element,—some hero or exploit, some emblem or allegory, being represented by means of costumed personations, pantomime, and dumb show, while in many cases songs, dances, and brief dialogues were interposed as part of a performance. There were masques and morris-dancing on May-day, as well as mummers and waits at Christmas. In a number of towns and villages the exploits of Robin Hood and his associates were also celebrated on May-day, often amidst a picturesque confusion of floral emblems and forestry devices. In Shakespeare’s time the May-day rites and games thus included a variety of elements charged with legendary, historical, and emblematical significance. But, notwithstanding this mixture of festive elements, the celebration as a whole retained its leading character and purpose. It was still the spontaneous meeting of town and country to welcome the fresh beauty of the spring, the welcome being reflected in the open spaces of the sports by tall painted masts decked with garlands, streamers, and flowery crowns, and in the public thoroughfares by the leafy screens and arches, the bright diffused blossoms and fragrant spoils brought from the forest by rejoicing youths and maidens at the dawn. May-day was thus

well fitted to be used, as it often is by Shakespeare, as the comprehensive symbol of all that is delightful and exhilarating in the renewed life and vernal freshness of the opening year.

After May-day, Whitsuntide was at Stratford perhaps the most important season of festive pageantry and scenic display. In addition to the procession of the guild and trades and the usual holiday ales and sports, it involved a distinct and somewhat noteworthy element of dramatic representation. And, as in the case of the regular stage- plays, the high-bailiff and council appear to have patron­ized and supported the performances. We find in the chamberlain’s accounts entries of sums paid “ for exhibit­ing a pastyme at Whitsuntide.” Shakespeare himself refers to these dramatic features of the celebration, and in a manner that almost suggests he may in his youth have taken part in them. However this may be, the popular celebrations of Shakespeare’s youth must have supplied a kind of training in the simpler forms of poetry and dramatic art, and have afforded some scope for the early exercise of his own powers in both directions. This view is indirectly confirmed by a passage in the early scenes of *The Return from Parnassus,* where the academic speakers sneer at the poets who come up from the country without any university training. The sneer is evidently the more bitter as it implies that some of these poets had been successful,—more successful than the college-bred wits. The academic critics suggest that the nurseries of these poets were the country ale-house and the country green, —the special stimulus to their powers being the May-day celebrations, the morris-dances, the hobby-horse, and the like.

But the moralities, interludes, and stage-plays proper afforded the most direct and varied dramatic instruc­tion available in Shakespeare’s youth. The earliest popular form of the drama was the mystery or miracle play, dealing in the main with Biblical subjects ; and, Coventry being one of the chief centres for the production and exhibition of the mysteries, Shakespeare had ample opportunities of becoming well acquainted with them. Some of the acting companies formed from the numerous trade guilds of the “ shire-town ” were moreover in the habit of visiting the neighbouring cities for the purpose of exhibiting their plays and pageants. There is evidence of their having performed at Leicester and Bristol in Shakespeare’s youth, and on returning from the latter city they would most probably have stopped at Stratford and given some performances there. And in any case,

Coventry being so near to Stratford, the fame of the multiplied pageants presented during the holiday weeks of Easter and Whitsuntide, and especially of the brilliant concourse that came to witness the grand series of Corpus Christi plays, would have early attracted the young poet ; and he must have become familiar with the precincts of the Grey Friars at Coventry during the celebration of these great ecclesiastical festivals. The indirect evidence of this is supplied by Shakespeare’s references to the well- known characters of the mysteries, such as Herod and Γilate, Cain and Judas, Termagaunt with his turbaned Turks and infidels, black-burning souls, grim and gaping hell, and the like. The moralities and interludes that gradually took the place of the Biblical mysteries were also acted by companies of strolling players over a wide area in the towns and cities of the Midland and western counties. Malone gives from an eye-witness a detailed and graphic account of the public acting of one of these companies at Gloucester in 1569, the year during which the poet’s father as high-bailiff had brought the stage- players into Stratford and inaugurated a series of per­formances in the guild hall. The play acted at Gloucester was *The Cradle of Security,* one of the most striking and popular of the early moralities or interludes. Willis, the writer of the account, was just Shakespeare’s age, having been born in 1564. As a boy of five years old he had been taken by his father to see the play, and, standing between his father’s knees, watched the whole performance with such intense interest that, writing about it seventy years afterwards, he says, “ the subject took such an im­pression upon me that when I came afterwards towards man’s estate it was as fresh in my memory as if I had seen it newly enacted.” In proof of this he gives a clear and detailed outline of the play. Willis was evidently a man of no special gifts, and, if the witnessing a play when a child could produce on an ordinary mind so memorable an impression, we may imagine what the effect would be on the mind of the marvellous boy who, about the same time and under like circumstances, was taken by his father to see the performances at Stratford. The com­pany that first visited Stratford being a distinguished one, their plays were probably of a higher type and better acted than *The Cradle of Security* at Gloucester ; and their effect on the young poet would be the more vivid and stimulating from the keener sensibilities and latent dramatic power to which in his case they appealed. These early impressions would be renewed and deepened with the boy’s advancing years. During the decade of Shakespeare’s active youth from 1573 to 1584 the best companies in the kingdom constantly visited Stratford, and he would thus have the advantage of seeing the finest dramas yet produced acted by the best players of the time. This would be for him a rich and fruitful experience of the flexible and impressive form of art which at a moment of exuberant national vitality was attracting to itself the scattered forces of poetic genius, and soon gained a position of unrivalled supremacy. As he watched the performance in turn of the various kinds of interlude, comedy, and pastoral, of chronicle and biographical plays, of historical, domestic, or realistic tragedy, he would gain in instructive insight into the wide scope and vast resources of the rising drama. And he would have opportunities of acquiring some knowledge of stage business, management, and effects, as well as of dramatic form. Amongst the com­panies that visited Stratford were those of the powerful local earls of Leicester, Warwick, and Worcester, whose

members were largely recruited from the Midland counties. The earl of Leicester’s company, the most eminent of all, included several Warwickshire men, while some of the leading members, like the elder Burbage, appear to have