

Shakespeare's Companies

**William Shakespeare's Early Career and the
Acting Companies, 1577–1594**

Terence G. Schoone-Jongen

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General Editor's Preface

Helen Ostovich, McMaster University

Performance assumes a string of creative, analytical, and collaborative acts that, in defiance of theatrical ephemerality, live on through records, manuscripts, and printed books. The monographs and essay collections in this series offer original research which addresses theatre histories and performance histories in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century life. Of especial interest are studies in which women's activities are a central feature of discussion as financial or technical supporters (patrons, musicians, dancers, seamstresses, wigmakers, or 'gatherers'), if not authors or performers per se. Welcome too are critiques of early modern drama that not only take into account the production values of the plays, but also speculate on how intellectual advances or popular culture affect the theatre.

The series logo, selected by my colleague Mary V. Silcox, derives from Thomas Combe's duodecimo volume, *The Theater of Fine Devices* (London, 1592), Emblem VI, sig. B. The emblem of four masks has a verse which makes claims for the increasing complexity of early modern experience, a complexity that makes interpretation difficult. Hence the corresponding perhaps uneasy rise in sophistication:

Masks will be more hereafter in request,
And grow more deare than they did heretofore.

No longer simply signs of performance 'in play and jest', the mask has become the 'double face' worn 'in earnest' even by 'the best' of people, in order to manipulate or profit from the world around them. The books stamped with this design attempt to understand the complications of performance produced on stage and interpreted by the audience, whose experiences outside the theatre may reflect the emblem's argument:

Most men do use some colour'd shift
For to conceal their craftie drift.

Centuries after their first presentations, the possible performance choices and meanings they engender still stir the imaginations of actors, audiences, and readers of early plays. The products of scholarly creativity in this series, I hope, will also stir imaginations to new ways of thinking about performance.



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Acting Companies, 1577–1594

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For Tom

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A final thanks to Mom, Dad, and Brendan for their love and support.

Introduction

Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb
Which hides your life and shows not half your parts.

Sonnet 17.3–4

[...] the “object” that the historian studies is not only incomplete; it is markedly variable as records are lost or rediscovered.

Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* 46

After decades of archival research on the life of Shakespeare, the eminent eighteenth-century scholar Edmond Malone had finally identified the company that Shakespeare joined as an actor before arriving in London in the early 1590s (or perhaps the late 1580s). Malone declared that Shakespeare, before launching his career as a playwright, must have been a player with Lord Leicester’s servants. Or perhaps with the Queen’s Men. Or maybe with Lord Warwick’s players (Malone, “The Life of William Shakespeare” 166–7).

So much for certainty. No wonder Malone was unable to finish his biography of Shakespeare. Malone’s doubts, though a measure of his scholarly integrity, have proved to be a prologue to two hundred years of confusion, debates, claims, and counterclaims on Shakespeare’s early life. The long, scholarly search for Shakespeare amid the various acting companies operating in the 1580s and early 1590s—the shadowy or “lost” years before he shows up in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1594—reveals, in a nutshell, the changeable and troubled history of Shakespearean biography across the centuries. It also reveals some fascinating developments in the scholarly approaches to theatre history and textual scholarship. This search is one among many unresolved problems that permeate Shakespeare studies (authorship, sexuality, religious loyalties, biographical details implied by the sonnets, date and order of the plays, suspect anecdotes, to name a few).

Malone’s uncertainty opened the floodgates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scholars and biographers have put forward a wide range of conjectures on Shakespeare’s apprentice years:

It is clear, then, that it is quite possible that Shakespeare may have followed in Leicester’s train. I think the passage in Sidney’s Letter converts that possibility into something more than a probability. (Thoms, *Three Notelets On Shakespeare* [1865] 117–18)

... it would appear not altogether unlikely that the poet was one of Lord Strange’s actors in March, 1592; one of Lord Pembroke’s a few months later; and that he had joined the company of the Earl of Sussex in or before January, 1594. (Halliwell-Phillips, *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* [10th ed., 1898] i.122)

In 1587 they [Leicester's] were in England, playing at Stratford-on-Avon during their autumn travel ... At Stratford, in my opinion, Shakespeare joined them. (Fleay, *A Chronicle History of the London Stage, 1559–1642* [1890] 82)

