

# Grids & Guides

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

## OUR KNOWLEDGE OF SHAKESPEARE

No one in Shakespeare's day seems to have been interested in learning about the private lives of the dramatists. The profession of play writing had scarcely begun to be distinguished from that of play acting, and the times were not wholly gone by when all actors had been classed in public estimation as vagabonds. While the London citizens were constant theatregoers, and immensely proud of their fine plays, they were content to learn of the writers of plays merely from town gossip, which passed from lip to lip and found no resting place



The Globe Theatre in London

in memoirs. There were other lives which made far more exciting reading. English sea-men were penetrating every ocean, and bringing back wonderful tales. English soldiers were aiding the Dutch nation towards freedom, and coming back full of stories of heroic deeds. At home great political, religious, and scientific movements engaged the attention of the more serious readers and thinkers. It is not strange, therefore, that the writers of plays, whose most exciting incidents were tavern brawls or imprisonment for rash satire of the government, found no biographer. After Shakespeare's death, moreover, the theatre rapidly fell into disrepute, and many a good story of the playhouse fell under the ban of polite conversation, and was lost.

*An introduction to William Shakespeare's Life*

Under such conditions we cannot wonder that we know so little of Shakespeare, and that we must go to town records, cases at law, and book registers for our knowledge. Thanks to the diligence of modern scholars, however, we know much more of Shakespeare than of most of his fellow-actors and playwrights. The life of Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's great predecessor, is almost unknown; and of John Fletcher, Shakespeare's great contemporary and successor, it is not even known whether he was married, or when he began to write plays. Yet his father was Bishop of London, and in high favor with Queen Elizabeth. We ought rather to wonder at the good fortune which has preserved for us, however scanty in details or lacking in the authority of its traditions, a continuous record of the life of William Shakespeare from birth to death.

## STRATFORD

The notice of baptism on April 26, 1564, of William, son of John Shakespeare, appears in the church records of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire. Stratford was then a market town of about fifteen hundred souls. Under Stratford Market Cross the farmers of northern Warwickshire and of the near-lying portions of Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and Oxfordshire carried on a brisk trade with the thrifty townspeople. The citizens were accustomed to boast of their beautiful church by the river, and of the fine Guildhall, where sometimes plays were given by traveling companies. Many of their gable-roofed houses of timber, or timber and plaster, are still to be found on the pleasant old streets. The river Avon winds round the town in a broad reach under the many-arched bridge to

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