

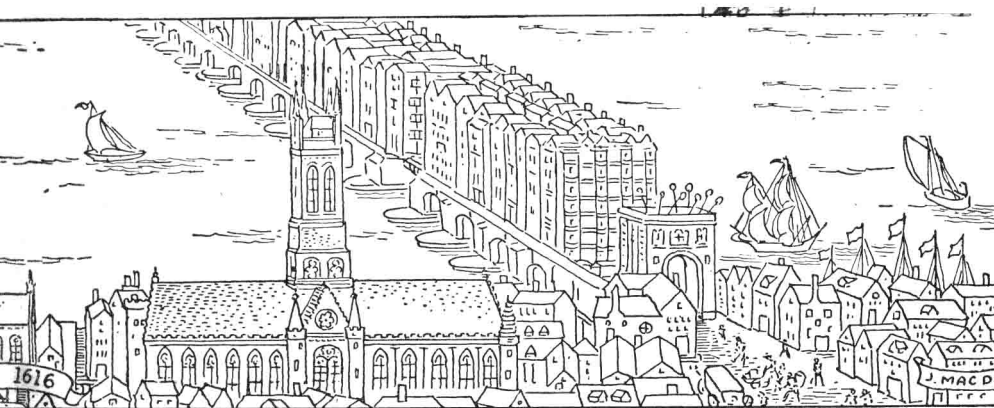
Shakespeare of *London*



Shakespeare OF LONDON

BY
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Jacket and title page by JAMES MACDONALD

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Foreword

THIS book is an attempt to bring a very great man into the light of common day. It is an attempt to show William Shakespeare as his contemporaries saw him, rather than as the gigantic and legendary figure he has become since. He was once life size, and this is an attempt at a life-sized portrait.

The book is not a literary biography. It does not concern the part of Shakespeare that was immortal and for all time. It concerns only the part of him that was mortal and belonged to the Elizabethan age. His plays are not discussed as literature, but only as they relate to the working problems of the London stage.

The confusion that surrounds Shakespeare's life has not been caused by lack of information. More is known about Shakespeare than about any other playwright of the period with the single exception of Ben Jonson; and some parts of his life are better documented even than Jonson's. But there has been a tendency to take each aspect of Shakespeare's career separately and brood upon it, instead of setting his career as a whole against the background of his own day. Any man will become incomprehensible if he is isolated from his background.

In Shakespeare's case his background was the theatre. It is unfortunate that so many of the people who have written about him should have had no theatre experience, and even more unfortunate that out of a misplaced reverence they have

been unwilling to remember that he was not only a professional playwright but a professional actor also.

It is also unfortunate that the men of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre left so few records of their activities. Shakespeare's Stratford is not difficult to reconstruct, since the parish and corporation records were kept with great care. The same thing is true of Shakespeare's London, for the Londoners were proud of their city and made several reports for posterity. But the men who worked with Shakespeare in the theatre did not know how deeply posterity was going to be interested in them, and it did not occur to them to leave a report of what they were doing.

The only man who wrote down a record of contemporary theatre conditions for future readers was Sir George Buck, who was Master of the Revels under James I and therefore in close professional contact with every actor and playwright in London. Buck was an admirer of "the public stages and theatres of this city" and he wrote a treatise on the subject; but the treatise has vanished and nothing remains except Buck's statement that he wrote it.

It may be, after all, that Buck's treatise would not be of much practical value in reconstructing the period. Thomas Heywood, who was one of the most experienced theatre men of the period, wrote a book at about the time of Shakespeare's retirement and gave it the promising title, *An Apology for Actors*. Unfortunately Heywood was so anxious to show the antiquity and dignity of the acting profession that he spent nearly all his time describing the conditions in the Roman theatre and for all practical purposes hardly mentions his own. Ben Jonson, like Heywood, was an actor and playwright and he also put some of his views on paper. They chiefly concern the low state, artistically, of the contemporary stage and his disapproval of audiences who did not like some of his plays. As for William Shakespeare, the greatest actor-playwright of them all, he paid so little attention to posterity

that he did not even bother to get his own plays into print.

There is no way to reconstruct the theatre of Shakespeare's day except to piece it together from the scattered references that have been accidentally preserved in everything from account books to sermons. Some of the details have vanished forever, but enough remain to form a reasonable and coherent background for Shakespeare's life.

