In such cases the players could not act at all without the per­mission of the mayor and council, and their first performance was usually a free entertainment, patronized and paid for by the corpora­tion, and called the mayor’s play. In all this John Shakespeare took the initiative, and in so doing probably helped to decide the future career of his son. The notes of personal pride and social ambition are equally apparent. It is on record, for example, that soon after reaching the highest post of municipal distinction the poet’s father applied to the heralds’ college for a grant of arms. This application was not at the time successful, but it seems to have been so far seriously entertained that official inquiries were made into the family history and social standing of the Shake­speares. But the remarkable fact is that such an application should have been made at all by a Stratford burgess whose position and prospects were so unstable and precarious as the events of the next few years showed those of John Shakespeare to be. At the time of the application his increasing family must have enlarged his household expenses, while his official position, combined with his open and generous nature, his love of social sympathy, distinc­tion, and support, would probably have led him into habits of free­handed hospitality and inconsiderate expenditure. All this must have helped to introduce a scale of lavish domestic outlay that would tend directly to hasten the financial collapse in his affairs that speedily followed. And on finding things going against him John Shakespeare was just the man to discount his available resources, and, as the pressure increased, mortgage his future and adopt any possible expedient for maintaining the increased port and social consequence he had imprudently assumed.

This seems to have been the course actually pursued when pecu­niary difficulties arose. During the three years that elapsed after his last purchase of house property his affairs became so seriously embar­rassed that it was found necessary, if not to sacrifice, at least to jeo­pardize the most cherished future of the family in order to meet the exigencies of the moment. In 1578 John and Mary Shakespeare mortgaged for forty pounds their most considerable piece of landed property, the estate of the Asbies. The mortgagee was a family connexion of their own, Edmund Lambert, who had married Mary Shakespeare’s sister Joan. The subsequent history of this transac­tion shows how bitter must have been the need that induced the Shakespeares to surrender, even for a time, their full control over the ancestral estate. The next year, however, the pressure, instead of being relieved by the sacrifice, had become still more urgent, and the only outlying property that remained to meet it was the reversionary interest in the Snitterfield estate. Under a family settlement Mary Shakespeare, on the death of her stepmother, would come into the possession of houses and laud at Snitterfield almost equal in value to the Asbies estate. But in 1579 the Shakespeares found it necessary to dispose altogether of this reversionary interest. In that year it was sold to Robert Webb for the sum of forty pounds. The buyer was a nephew of Mary Shakespeare, being the son of Alexander Webb, who had married her sister Margaret. In thus applying to relatives or family con­nexions in their need, and disposing of their property to them, the Shakespeares may have hoped it would be more easily regained should times of prosperity return. The sacrifice of the remaining interests in the Snitterfield property afforded, however, only a temporary relief, quite insufficient to remove the accumulating burden of debt and difficulty which now weighed the Shakespeares down. The notes of the proceedings of the Stratford corporation and of the local court of record sufficiently show that John Shake­speare’s adverse fortune continued through a series of years, and they also enable us in part to understand how he bore himself under the changes in his social position that followed. These changes begin in the critical year 1578. In January of that year, when his brother aldermen were called upon to pay a considerable sum each as a contribution to the military equipment to be provided by the town, John Shakespeare is so far relieved that only one half the amount is required from him. Later in the year we find him wholly exempted from the weekly tax paid by his fellow- aldermen for the relief of the poor. In the spring of the follow­ing year, on a further tax for military purposes being laid on the town, he is unable to contribute anything, and is accordingly reported as a defaulter. A few years later, in an action for a debt, a verdict is recorded against him, with the official report that he had no goods on which distraint could be made. About the same time he appears to have been under some restraint, if not actually imprisoned for debt. And as late as 1592 it is officially stated, as a result of an inquiry into the number who fail to attend the church service once a month according to the statutory require­ment, that John Shakespeare with some others, two of whom, curiously enough, are named Fluellen and Bardolph, “ come not to church for fear of process for debt.” In the year 1586 another alderman had at length been chosen in his place, the reason given being expressly because “ John Shakespeare doth not come to the halles when they are warned, nor hath not done for a long time.”

