None the less, there is a context there for William Shakespeare's early learning about theatre performance and contemporary drama in the work of such professional companies. He might, too, have travelled nearby to see the spectacular entertainments at Kenilworth given by the earl of Leicester for the queen in 1575, or the magnificent cycle drama of mystery plays which was still performed annually at Coventry until 1578, or Coventry's Hocktide play (suppressed in 1568 but performed again at Kenilworth in 1575), or the amateur performances which regularly occurred in Stratford.

There is no evidence that either of Shakespeare’s parents could write: each signed with a kind of mark. But the marks were not the awkward crosses of the totally illiterate: John often drew a fine pair of compasses; Mary's mark in 1579 was a complex design, apparently incorporating her initials and fluently written. Both may well have been able to read: many who could not write could read. Certainly, given John's status in the community, his four sons would have gone to Stratford's grammar school where their education would have been free. Before that William would have attended 'petty school' from about the age of five to about seven, learning to read.   
  
At the King's New School, Stratford's splendid grammar school, William would have learned an immense amount of Latin literature and history, perhaps using the Latin–English dictionary left to the school by John Bretchgirdle who had baptized him. Among the works that Shakespeare later used as sources for his plays are a number that he would have read as part of his grammar-school education: the history of Livy, the speeches of Cicero, the comedies of Plautus and Terence, the tragedies of Seneca, and the poetry of Virgil and, above all, Ovid, who remained his favourite poet. The range of Latin writing that formed the curriculum was, by modern standards, vast. The mode of teaching, by a good teacher assisted by an usher, was one calculated to ensure the arts of memory, facility in composition, and rhetorical skills.

In addition, regular attendance at church, a legal requirement which his father does not appear to have avoided until later, guaranteed prolonged exposure to the Book of Homilies (fairly dull), the Book of Common Prayer (rather more exciting), and, especially, the exhilarating language of the Bible in English, a resource that Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, knew well, used extensively, and embedded deeply into the fabric of his language.   
  
The decision to write plays on English history was a response to the current popularity of such drama. The idea of a two-part play was probably a response to the phenomenal success of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, though there were many other two-part plays. There are strong indications, not least in the title by which *2 Henry VI* was first known, that Shakespeare had mapped out the drama as at least a two-part exploration of a catastrophic period of English history. But his decision to create a three-part work was an innovation. Shakespeare's first investigation of English history generated a work on a scale that had no dramatic precedent in the professional theatre. Its nearest analogy was the biblical cycle-drama, the 'mystery' plays which were still being performed in his boyhood. But the move from sacred to secular also produced a form of theatrical analogue to the chronicle histories, the massive prose narratives out of which Shakespeare constructed his plays, particularly Edward Halle's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1548) and Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* of which Shakespeare used the second edition of 1587. He read other chronicles as well, implying the availability to him of a substantial library, and these plays show the first small traces of his use of works that he would return to for local and general inspiration throughout his career: Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* in Adlington's 1566 translation and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Arthur Golding's version completed in 1567.