In dealing with Shakespeare's life, I have taken what seems to me the safest course and have based it entirely on contemporary documents. I have used no evidence that is dated later than 1635; and I have accepted a document as late as this (nineteen years after Shakespeare's death) only because it records testimony given by Cuthbert Burbage, the last survivor of the original group of London theatre men who had worked with Shakespeare.

It was not until the Restoration that anyone was sufficiently interested in Shakespeare's life to begin writing about it, and by that time all the men who had known him were dead and the conditions under which he had worked had completely disappeared. What the men of the Restoration wrote about Shakespeare has had an enormous influence on all subsequent biographies and cannot be altogether ignored. On the other hand, it has no documentary support and cannot legitimately be included in the body of this particular book.

I have put all material of this kind in appendixes. Appendix One is on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, about which very little contemporary evidence has survived except the name of the publisher and the price of the book. Appendix Two concerns the stories about Shakespeare's life that first became current during the Restoration and have since hardened into accepted fact because so many people have believed in them. Appendix Three concerns the attacks on the authority of the editors of the First Folio and the resulting disintegration of the canon.

A book of this kind is a mosaic, built up of a number of small facts that have meaning only when they are placed in

juxtaposition to each other. A single paragraph has sometimes been built up from a dozen different sources of information, and to list these sources would in some cases take more room than the writing itself now occupies. The bibliography lists only a fraction of the books that were used in preparing the text, and I am sorry that lack of space has made it impossible to give individual credit to the thousands of publications, from the middle of the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, that have helped me in writing *Shakespeare of London*.

Nearly all this research was done in the New York Public Library, which is not only one of the greatest repositories of books in the world but has the further and democratic distinction of serving as "a free library for the use of the people." All the books listed in the bibliography are available in the New York Public Library with the exception of the following: Holinshed's *Chronicles*, in the Arents collection in the same building, *Henslowe Papers*, in the library at Columbia University, Stow's *Survey of London*, in the Morgan Library, Ingleby's *Shakespeare and the Enclosure of Common Fields at Welcombe*, in the Boston Public Library, and Stubbes' *Anatomy of Abuses*, in the Folger Shakespeare Library.

All spelling has been modernized. This service is habitually done for Shakespeare, and there seems to be no reason to fail to do it for his contemporaries.

M. C.

Chapter I

THERE were many towns named Stratford in England, but the one that stood on the banks of the river Avon had special reason to be proud of its native sons. John of Stratford had become Archbishop of Canterbury and lay buried in a tomb of alabaster at the high altar, and Hugh Clopton had gone to the great city of London and ended by becoming its Lord Mayor.

By the middle of the sixteenth century these special glories were a thing of the past. But the stone bridge over the Avon that Sir Hugh Clopton had built at great expense for his native town had opened up a year-round traffic with London, and Stratford had become a thriving market community and was now one of the largest towns in Warwickshire. When the young men who were born in the near-by villages decided that they did not want to be farmers, they migrated to Stratford to learn a trade and settle down in one of its well-travelled streets.

Among the young men of Warwickshire who felt the pull of Stratford was one named John Shakespeare. John lived in the pleasant little village of Snitterfield, four miles to the north. His father was a tenant farmer and his brother was a tenant farmer, but John had no intention of following in their footsteps. When he left Snitterfield he probably had no higher ambition than to become a successful business man in Stratford; but before John Shakespeare died he had achieved the

highest political office in town, and had been a justice of the peace, a landowner and a gentleman with a coat of arms. He had also become the father of a son named William who had a considerable success on the London stage; and, while this was not in itself a very dignified achievement from the Stratford point of view, John Shakespeare had the satisfaction of knowing before he died that his son was already investing his money in Stratford real estate.

The trade that young John Shakespeare selected for himself was that of making gloves. Everyone wore gloves in the sixteenth century, and since their native manufacture was protected by Act of Parliament, it was a profitable trade. The glovers were one of the most powerful trade groups in Stratford, and on market days they put up their booths and trestles in the most strategic location in town. They did their selling just under the big clock in the paved market square, where most of the customers gathered, and it was not until more than a hundred years later that another powerful trade group, the mercers, managed to take this location away from them. John Shakespeare was a "whittawer," a dealer in the fine white leather from which the best products were made, but like most of his fellow townsmen he sold other commodities, from timber to wool, in his spare time.