Most of his colleagues of latter life opened their histrionic careers in Lord Leicester's professional service, and there is plausible ground for inferring that Shakespeare from the first trod in their footsteps. (Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare* [1917] 54)

There is therefore really some basis for the suggestion made long ago by Halliwell-Phillips that [Shakespeare] is to be looked for during these years in Pembroke's company until its collapse and then in Sussex's. (Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* [1923] ii.130)

... it seems highly probable that [Shakespeare], too, was one of Strange's Men before 1594. (Honigmann, *Shakespeare: 'the lost years'* [1985] 60)

The case for Shakespeare having belonged either to the Queen's Men or Pembroke's seems evenly divided. (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1576–1642* [3rd ed., 1992] 248)

... Shakespeare is thereby identifiable as an actor or a writer, or both, for the Queen's Men. (Sams, *The Real Shakespeare* [1995] 59)

... I am almost convinced that Shakespeare was with his plays in Pembroke's Company at the Theatre in 1592 and 1593. (Gurr, *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* [1996] 271)

The conjecture that best answers these conditions is that Shakespeare belonged to the Queen's Men early in his career, perhaps in some other capacity than as a writer. (McMillin and MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* [1998] 165)

Was Mr. Shakspeare one of the actors in his [the Earl of Oxford's] employ? This seems likely. (Sobran, *Alias Shakespeare* [1997] 221)

The young Shakespeare was to stay with Worcester's men for four or five years. (Southworth, *Shakespeare the Player* [2000] 29)

... as to Shakespeare's roles in the course of his apprenticeship and early career as an Admiral's man. (Southworth [2000] 50)

... [Shakespeare] perhaps came to the notice of Sir Fulke Greville ... and for a couple of years served him in some capacity, probably as a player. (Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare* [2001] 36)

Over the years, scholars have advanced their particular theories concerning Shakespeare's pre-1594 acting company affiliations, but no one has ever attempted to systematically identify, outline, and analyze all of these competing theories. E.K. Chambers's *Elizabethan Stage* and Andrew Gurr's *Shakespearean Playing Companies* treat some, but not all, of these theories; S. Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare's Lives*, which takes up nearly all of the other Shakespeare controversies and debates, mentions this one only in passing.

The goal of this study is therefore to explain, analyze, and assess the competing claims about Shakespeare's pre-1594 acting company affiliations. It is not, however, my intention to demonstrate that a particular argument for Shakespeare's pre-1594 company is correct. Rather, the goal of this study is to demonstrate that this topic is in fact a nexus for key issues in Elizabethan theatre history, Shakespearean biography, and historiography. In fact, I aim to show that the biographical issue of Shakespeare's pre-1594 company affiliation is so closely intertwined with the attendant historiographic issues and related theatre history issues that these three topics cannot be intelligibly separated. Accordingly, this study has been structured with Shakespeare's biography, theatre history, and historiography in mind. The first two chapters deal primarily with the known facts of Shakespeare's early life; the next two chapters set out and clarify the theatrical contexts in which Shakespeare emerged as an actor and dramatist; and the remaining chapters examine a wide variety of arguments scholars have made over the last two centuries regarding Shakespeare's theatrical whereabouts before 1594. Likewise, each individual chapter frequently evidences the inseparability of biography, historiography, and theatre history when it comes to Shakespeare. For example, what is known regarding Shakespeare's biography in 1592 simply cannot be discussed without some understanding of the theatrical conditions of that time, but on both counts one must reckon with competing scholarly claims about both Shakespeare and the London theatre of 1592.¹ Similarly, one cannot fully understand the reasons and liabilities for thinking Shakespeare might have once belonged to Strange's Men without some knowledge of the suggestion that Strange's and the Admiral's Men were once an "amalgamated" company, a claim based on many questionable assumptions about acting company patronage, provincial playing, and the dating of one particular document.² Many previous studies have focused primarily on Shakespeare with theatrical contexts as a background; others have focused on Elizabethan theatre history with Shakespeare at the periphery; still others have focused on a critique of previous Shakespearean biographers. This study seeks to do all three. While admittedly ambitious, it is my hope that by focusing on a limited part of Shakespeare's professional career, I will be able to more clearly present him in terms of his contexts while still doing justice to these contexts (provincial, court, and London playing, dynamics between acting companies and patrons, publication practices, etc.). At the same time, I will be tracing a problem—Shakespeare's pre-1594 acting company—that has not been traced in such detail before. Perhaps even more to the point, this study will offer a detailed analysis of the biographers and theatre historians who have presented so many different and contradictory versions of Shakespeare's professional affiliations between the late 1570s and 1594. In this sense, my study offers both a history and a critique of Shakespearean biographers and their historical methodologies. The biographers have presented a confusing picture of not only the London theatre scene

