

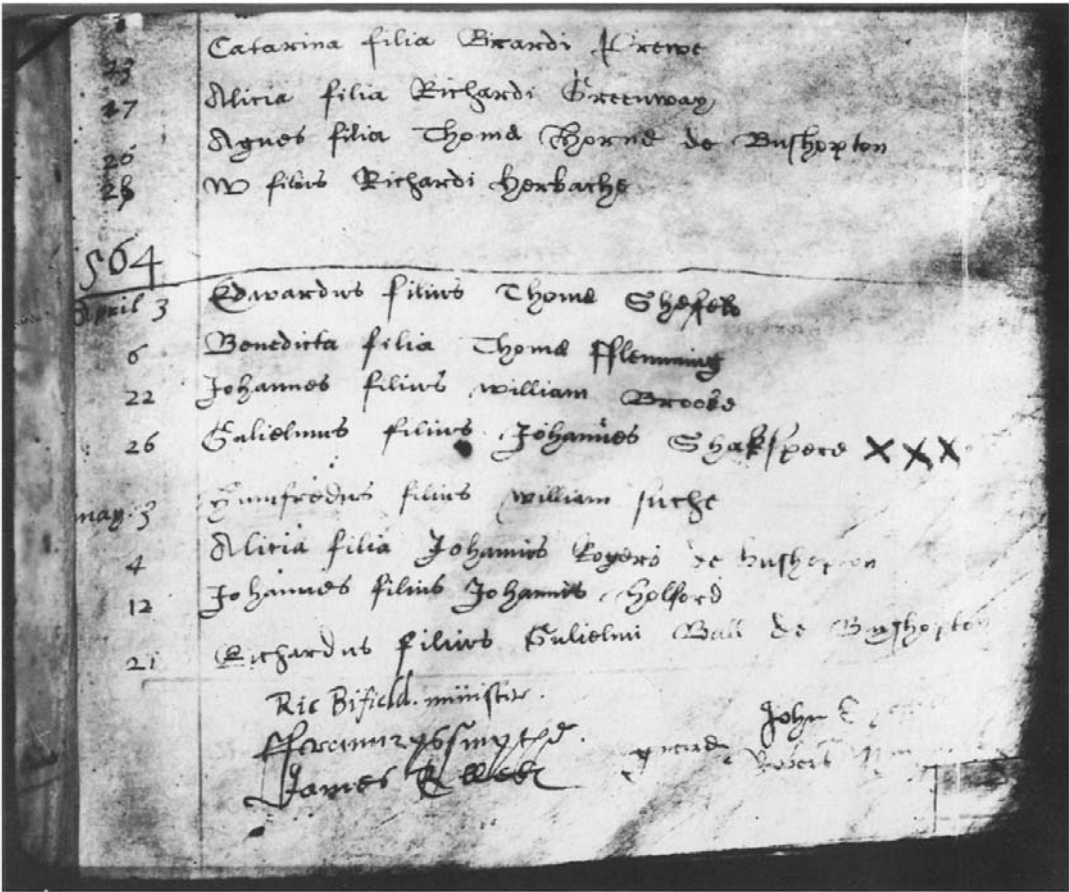
I

Shakespeare and Stratford

The first volume of the Stratford-upon-Avon Parish Registers records ten baptisms in January 1564, seven in February, none at all in March and four in April. The last of these, dated very clearly 26 April, lists 'Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakspere'. It is assumed, though not known, that he was born on 23 April. Twenty-one baptisms in the first four months fits well with an average annual birth-rate of about sixty in the small market town. Stratford had been granted its first charter of incorporation, signifying its recognition as a single community, in 1553. By 1564 it contained upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes. Despite the regular visitations of bubonic plague, the population of England increased by a third between 1545 and 1603¹ and virtually doubled, from about 2.2 million to about 4.2 million, in the century that separated the accession of Henry VIII (1509) from the accession of James I (1603).² Half the population was aged under twenty,³ a dominance of youth whose implications are only now being fully explored by social historians. Almost a half of any sixty children born in Stratford might have reached adulthood. From a study of London's St Botolph's parish records in Shakespeare's day, Thomas Forbes concludes that 'of every one hundred babies born . . . about seventy survived to their first birthday, forty-eight to their fifth and twenty-seven to thirty to their fifteenth',⁴ but the climate of Stratford was much kinder than that of an overcrowded parish in the overcrowded metropolis. Even so, only one of Shakespeare's four sisters survived childhood. His three younger brothers were hardier, though none outlived him. Tudor mortality rates indicate a life-expectancy of about thirty-five to forty years, higher than in most of the countries in early modern Europe.⁵

