the family

business. This entailed visits to London, and therefore when William surfaces in the city it is “exactly where and when contacts in the wool trade would have been vital to the survival of the family business.” Shakespeare therefore arrives in London as “a businessman rather than an impoverished poet” (Fallow 2015, p. 38).

In contrast, there are those who insist the pull of the theater for young William is heightened by the desire to leave Stratford: the “power of its language, the mystery of mimesis, the potential to travel away from provincial Warwickshire” all drew Shakespeare to the city (Dutton 2018, p. 28) – or to Lancashire. Those who view Shakespeare as a crypto-Catholic take William north in the later 1580s as schoolmaster (or possibly actor) in the household of Sir Thomas Hesketh, whose wife and at least one of his sons were active Catholics.<sup>10</sup> Some add the idea that William was sent to Lancashire to get him away from (religious) trouble in Warwickshire. When Hesketh died in 1588, the argument goes, Shakespeare passed into the household of the Earl of Derby, Hesketh’s patron, and thence to the life of a touring actor and novice playwright with the Earl of Derby’s son, Ferdinando, Lord Strange, the patron of one of the leading acting companies of the 1580s.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare’s experiences touring with Lord Strange’s Men may even emerge in his plays: when he imagines a performance “it is not in a public playhouse but in the private space of a royal palace or a lord’s house” (Potter 2012, p. 55).

And yet, for all the lure of London, Shakespeare is unlike his younger contemporary Ben Jonson, who refers to the city’s streets and pubs and theaters in his plays. William “always retained something of a pre-urban sensibility, in which playing was closely attached to the service of a lord and to great private houses” (Dutton 2018, p. 38). Not just that, it is a Midlands’ pre-urban sensibility, because Shakespeare’s earliest plays are “dotted with names of places in the Midlands.” Shakespeare’s continued connection to his Warwickshire roots – understood variously as pre-urban, narrowly provincial, or idyllic pastoral, and existing in his imagination as much as his lived experience – is a powerful theme in many “Lives.”

When and why Shakespeare began working in the theater in London (or elsewhere) remains murky. What is clearer is that to be an actor was to exist on the edge of convention. On the one hand, an actor was merely a household retainer, a lowly, liveried member within a deeply hierarchical unit, organized around the service of a lord and patron. At the same time, an actor was one step away from a vagabond, a byword for bad behavior, dissolute, “loitering” fellows, disrespectful of authority, “passing from country to country, from one gentleman’s house to another, offering their service, which is a kind of beggary” (Van Es 2013, p. 8, quoting from Wickham, Berry, and Ingram 2020, pp. 157–171).<sup>12</sup> Hidden behind the invective was a horror of social mobility: “a

common theme is the players' rapid rise from travelling minstrels to gaudy and wealthy men" (Van Es 2013, p. 8). Actors were indeed "entrepreneurs, seeking to make a living in a developing marketplace – though one contested by a number of different parties, notably the Crown (the Queen's government); Parliament; their own aristocratic patrons; and local authorities, often in the form of their mayors and councils" (Dutton 2018, p. 28). Acting could, and did, transform men's fortunes.

Particularly acting in London. The theater world in the city had been changing rapidly from the time of William's early childhood when performances (whether amateur or professional) were attached to a specific occasion, and at the invitation, and under the control, of the person commissioning the performance. By the time William entered his teens, playing companies were working through much of the year, performing to paying audiences, and even providing a selection of plays at each venue. And a few brave visionaries had started building theaters: in 1567, a stage and scaffolding in a farmhouse called the Red Lion about a mile from the city walls; 10 years on, The Curtain; 20, and the Rose is being built. The steady rate of building suggests that business was good. London was thriving in the years after 1588, temporarily free of the major epidemics which led to playhouse closures, and a population of 200,000 made it far and away the biggest city in England.

By 1590 there were "at least four substantial buildings attracting acting companies to London, with smaller venues existing besides. Playhouses proper, although partly open to the elements, could shelter thousands of spectators and were equipped with tiring houses for the purpose of costume changes and space for the storage of theatrical properties. Their occupation was changeable: individual troupes would come and go depending on touring routes and the seasons. Alternative entertainment, such as fencing contests or animal baiting, was also an option for the owners when no suitable players were in town" (Van Es 2013, p. 11).

