

Born in 1564 in provincial Stratford-upon-Avon, he was the eldest surviving child of John and Mary Shakespeare. John is thought to have been the son of Richard, a husbandman in Snitterfield (four miles from Stratford) who held lands as a tenant of Robert Arden, gentleman. Arden's daughter, Mary, inherited fifty acres when her father died in 1556, and not long after married John Shakespeare. John and Mary therefore belonged to different social levels; John, like his son William, proved to be 'upwardly mobile'.

John Shakespeare is first heard of in Stratford in 1552, when he was fined one shilling for building an unauthorized dunghill or muck-heap in Henley Street. (In Stratford, as in London, excrement and other refuse must have been a familiar sight in public streets.) We assume that John already lived in this street, in the house now known as his son's birthplace. He worked as a glover and whittawer (a curer and whitener of skins), but he also became 'a considerable dealer in wool' (Nicholas Rowe, in his *Life of Shakespeare*, 1709, confirmed by recently discovered records), he sold barley and timber, and he bought houses, including the one adjoining his house in Henley Street. In addition to his probably complex business dealings he participated in civic affairs and rose from minor duties to hold office as chamberlain, member of the town council, alderman, and, in 1568, high bailiff (we would say 'mayor'). He signed official documents with his mark, which may mean that he could not write, though this does not necessarily follow. Whether or not he was illiterate he must have had a good head for business since he was asked to take charge of civic accounts. Is it not likely, though, that Shakespeare's parents were both remarkable people?

Having prospered for some twenty years, John ran into difficulties in the late 1570s. He was let off paying his weekly 4d. for poor relief; he failed to attend council meetings, and consequently was deprived of his alderman's gown (1586); he mortgaged part of his wife's inheritance. It could be that he only pretended to be poor and withdrew from council business for religious reasons—if, like many others, he became a 'recusant' when Queen Elizabeth succeeded Mary in 1558, i.e. he refused to give up the 'Old Faith', Roman Catholicism. Recusants were persecuted more vigorously just when John Shakespeare's difficulties started and were fined for non-attendance at church, and his name appears in a list of non-attenders: apparently he alleged that he stayed away because he feared that he might be arrested for debt. Nevertheless he continued to own houses in Stratford; in 1580, summoned to appear in court at Westminster, he was fined £40 (equivalent to a schoolmaster's salary for two years) for non-appearance. The court, we are told, would not have imposed such a fine if John was believed unable to pay. Did his fortunes really decline, or did he withdraw from the council because, as a recusant, he did not wish to take part in punishing other Catholics? The evidence is not clear.

John Shakespeare died in 1601, and Mary in 1608. We are granted one glimpse of John some fifty years after his death. 'Sir John Mennis saw once his old father in his shop—a merry-cheeked old man that said "Will was a good honest fellow, but he durst have cracked a jest with him at any time."' Who durst—father or son? If the son, this suggests that he sometimes made jests out of season, which is confirmed by other early anecdotes.

John and Mary sent their son to 'a free school' (Rowe), probably the King's New School at Stratford. Here he learned Latin grammar, read Aesop's *Fables*, then moved on to the usual classics: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (frequently quoted or alluded to in his later writings), Plautus (whose *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* supplied the plot for *The Comedy of Errors*), Terence, Virgil, Cicero, and no doubt many others. English and modern European literature and history were not taught at this time. The successive masters at his school, Oxford graduates, several of whom were Catholics

or had Catholic connections, were paid £20 a year plus housing. Ben Jonson later wrote disparagingly of Shakespeare's 'small Latin and less Greek': by Jonson's own standards this may have been fair comment, yet Shakespeare probably read Latin as easily as most graduates 'with Honours in Latin' today. It was once thought that he was ignorant of Greek tragedy; not so, it is now said, he knew some Greek tragedies, either in the original or in Seneca's adaptations.

If, as was usual, Shakespeare left school at fifteen or sixteen, what did he do next? According to Rowe, his father 'could give him no better education than his own employment', while a Mr Dowdall (1693) thought that he was 'bound apprentice to a butcher'. John Aubrey heard from the son of one of Shakespeare's colleagues that 'he understood Latin pretty well, for he had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country'. Another theory takes us north, to Lancashire, where a wealthy Catholic esquire, Alexander Hoghton, recommended William 'Shakeshafte' to his neighbour, Sir Thomas Hesketh, and at the same time bequeathed him his 'instruments belonging to musics and all manner of play clothes' (August 1581). Was Shakeshafte a player, and could he have been Shakespeare? Could he have worked as an assistant 'schoolmaster in the country' for Hoghton? (The performance of plays by boys was recommended by forward-looking schoolmasters). If so, it would imply that at this date Shakespeare was also a Catholic.

From Hoghton and Hesketh he could have transferred to the service of Lord Strange, a more important Lancashire magnate in whose company, reconstituted as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, we find Shakespeare in 1594. Lord Strange was also suspected of Catholic sympathies.

The curious forms that names could take puzzle us again when, on 27 November 1582, the Bishop of Worcester issued a licence for the marriage of 'Willelmum Shaxpere et Annam Whateley de Temple Grafton'. The next day a bond was signed to protect the bishop, in case the marriage of William 'Shagspere' and Anne 'Hathwey' led to legal proceedings, since William was a minor and Anne was pregnant. Some think that 'Whateley' was a misreading of Hathaway, others that Shakespeare, aged 18, would have preferred not to marry Anne Hathaway, aged 26. It must be added that names—like spelling—could wobble at this time. Shakespeare is 'Shaxberd' in the Revels accounts of 1604–5, Christopher Marlowe also appears as 'Morley' and 'Marlin'.

Anne Hathaway, probably the eldest daughter of Richard Hathaway, a husbandman in Shotton, lost her father in September 1581 and nine months later gave birth to her first child, Susanna (baptized 26 May 1583). On 2 February 1585 the twins Hamnet and Judith were baptized (Hamnet being a variant form of Hamlet); doubtless their godparents were Hamnet and Judith Sadler, family friends.

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