John Leland visited Stratford in about 1530, during his quest for English antiquities, and found it 'reasonably well buyldyd of tymbar', and, forty years later, William Camden called it a 'handsome small market town'. Fire was a constant danger in Tudor

SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSIONAL CAREER



1 Shakespeare's name in the Stratford baptismal register has been marked with three crosses by an unknown bard-watcher.

England's timber towns. Chester was devastated in the year of Shakespeare's birth, and Stratford suffered major conflagrations in 1594 and 1595, with 200 buildings wholly or partially destroyed and 400 people thrown on relief, and another in 1614, when over fifty houses were burned. The plague, on its sporadic provincial outings, spared property but not people. When Shakespeare was about three months old, the summer's first plague-death in Stratford was recorded. Two hundred of the town's total population of at most 1,500 would be dead by December.⁶ London had lost nearly a quarter of its population the year before and England's second city, Norwich, would lose nearly a third in 1579.⁷ One major epidemic and a few lesser mortality crises would be within the average

Shakespeare and Stratford



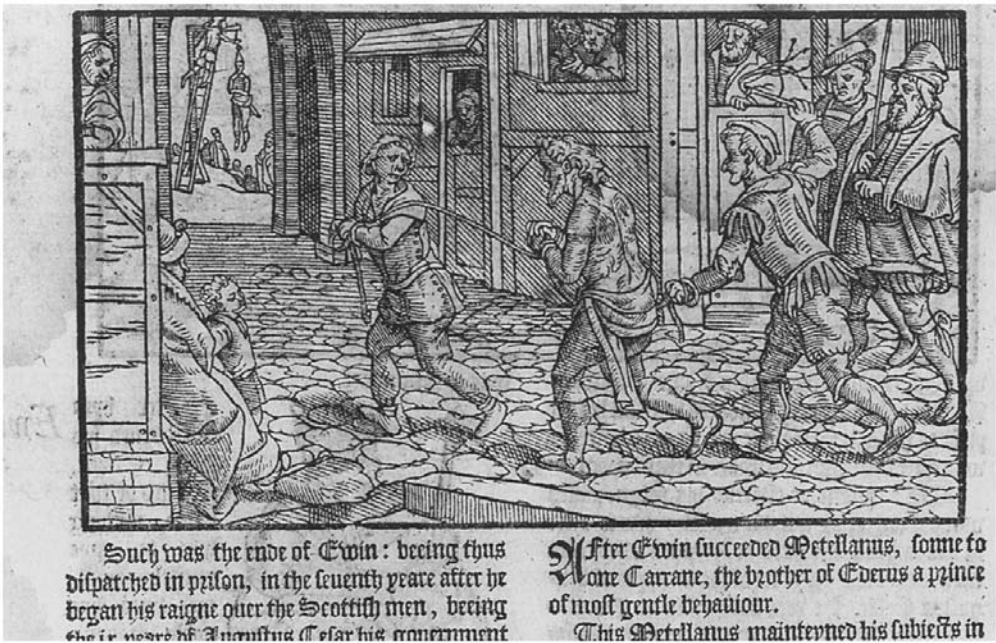
2 The only men present in this disquieting illustration of childbirth from Jacob Rueff's *De conceptu et generationis* (1554) are astrologers.

SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSIONAL CAREER

experience of a Tudor Englishman, wherever he lived.⁸ There was a minor outbreak of plague in Stratford in 1578, excessive mortality in 1587, due to 'the burning ague', and in 1608, due probably to smallpox. A quick way to recognise a mortality crisis is to set the number of baptisms recorded in parish registers against the number of burials, but what no measure can determine is the steady contribution made by malnutrition. Grain prices rose by about 400 per cent during the sixteenth century, whilst the wages of urban and agricultural labourers rose by only 170 per cent.⁹ If harvests failed, the effects were catastrophic. Stratford's 'burning ague' of 1587 followed the bleak harvest of 1586. Wheat prices nationally had risen by forty-two per cent against the average rise for the previous thirty years. The Midlands were particularly hard-hit. Wheat in Warwick cost seventy-four per cent over the average and in Stratford eighty-two per cent.¹⁰ Whatever the 'burning ague' was, it was surely hosted by hunger. The worst crisis came with the succession of failed harvests after 1594. By 1597, famine conditions were making the decisive contribution to burial rates fifty-two per cent higher than in the five-year periods either side. The poor, whose diet had steadily deteriorated through the sixteenth century, were starving to death in 1597, and if contemporary commentators are surprisingly reticent, it is all too probably because the ravages of malnutrition were so familiar as to be inconspicuous.¹¹ As Brecht was to observe, 'who mistrusts what he is used to?'¹²

In its response to poverty, Stratford was typical of Elizabethan towns. The levying of an obligatory tax for the relief of the poor raised too little money, there as elsewhere, to meet all circumstances. For example, the Corporation issued a petition in 1601 on behalf of the 700 poor within the borough,¹³ whilst, in the same year, Stratford magistrates complained of the time spent in alehouses by near-destitute labourers 'when their wives and children are in extremity of begging'.¹⁴ Then, as now, poverty had its own desperate compensations. There is no doubt that conditions worsened in the 1590s, but the decline was not sudden. A 1570 census in Norwich had identified 2,300 paupers in the city.¹⁵ This census was part of a national search for vagrants that lasted from 1569 to 1572 and culminated in the notorious vagrancy acts of 1572. A.L. Beier calculates that the 15,000 vagrants of late Elizabethan England had increased to 25,000 by the reign of Charles I.¹⁶ These 'masterless men', most of them forced to migrate by economic hardship in their home parishes, were generally unwelcome wherever they arrived. The

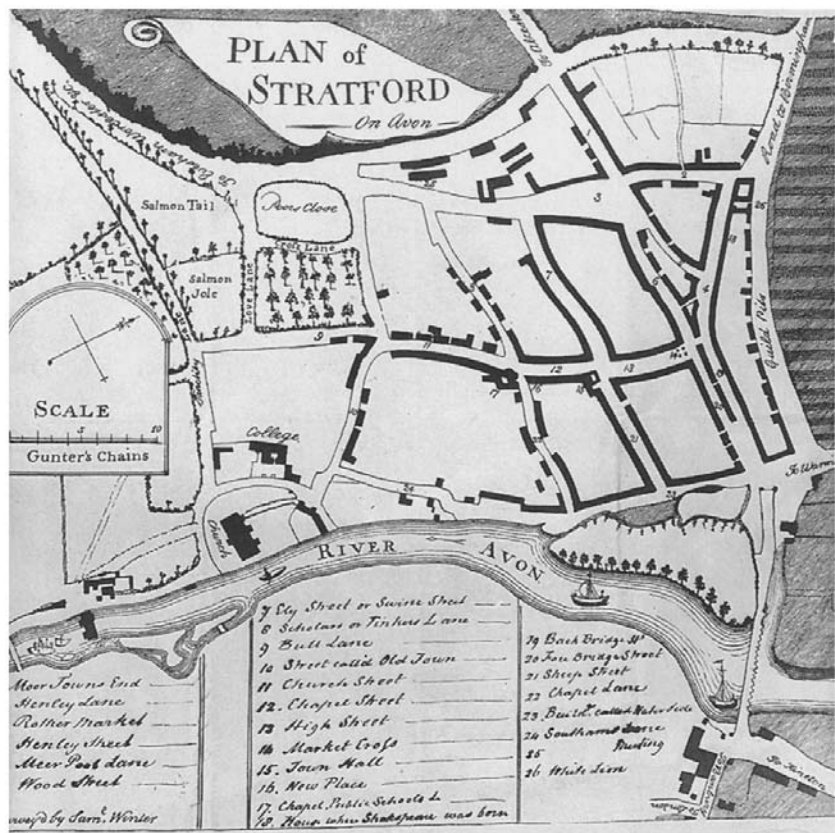
Shakespeare and Stratford



3 In this illustration from Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577), the jeering citizen on the right is as disturbing a presence as the hanged and whipped vagrants.