The Stratford that John Shakespeare knew was still a medieval town. It had never been walled, which accounted for its unusually straight and broad streets, but in spirit it was a tight, narrow little medieval community. Like every other town in England, Stratford was run on a strict, paternalistic system that had worked well for the citizens' remote ancestors and might be expected to work equally well for them. Every effort was made to protect local industry and keep away outsiders, all trade was strictly controlled and supervised, and every resident was hedged about with rules designed to keep himself and the town in order. An inhabitant of Stratford was fined if he let his dog go unmuzzled, if his duck wandered, if

he played cards "or any other unlawful games," if his children were not at home by eight o'clock in the summertime, if he failed to sweep his gutters or if he borrowed gravel from the town gravel pits. If he wanted to bring an outsider into his house he had to have a special license from the High Bailiff, and if from a sense of compassion he gave shelter in his house to "any stranger woman" who was pregnant he was heavily fined.

The natural result of Stratford's strict medieval standards of conduct was that the men of Stratford's governing body were continually obliged to fine themselves and their fellow townsmen for breaking the rules. With so many rules to be enforced it was impossible to avoid breaking a few of them, and there was no citizen of Stratford so virtuous or so distinguished that he escaped a fine for one offense or another.

One of the best sources of revenue was the law that forbade the residents from making private, informal dump-heaps of their own instead of using the four or five official ones. Fines for making a "muckhill at chamber's door" were levied at nearly every frankpledge, for it was one of the commonest offenses in Stratford. John Shakespeare, for instance, makes his first appearance on the town records because he and two of his very respectable neighbors were fined twelvepence each for establishing a refuse heap near their houses instead of using the public one at the end of the street. John Shakespeare must have been a sober, respectable householder for he was very seldom fined for having sinned against the Stratford by-laws, but some of his fellow townsmen were always leaping in and out of the records for having done the wrong thing again.

The dealers in basic food commodities had an especially hard time in Stratford, for the town was operating on the rigid medieval system of price controls and that meant an equally strict supervision of quality. Every year two ale-

tasters were elected to see that the bakers and butchers and innkeepers of Stratford were obeying the rules on prices, that the brewers were putting “no hops nor no other subtle things in their brewing” and that the numerous women who retailed beer were not serving it in unsealed pots. In the September elections of 1556, John Shakespeare was made an ale-taster and started his long climb upwards through the various civic offices in Stratford.

The next year John Shakespeare entered the Council, the governing body of Stratford. He was appointed one of the fourteen Capital Burgesses and had the proud obligation of attending the meetings of the Council in the handsome old guild building. John Shakespeare wore a special gown to attend these meetings and there was a fine of twelvepence if he forgot it. There was a further fine of six shillings and eightpence if he left the meeting in any but “brotherly love”; for the citizens in that orderly little town were on the whole a rowdy and opinionated lot and it needed a direct attack on their pockets to keep them in order. More than one Council meeting was broken up for what was politely called “opprobrious words” and occasionally a member had to be expelled for having too excitable a temperament.

The following year, in 1558, John Shakespeare was made one of the constables of the borough, a position that required a strong, healthy and determined man. Physical assaults were a commonplace in a period when every man had a right to wear a dagger but theoretically no right to use it. John Shakespeare happened to get the office at an especially difficult and contentious time, for he had been constable less than two months when Queen Mary died. As long as Mary was ruler, the official religion of England was Catholicism and every Protestant was a potential traitor. When her successor, Queen Elizabeth, came to the throne that November, the state religion became Protestant again. Most Englishmen accepted the change without any special difficulty, but in every town

there was a group that did not welcome the new queen and they made the life of a constable a busy one.

The next year John Shakespeare was reappointed petty constable and he was also made affeeror. In this office he was responsible for deciding what penalties should be levied in cases that were covered by no special town statute. He must have done his work satisfactorily, for in 1561 he was given the important position of town chamberlain, and with his colleague, John Taylor, became responsible for administering the borough revenues.