It was a volatile world, involving extensive touring away from the capital, not always without trouble. The Queen's Men were in Dublin one month, invited to perform at the wedding of King James VI and Anne of Denmark in Edinburgh the next, with the more everyday mayor's plays filling in the gaps.<sup>13</sup> The death of a star performer in one company, the death of a patron of another, could change everything, as it did in 1588, the year in which Richard Tarlton (of the Queen's Men) died and in which Lord Strange formed a new company from the remnants of the Earl of Leicester's Men. Already disrupted when the earl had taken some of his playing troupe with him to war in the Low Countries, the company completely dissolved on Leicester's death.

The new players moved swiftly "into the highest league," not least because of the presence of Will Kemp, a comedian who was, almost, Tarlton's equal

(Dutton 2018, p. 61). Trouble came and was averted. The Lord Mayor, attempting to close the playhouses, instructed the two main London troupes (the Admiral's and Strange's Men) to stop playing. The former "dutifully obeyed, but the others in very contemptuous manner departing ... went to the Cross Keys [an inn] and played that afternoon" (Chambers 1923, Volume 4, p. 305). Some of Strange's players were imprisoned for their contempt, but most were protected by their patron.

Strange's Men prospered, being awarded six slots in the Revels Calendar of 1591–1592, and three the next year. And between 19 February and 22 June 1592 they performed the first fully recorded London season, playing continuously at the Rose. Prior to this, no company had attempted to set up more-or-less permanent residence in London. The new permanent theaters were changing drama. In this first season of 105 days, no fewer than 27 plays were staged.

This was very different from touring, when companies would take three or four plays out on the road, with perhaps two or three new plays in their repertoire because they could rely on a new audience in the next town or great house. In London, there was a pressing need to get the playgoers back for more. The new public theaters needed more plays, more playwrights: a perfect recipe for the young actor, and aspiring playwright, William Shakespeare. He was not alone, of course: "As the commercial theatre expanded, many young men, primed with a command of rhetoric thanks to their training in the new grammar schools, made their way to the capital. Under-employed and highly literate, they were soon called upon to produce copy for the players, who (with large venues and longer periods of residence) were turning over material at an unprecedented rate" (Van Es 2013, p. 1). It was an era of unprecedented opportunity for an actor-playwright. The new playhouses (when they were permitted to open) needed new material, far more than had been required when companies only went on the road: "itinerant acting companies could succeed by repeating in different places a small inventory of plays" (Bednarz 2018, p. 22). Those "with an established urban-based clientele were, instead, compelled to acquire larger and more differentiated repertoires – including diverse and innovative comedies – in order to satisfy the expectations of inveterate theatre-goers who could choose among competing venues" (Bednarz 2018, p. 22).

In retrospect, we can see that William Shakespeare was in the right place, at the right time: London 1592. Whether his family, particularly his father, saw the situation in the same way is another question. Fred Tromly (2010, p. 251) speculates on John Shakespeare's response to his son's career choice, bearing in mind that no one knew just how lucrative the theater industry would be for his son. Believing that John saw William "rejecting the traditional forms of business in favour of an enterprise that, in addition to being morally questionable in the

eyes of many, offered very little promise of stability and steady income,” he sees an unbridgeable generation gap opening between father and son. For Jonathan Bate that rejection of artisan business in Stratford was less calculated but no less significant. Refusing to speculate about the Shakespeare family’s Catholicism, Bate nevertheless asserts that “the balance of probability is that William Shakespeare’s own instinct and inheritance were cautious, traditional, respectable, suspicious of change. We may as well say conservative” (2008, p. 66). This all changed when William “got the acting bug.” For Bate, as with Tromly, John Shakespeare would not have been best pleased. Coming from a class where “idleness” was sin, he “would have subscribed to the common view that actors were little better than vagabonds [...] When John heard that his son had become employed in the theatre, he would have been flabbergasted. The dramatic profession was a completely unknown quantity” (2008, pp. 73–74).

What no one could have imagined was William Shakespeare’s unlikely and swift rise from actor to jointsharer in a new acting company, The Lord Chamberlain’s Men. But that is where he was headed.