village of Helperby, north of York, was said to derive its name from its eagerness to get rid of an old vagrant woman who had collapsed inside its boundaries and might, therefore, claim poor relief from the inhabitants. 'Help her by!' was the shout. The derivation has no historical justification (Helperby appears in the Domesday Book), but such legends were buttressed by contemporary practices. The invalid Catherine Boland was, for four months in 1582–3, carted back and forth between Leicester and a Northamptonshire parish while local burghers disputed her birthplace. A Southwark pauper-catcher (like Dogberry, an ill-paid appointee of the Corporation) ordered that an old man 'not able to go, stand or speak' be deposited over the border of a neighbouring parish in which he had been previously lodged.¹⁷ There is no convincing evidence that these displaced persons constituted a threat to public order, but the authorities believed them to be so. Beier suggests that we can

SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSIONAL CAREER



4 Samuel Winter's eighteenth-century plan of Stratford shows the pattern of streets that Shakespeare would have known; three running parallel to the river are met at right angles by three others, whilst Church Street curves sharply into Old Town at its west end.

recapture the contemporary force of the words 'rogue' and 'beggar' if we think in terms of today's equivalents, 'anarchist, terrorist, or (in some western countries) communist'.¹⁸ After 1572, arrested vagrants, particularly those making a repeat appearance in a parish, were often whipped and sometimes hanged as 'felons without benefit of clergy'.¹⁹ Secular officials had rarely the funds or the will to provide the lodging and support that had been traditionally supplied by religious institutions before the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. The decline of hospitality is a repeated theme in late Tudor and early Stuart literature. For Donald Lupton in 1632, true hospitality is a fading memory:

Shakespeare and Stratford

It's thought that pride, puritans, coaches²⁰ and covetousness hath caused him to leave our land . . . he always provided for three dinners, one for himself, another for his servants, the third for the poor . . . we can say that once such a charitable practitioner there was, but now he's dead, to the grief of all England: and 'tis shrewdly suspected that he will never rise again in our climate.²¹

For Lupton, the downward plunge of humane values was palpable. A major social and economic shift, fed by religious controversy and accelerated by the high cost of conflict with Spain, increasingly disrupted the patterns of life in country towns as the sixteenth century progressed, and the most pressing problems for local Councils and Justices of the Peace were those associated with poverty.

Prominent in the magisterial oligarchy that governed Stratford in the years following Shakespeare's birth was his father, John Shakespeare. The 1553 charter had called for a Common Council of twenty-eight members, fourteen of them aldermen, fourteen capital burgesses with a bailiff (a small-town mayor) elected annually from among that number. There were also various minor offices associated with the Council, typical of the inexorable spread of Tudor bureaucracy. John Shakespeare's first appointment was as one of four constables, sworn in 1558 to keep the peace, to deal with vagrancy and, if possible, to prevent fires from spreading. He had been born (c.1529) and brought up in the nearby village of Snitterfield, where his father rented a farm from Robert Arden. This Arden belonged to a family of much greater prominence in Warwickshire than he himself was. Even so, it was a substantial step towards the minor gentry for John Shakespeare when, in about 1557, he married Mary, the daughter of Robert Arden. He was established in Stratford by then, having evidently preferred a seven-year apprenticeship as a glover and whittawer (dresser of white leather) to life on a Snitterfield farm. From constable he progressed to affeeror (assessor of non-statutory fines) and then, probably in 1560, was elected one of the fourteen capital burgesses. By 1565, he was an alderman and, in 1568, was appointed bailiff by his fellows. John Shakespeare's social aspirations led him at this time, when his first son was in his fifth year, to contemplate using his high office as the basis for an application to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. His service on the Council continued, apparently untroubled, until 1576. In that year, a major hiatus in our knowledge of the Shakespeare family began. It will be treated in due course.