Again John Shakespeare took his post in a busy period. A government order had gone out that all signs of Catholicism in the local churches and chapels were to be effaced, since the one true religion was now quite a different one, and it was the business of the local chamberlains to see that the altars were removed, the images hacked, and the old religious paintings whitewashed. John Shakespeare, for instance, paid a workman two shillings to deface the images that stood in the guild chapel, and it was probably at the same time that all the wall paintings in the chapel were whitewashed. It was rather a pity that the paintings could not have remained for Shakespeare's son to look at, since he would have enjoyed the dragons over the vicar's door, the devils with their tapir-like noses between the nave and the chancel, and St. George warring with the dragon on the other side of the nave while a horse with the horn of a unicorn did his best to be of assistance. The Reformation was responsible for removing a good deal of innocent color from the lives of the people of England, and although St. George was their patron saint he was one of the casualties.

The chamberlains served a two-year term, with John Taylor assuming most of the responsibility the first year and John Shakespeare the second. They collected the town revenues, administered them, and turned in a full report to their fellow members on the Council. The expenditures were miscellane-

ous, apart from standard ones to the schoolmaster and the vicar, and ranged from seventeen shillings for mending the vicar's chimney to twelpence for repairs of the much-repaired town clock. When the revenues fell short of the expenses, John Shakespeare made up the difference out of his own pocket. In the end the borough owed him a substantial sum of more than four pounds, but Shakespeare asked no interest and was willing to wait some time for repayment.

It has been repeatedly suggested that John Shakespeare was an illiterate man who could not even write his own name. His handwriting does not appear in the chamberlains' accounts, which were copied out by the town clerk, and when he signed his name to documents he used either a mark or a rather delicate drawing of the compasses he used in his glover's trade. The use of a mark as a signature does not mean anything one way or the other. A close friend of Shakespeare's, Adrian Quiney, made his mark in the Council records on the same page as John Shakespeare and he occasionally used an inverted capital Q for his signature; but there are letters of Adrian Quiney's extant to prove that he could have written his name if he wanted to. Christopher Marlowe's father signed his will with a mark, although he was a clerk in Canterbury with his signature still extant in the church register.

There is no record of a chamberlain in Stratford who did not know how to write, and an illiterate man would be a curious choice for an office that consisted of so much careful bookkeeping. John Shakespeare was such a success in the office that after his two-year term was over and William Tyler and William Smith were acting as the new chamberlains he was retained for another year to draw up their accounts for them. This was not a normal procedure in Stratford, and indicates that John Shakespeare must have been unusually well equipped for the office of chamberlain.

In the meantime John Shakespeare had become a married man, and it is probable that his marriage was quite as gratify-

ing to his relatives in Snitterfield as his steady business and civic advancement must have been. His wife had one of the oldest names in Warwickshire, for the Ardens had been "lords of Warwick" before William the Conqueror came. Just what connection Mary Arden may have had with the Warwickshire Ardens is not clear. When the Office of Heralds in London was obliged to wrestle with the problem they finally linked her with another branch of the family and the actual genealogy has never been straightened out to anyone's satisfaction. At any rate, it is clear that Mary Arden would have been considered a member of the gentry, although she lost that distinction when she became Mary Shakespeare.

But Mary Shakespeare brought her husband a gift almost as good as gentility; she brought him land. Old Robert Arden had no sons, and of all his daughters Mary seems to have been his favorite. He left her in his will not only a substantial cash payment but also a large piece of farm property in Wilmcote. What this land meant to John Shakespeare, son of one of Robert Arden's tenant farmers, can be measured by the tenacity with which he fought to get it back after he had lost it.

Mary was the youngest of Robert Arden's children and yet he made her one of the two executors of his will. It was Mary who was responsible in part for seeing that her father's featherbed and his decorative painted hangings and his colts and sheep and bees and wheat went to their new owners after his death, and that her stepmother did not war openly because she had received only part of the inheritance. Mary was evidently a competent woman, and certainly she married in John Shakespeare an intelligent and competent man.

The year that Robert Arden died, his future son-in-law himself became a landowner. This was the same year that John Shakespeare bought two houses in Stratford, one in Greenhill Street on the west edge of town, and one in Henley Street. He had been living in Henley Street for at least four years past, and he may have bought the house he had already

been renting. It was probably to the house in Henley Street that he brought his bride, and it was evidently here that most of the Shakespeare children were born.