From this brief official record it would seem that under his reverse of fortune he was treated with marked sympathy and consideration

by his fellow townsmen. For at least seven years after his troubles first began his fellow-burgesses persist in keeping his name in its place of honour on their roll, partly no doubt as a mark of respect for his character and past services, and partly it may be in the hope that his fortunes might improve and prosperous days return. And, when at length he is superseded by the appoint­ment of another in his place, this is done, not on the ground of his reduced circumstances, but simply because he voluntarily absents himself from the council, never attends its meetings or takes any part in its affairs. This is a noteworthy fact illustrating still further John Shakespeare’s character. The statement clearly indicates the kind of moral collapse that had followed the con­tinuous pressure of material reverses. The eager sanguine nature that had so genially expanded in prosperity was, it is clear, sorely chilled and depressed by adversity. He abandons the usual places of resort, withdraws himself from the meetings of the corporation, and ceases to associate with his fellow-burgesses. And, what is perhaps still more noticeable, he gives up attending church, and no longer even worships with his fellow-townsmen. All this is the more significant because his circumstances, though seriously embarrassed, and for some years much reduced, were never so desperate as to compel him to part with his freehold property in Henley Street. In the darkest hours of his clouded fortune he still retained the now world-famous houses associated with the poet’s birth and early years. There was no adequate reason there­fore why John Shakespeare should have so completely forsaken the usual haunts and regular assemblies of his fellow-townsmen and friends. But it seems clear, as already intimated, that, while gifted with a good deal of native energy and intelligence, and possessing a temper that was proud, sensitive, and even passionate, John Shakespeare lacked the kind of fortitude and moral courage which enables men to meet serious reverses of fortune with dignity and reserve, if not with cheerfulness and hope. With the instinct of a wounded animal he seems to have left the prosperous herd and retired apart to bear his pain and loss in solitude and alone. Nor apparently did he hold up his head again until the efficient support of his prosperous son enabled him to take active measures for the recovery of his alienated estate and lost position in the town. By the middle of the last decade of the 16th century the poet's success in his profession was thoroughly assured, and he was on the high road to wealth and fame. As actor, dramatist, and probably also as sharer in the Blackfriars theatre, he was in the receipt of a large income, and according to tradition received a considerable sum from the young earl of Southampton, to whom his poems were dedicated. The son was now therefore as able as he had always been willing to help his father to regain the position of comfort and dignity he had formerly occupied. We find accord­ingly that in 1597 John and Mary Shakespeare filed a bill in Chancery against John Lambert for the recovery of the Asbies estate, which had been mortgaged to his father nearly twenty years before. There had indeed been some movement in the matter ten years earlier, on the death of Edward Lambert the mortgagee. His son John being apparently anxious to settle the dispute, it was proposed that he should pay an additional sum of twenty pounds in order to convert the mortgage into a sale, and that he should then receive from the Shakespeares an absolute title to the estate. The arrangement was not, however, carried out, and in 1589 John Shakespeare brought a bill of complaint against Lambert in the Court of Queen’s Bench. Nothing further, how­ever, seems to have been done, probably because Lambert may have felt that in the low state of the Shakespeares’ fortune the action could not be pressed. In 1597, however, there was a change in the relative position of the litigants, John Shakespeare having now the purse of his son at his command, and a bill in Chancery was accordingly filed against John Lambert. The plea in support of the Shakespeares’ claim was that the original con­ditions of the mortgage had been fulfilled, the money in discharge having been offered to Edward Lambert at the proper date, but refused by him on the ground that other sums were owing which must also be repaid at the same time. To this plea John Lambert replied, and there is a still further “ replication ” on the part of the Shakespeares. How the matter was eventually decided is not known, no decree of the court in the case having been discovered. But the probabilities are that it was settled out of court, and, as the estate did not return to the Shakespeares, probably on the basis of the proposal already made,—that of the payment of an additional sum by John Lambert. About the same date, or rather earlier, in 1596, John Shakespeare also renewed his application to the heralds’ college for a grant of arms, and this time with success. The grant was made on the ground that the history and position of the Shakespeare and Arden families fully entitled the applicant to receive coat armour. There can be no doubt that the means required for supporting these applications were supplied by the poet, and he would be well rewarded by the knowledge that in the evening of his days his father had at length realized the desire of his heart, being officially recognized as a “gentleman of worship.” And, what would now perhaps please his father still better, ho