The outstanding architectural features of John Shakespeare's town

SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSIONAL CAREER



5 Clopton Bridge in an engraving by F. Eginton from R.B. Wheler's *History and Antiquities of Stratford-upon-Avon* (1806).

were the Guild Chapel at the corner of Chapel Street and Chapel Lane, Holy Trinity Church in Old Town and the splendid fourteen-arched stone bridge, named after Sir Hugh Clopton who financed its building at the end of the fifteenth century. Bridges stood not far below churches in the hierarchy of man's achievements. An early fifteenth-century poem celebrates the completion of a new bridge at Culham Hythe:

Of alle werkys in this worlde that ever were wrought
Holy Chirche is chefe . . .
Another Blissed besines is brigges to make.²²

Clopton Bridge gave to Tudor Stratford an accessibility denied to its larger neighbour, Warwick. It carried into the town travellers from London, Oxford and Banbury. But roads in Warwickshire were notoriously sparse and ill-maintained. The great landowners had not yet developed the mercantile interests that encouraged massive expenditure on access highways; nor was the Avon navigable as far

Shakespeare and Stratford



6 The County of Warwickshire, from Saxton's map of England (1574).

as Stratford until 1636. Of the seventy-three town plans in John Speed's *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (1612), Warwickshire is represented only by Coventry and Warwick. Stratford served as a market town for its immediate region – the 1553 charter confirmed its weekly (Thursday) market – but was no Mecca. Its two licensed fairs (3–4 April and 13–15 September) were augmented by three more (Thursday/Friday before Lent, 14–16 July and 5–7 December) when the charter was renewed in 1610, additions which are their own evidence of success. Of the ten companies listed in the Guild Register during the fifty years that followed incorporation, the company of bakers was the oldest. Oddly, although Stratford was an acknowledged centre of the gloving trade, and although glovers were granted a prime site in the weekly market (by the High Cross at the corner of Wood Street and High Street), there was no separate company of glovers and whittawers until 1606. Nor was malting,

SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSIONAL CAREER

already the town's principal industry in the sixteenth century, given company status. It is likely that many of Stratford's citizens, including both John and William Shakespeare, stockpiled malt surreptitiously during the end-of-century recession. A 1598 survey revealed that seventy-five of Stratford's householders had stores of malt on their premises, and this less than a year after the famine of 1597, when the corn used in malting might otherwise have gone to the making of bread. Philip Styles cites the local inhabitant who longed for the people's hero, the Earl of Essex, to visit Stratford and have the maltsters 'hanged on gibbets att their owne dores'.²³

Albeit on a modest scale, Stratford expressed the popular culture of the age. The 1547 attempt to suppress the annual Ascension Day Pageant of Saint George was probably unsuccessful, despite the strength of anti-Catholic sentiment in the town. A council that was prepared to contribute to a Whitsuntide Pastime in 1583 would have been strangely inconsistent to pay no heed to the townspeople's delight in the familiar spectacle of the fight to the death between hero and dragon, particularly under a Queen as eager as Elizabeth to incorporate the cult of Saint George in the Tudor myth. We can fairly assume that theatrical entertainments were a regular feature of the annual fairs. People travelled long distances to see plays. A Shropshire man, questioned as a vagrant at Chester's midsummer fair in 1577, explained that he had come because 'he heard of the plays here'.²⁴ Stratford's parish records mention payments to nineteen visiting companies between 1569, when John Shakespeare was bailiff, and 1587, the year in which it has often been argued that William Shakespeare left Stratford. As an addition, whose significance has only recently been appreciated, no country town was without its youth-organised festivities, some of which, having begun as rites of passage into adulthood, may have expanded into mere riot. The popular voice has been misleadingly silenced by writers whose primary interest is in literature. We are now invited to take account of a public theatre whose early life was not divorced from festive play nor even from resistance to authority.²⁵

The young Shakespeare would certainly have seen some of the Stratford performances of visiting players. As bailiff, his father was the formal host of two of the most prominent contemporary acting companies, the Queen's Men at the Guild Hall in the early summer of 1569 and Worcester's Men in August of the same year, and if his eldest son was considered too young then, he was old enough to watch Leicester's Men in 1573 or Warwick's Men in 1575. Stratford is close enough to Kenilworth for its inhabitants to have been drawn