¹ For more on this, see Chapter 2.

² For more on this, see Chapters 4 and 6.

in these years but also the activities of the theatre companies, both inside and outside of London. It is my hope to bring some clarity to several of these issues and problems in the historical and biographical study of Shakespeare and his time.

Although I will not identify which company Shakespeare worked with before 1594, I will be able to demonstrate why many explanations are impossible, why others are improbable, and why only a few meet the qualifications of historical possibility. No definitive explanations will emerge, but a number of false explanations will be exposed. In the process, perhaps, this study can set some basic conditions for writing both the biography of Shakespeare and the theatre history of the 1580s and early 1590s, those key years before two major companies—the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Admiral's Men—were consolidated in London. A number of key facts are known about Shakespeare and London theatre after 1594; it behooves us to bring some clarity to the conditions before that date. This study is not, then, just another biography of Shakespeare. If anything, by focusing on this one troublesome aspect of Shakespeare's biography I am seeking to shift attention away from the difficult, even impossible, issues of a too exclusive focus on Shakespeare. Rather, I am trying to show that the theatre history and historiographic issues are at least as significant as the life of one actor-turned-playwright; once again, these issues are not separable from the life anyway. In the end, it is not possible to prove where Shakespeare was, but it is possible to gain a more complex understanding of one of the major moments of transformation in English theatre history, all the while providing a historiographical analysis of the problems that have plagued the search for Shakespeare. In doing so, I will be following the example of scholars such as William Ingram (*The Business of Playing*), Roslyn Lander Knutson (*Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time*), and Scott McMillin (*The Elizabethan Stage and the Book of Sir Thomas More*).

In analyzing the competing claims for Shakespeare's early theatrical career (and a number of Elizabethan theatre history issues), my assessment relies heavily on a terminology of the possible, the plausible, and the probable. I regard a possibility as a hypothesis which no evidence flatly contradicts; in other words, if something is not demonstrably false, it is a possibility, although not necessarily a good one. A plausibility is something more than a possibility, in that it is speculation which can be justified (though not proven) on one or more counts. A plausible conjecture is thus based on some sort of positive evidence, rather than on the absence of negatory evidence. At the same time, however, a plausibility is not strong or convincing enough to rule out other possibilities or plausibilities. In the case of a probability, other possibilities can effectively be laid aside because the probable hypothesis is so much stronger or more likely than any alternatives. A probability is not certain, but it is pretty likely. Here again, however, I wish to emphasize that this study is not concerned only with deciding what is or is not possible, plausible, probable, or certain. While this study will encounter arguments or hypotheses that can be dismissed as implausible, the arguments or hypotheses themselves may still have value outside of their conclusions, in that they may bring up important issues beyond Shakespeare's whereabouts. The issues raised, in other words, may be more rewarding to consider than the biographical search itself.

Before proceeding any further, I should note that it is my operating assumption that William Shakespeare of Stratford did, in fact, write the plays which have been attributed to him and will not, for the most part, be taking up any anti-Stratfordian scholars. Generally speaking, anti-Stratfordian arguments about Shakespeare's authorship rest on two contentions:

1. They doubt that a boy from Stratford would have received the necessary education or would have been able to acquire the necessary erudition they find evident in Shakespeare's plays and poems. Diana Price, for instance, claims that "It is difficult to square Shakspeare's probable but incomplete grammar school training with the works of Shakespeare—works that attest to a highly educated mind" (235).
2. They argue that the biographical information available about Shakespeare, much of which consists of financial transactions and lawsuits, does not square with the poetic sensibilities present in the poems and plays. Bertram Fields, for instance, comments that "it is difficult to reconcile the crass actions and attitudes of the Stratford man with the sensitivity and humanity manifest in Shakespeare" (132) while Diana Price argues that "most analyses of Shakespeare's plays find few parallels to Shakspeare's documented life" (267).