The first of the Shakespeare children was born in 1558, the same month John Shakespeare was appointed constable. It was not the hoped-for son who would carry on the family name and inherit the land. It was a little girl named Joan and she died young. It was not until four years later that a second child was born to Mary Shakespeare; this also was a little girl, and they buried her the following spring.

A year after Margaret's burial, in the same month of April, Mary Shakespeare give birth to her third child. This time it was a son, and his father and mother named him William.

The people of Stratford had no way of peering through the mists of the future to discover that the date on which William Shakespeare was born would be of interest to the whole of the civilized world. The Stratford parish register merely recorded the date of his baptism. This was the 26th of April, 1564, and all that can be said with certainty about the day of his birth is that it was a few days earlier.

Tradition and sentiment have united to proclaim that Shakespeare was born on the 23rd of April. This was the date on which he died in Stratford, fifty-two years later. Moreover, the 23rd of April is St. George's Day, and St. George is the patron saint of England as Shakespeare is its patron writer. The pageant of St. George vanished from the streets of Stratford when Queen Elizabeth came to the throne. His dragon no longer snorted through the streets on Holy Thursday, and the two shillings that the men of Stratford had once spent for gunpowder so that smoke and flame could come out of its mouth no doubt went to soberer and worthier objects. Still, it is pleasant to feel that the great master of make-believe was born on St. George's Day, and there is no harm in hoping that he was.

John Shakespeare was still acting as chamberlain the year his son was born, and William must have received a christening worthy of the first-born son of a town official. The ceremony took place in the handsome old Church of the Holy Trinity by the river, and John Bretchgirdle was the vicar who christened the white-clad baby in the presence of his father, his godparents and the assembled congregation so that he could go out into the world as a properly-accredited member of the Church of England. Bretchgirdle was an Oxford graduate who took equal delight in Horace and in carpentering, and when he died the following year he had seen to it that the small boys of Stratford would inherit those of his books they would enjoy reading.

Religion was administered with a firm hand in Stratford, as it was everywhere else in England. Religion and politics were inextricably connected, and every human being in England who was loyal to the Queen was expected to be equally loyal to the Church. Since this loyalty was not in every case quite spontaneous, any citizen of Stratford was fined if he did not present himself, his family and his servants at church every Sunday; and government commissions were constantly on the prowl all over England to make sure that the people were obeying the Act of Uniformity and that those dreaded individuals, religious recusants, were being unearthed and properly punished. The pulpit was a useful outlet for government propaganda, and the special prayers and homilies read from the pulpit by Bretchgirdle and his successors were of great assistance in preventing the people of Stratford from making up their minds independently on any subject whatever.

The religion of John and Mary Shakespeare is not known. Mary's father made a Catholic will, but since he died in the days "of our sovereign lord and lady, Philip and Mary" it would have been odd if he had done otherwise. Little Joan Shakespeare was baptised in the Catholic fashion, in Latin

and with the anointing, because Queen Mary was still on the throne; but her brother William, who was born after Elizabeth came to the throne, was baptised in the Protestant fashion, in English and at the font. Nearly two decades later, John Shakespeare's name occurs on a list, drawn up by an ecclesiastical commission, because he had not been going to church. However, his name is not listed among the six suspected of being Catholic but among those who "come not to church for fear of process for debt." In any case, whatever his parents' religion may have been, William Shakespeare was a member of the Church of England. When the Walker family of Stratford named their son William, Shakespeare acted as godfather at the baptism, and he could not have done so unless he were an accredited member of the Church of England.

Three months after William Shakespeare was born, Stratford was visited by the plague. The infection was so serious that the Council could not meet indoors in August and took up a special collection for plague victims at a meeting in the chapel garden. For once the town clerk was not there to record the meetings; his son and his daughter had just died of the plague. In six months there were more than 250 burials, and there must have been many times when John and Mary Shakespeare were frightened for the safety of their only son.

In time the plague wore itself out as it always did. Stratford resumed its normal life, and John Shakespeare continued his steady rise in the town government.

The year after William was born, the town Council found itself obliged to expel one of its members, an alderman named William Bott. Bott had indulged in too many opprobrious words, and John Shakespeare was sworn in as an alderman in his place. In his new dignity as alderman, John Shakespeare wore a black gown faced with fur and on Sundays he had a special seat nearer the pulpit. He was entitled to hang a special lantern before his house on Henley Street during the Christmas season, and above all he had achieved the coveted