

the ancient church. Beyond it the rich pasture land rises up to green wooded hills. Not far away is the famous Warwick Castle, and a little beyond it Kenilworth, where Queen Elizabeth was entertained by the Earl of Leicester with great festivities in 1575. Coventry and Rugby are the nearest towns.

BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

The record of baptism of April 26, 1564, is the only evidence we possess of the date of Shakespeare's birth. It is probable that the child was baptized when only two or three days old. The poet's tomb states that Shakespeare was in his fifty-second year when he died, April 23, 1616. Accepting this as strictly true, we cannot place the poet's birthday earlier than April 23, 1564. There is a tradition, with no authority, that the poet died upon his birthday.

John Shakespeare, the poet's father, sold the products of near-by farms to his fellow-townsmen. He is sometimes described as a glover, sometimes as a butcher; very likely he was both. A single reference, half a century later than his day, preserves for us a picture of John Shakespeare. The note reads: "He [William Shakespeare] was a glover's son. Sir John Mennes saw once his old father in his shop, a merry-cheeked old man, that said, 'Will was a good honest fellow, but he durst have crackt a jesst with him att any time.'"¹

John Shakespeare married Mary Arden, the daughter of his father's rich landlord, probably in 1557. He had for over five years been a middleman at Stratford, dealing in the produce

1. John Shakespeare's father, Richard Shakespeare, was a tenant farmer, who was in 1590 renting his little farm at Snitterfield, four miles north of Stratford, from another farmer, Robert Arden, of Willmorton.

of his father's farm and other farms in the neighborhood. In April, 1552, we first hear of him in Stratford records, though only as being fined a shilling for not keeping his yard clean. Between 1557 and 1561 he rose to be ale tester (inspector of bread and malt), Burgess (petty constable), affeeror (adjuster of fines), and finally city chamberlain (treasurer).

Eight children were born to him, the two eldest, both daughters, dying in infancy. William Shakespeare was the third child, and eldest of those who reached maturity. During his childhood his father was probably in comfortable circumstances, but not long before the son left Stratford for London, John Shakespeare was practically a bankrupt, and had lost by mortgage farms in Snitterfield and Ashbies, near by, inherited in 1556 by his wife.

EDUCATION

William Shakespeare probably went to the Stratford Grammar School, where he and his brothers as the sons of a town councilor were entitled to free tuition. His masters, no doubt, taught him Lilly's Latin Grammar and the Latin classics,—Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Cicero, Seneca, and the rest,—and very little else. If Shakespeare ever knew French or Italian, he picked it up in London life, where he picked up most of his amazing stock of information on all subjects. Besides Latin, he must have read and memorized a good deal of the English Bible.

MARRIAGE

In the autumn of 1582 the eighteen-year-old Shakespeare married a young woman of twenty-six. On November 28,

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| bodytextFirst | <p>No one in Shakespeare's day seems to have been interested in learning about the private lives of the dramatists. The profession of playwriting had scarcely begun to be distinguished from that of playacting, 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 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.</p> |
| bodytext | <p>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</p> |