The first of these objections smacks of elitism; more importantly, studies of the Elizabethan educational system demonstrate that Shakespeare would have received a basic education quite impressive by twenty-first century standards (see Chapter 1). The second of these objections rests on the assumption that the available court and financial records tell the reader *everything* about the Stratford man's personality. As the available documents are concerned with matters for which there would be no call for Shakespeare to reveal his poetic sensibilities, this is not a particularly safe assumption. Besides, as Louis Gottschalk observes, the past "is likely to have gone through eight separate steps at each of which some of it has been lost; and there is no guarantee that what remains is the most important, the largest, the most valuable, the most representative, or the most enduring part" (46). More importantly, in voicing dissatisfaction over the apparent lack of continuity between the certain facts of Shakespeare's life and the spirit of his literary output, anti-Stratfordians adopt the very Modernist assumption that an author's work must reflect his or her life. Neither Shakespeare nor his fellow Elizabethan writers operated under this assumption, and many literary critics and schools of literary criticism have been increasingly prone to challenge this assumption and argue, accordingly, that using literary works as evidence for the biography of the author is an undesirable, if not unsafe, practice (New Criticism, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and nearly every other strain of poststructuralism, to name but a few). While it may today seem commonsensical that it is possible to detect an author's biography in his or her works, Marc Bloch reminds scholars that "the worst of common sense is that it exalts to the level of the eternal observations necessarily borrowed from our own brief moment in time" (67).

Quite apart from holding these questionable assumptions, anti-Stratfordians have been unable to find a “real” author in any way more plausible than William Shakespeare of Stratford. Instead, anti-Stratfordians offer a laundry list of details about the life of their favored candidate(s), contend that these details “prove” the life of Oxford, or Bacon, or Marlowe, or Rutland, or Queen Elizabeth better fits the attitudes present in Shakespeare’s works, and consider the case closed. This is hardly a rigorous process; it is, instead, an argument based on a “rhetoric of accumulation,” to use Paul Werstine’s term, which proves nothing besides the ability of the proponent of a particular argument to amass a list of individually unconvincing coincidences (“Shakespeare, More or Less” 130, 140). Such an argument does not follow any accepted method of historical argument; it merely pokes (or claims to poke) a few holes in one thesis, offers an alternative hypothesis dependent entirely on coincidence, and presents no further evidence, beyond literary interpretation, in support of the new hypothesis. Such “evidence” fails to stand up to Gottschalk’s tests for evidential credibility. Coincidence and literary interpretation alone cannot tell the historian if those who produced the coincidence or literary interpretation were (1) willing or (2) able to tell the truth, (3) whether the coincidence or literary interpretation is accurate, or (4) if there is any independent corroboration, besides more coincidences and literary interpretations, to independently corroborate the “evidence” derived from the original coincidence or interpretation (150). As will become apparent in the pages of this study, many orthodox Shakespeare scholars and biographers also depend far too heavily on coincidence and literary interpretation when they argue about Shakespeare’s pre-1594 whereabouts.

There are, however, two points at which this study and the anti-Stratfordian arguments converge. First, anti-Stratfordians have often concerned themselves with the attack on the “upstart crow” in *Greene’s Groatsworth of Wit* and Henry Chettle’s supposed apology to the “upstart crow.” The proliferation of anti-Stratfordian interpretations of these documents would be irresponsible to ignore, particularly since some anti-Stratfordians have raised valid criticisms of the traditional interpretations of Chettle’s apology (see Chapter 2). Second, in at least one instance an anti-Stratfordian has mounted an argument concerning William Shakespeare’s acting company before 1594. Analyzing this argument (Chapter 10) is, of course, well within the scope of this study, and also affords an opportunity to point out several other liabilities in the anti-Stratfordian position.

The chapters that follow are divided into three sections. In the first section, I define the chronological parameters of this study. It is possible to say with certainty that Shakespeare was born in 1564 and joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men at, or very soon after, its formation in the late spring of 1594. It is also possible to set down some other chronological certainties within these thirty years. In Chapter 1, I discuss when at the earliest Shakespeare could have reasonably left Stratford to embark

on his theatrical career. In Chapter 2, I try to determine a rough framework for Shakespeare's pre-1594 London activities. To do so, I first consider two possible pre-1594 allusions to Shakespeare (*Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* and Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse*), which firmly place Shakespeare in London by 1592, after which I consider the evidence we have for dating some of Shakespeare's early plays. These first two chapters will show that Shakespeare could have left Stratford as early as the late 1570s, that he likely arrived in London by about 1588, and was established as a playwright by 1592 before becoming the Chamberlain's Men's leading playwright in 1594. Having set up this chronological framework, I provide a discussion in Part 2 of the theatrical contexts Shakespeare would (and could) have worked in between about 1577 and 1594. Chapter 3 will provide a brief overview of touring practices and active companies between 1577 and 1588, while Chapter 4 will offer an overview of London playing between 1588 and 1594. I will outline several key changes that occurred during those years and also address several misconceptions about the activities of playing companies during this period.

The ensuing chapters in Part 3 will set out and analyze, within the framework furnished by Parts 1 and 2, the various arguments for Shakespeare's membership in particular playing companies. The first four chapters in Part 3 analyze the four most prominent, substantive, and complex arguments for Shakespeare's early company affiliations. These chapters are organized in a way designed to follow the chronological development of Shakespearean biographies and historical scholarship. Accordingly, Chapter 5 takes up the Queen's Men, one of the companies Edmond Malone thought Shakespeare might have joined, while Chapters 6, 7, and 8 consider the three companies J.O. Halliwell-Phillips, followed by E.K. Chambers and many others, believed Shakespeare belonged to before the Chamberlain's Men: Strange's Men, Pembroke's Men, and Sussex's Men. Chapter 9 then considers the argument that Shakespeare spent several of his teenage years in Lancashire, in the service of the Hoghton family. This suggestion was first made in 1923, but since the 1980s and E.A.J. Honigmann's *Shakespeare: the 'lost years'*, it has attracted a good deal of attention and been endorsed by several prominent scholars. This chapter will focus on the Lancashire connection as a whole, but also pay special attention to Honigmann's suggestion that, while in Lancashire, Shakespeare belonged to companies of players patronized by Alexander Hoghton and Thomas Hesketh. Finally, Chapter 10 examines a number of other, less popular and less substantive arguments that have been made regarding Shakespeare's pre-1594 theatrical activities. This chapter will begin with a consideration of the argument for Shakespeare's presence in Leicester's Men, before examining how the methods used to locate Shakespeare in Leicester's Men parallel those used to place him in Worcester's, Warwick's, Oxford's, and the Admiral's Men. After a brief conclusion, the Appendix includes the itineraries for the Queen's, Strange's, Pembroke's, and Sussex's Men between 1577 and 1594, as I make frequent reference to these itineraries in the relevant chapters.

Before proceeding, a few general notes about the text are in order. First, because of the structure of this study, there is necessarily a fair amount of repetition. For

example, some of what is discussed in Chapter 4 regarding London playing companies between 1588 and 1594 is repeated and expanded on in Chapter 6, but in the context of Strange's Men's activities in London during the same period. The reason for this repetition is to ensure that the reader always has all information relevant to the topic at hand, rather than constantly referring the reader back to previous chapters. Second, this study is primarily a work of synthesis rather than a work of original documentary research. It is the arguments that have been erected on factual foundations—not the foundations themselves—that I am primarily concerned with. For this reason, the reader will notice that most documentary sources are cited from secondary sources (*Records of Early English Drama* and *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, to name two particularly prominent secondary sources). Finally, although for the most part I directly cite play scenes and lines when a scholar makes use of such in his or her arguments, there are a few instances where I do not directly cite to the play and instead cite to the scholar's argument. I have done this only where the scholar's references to particular plays or scenes are in passing, or are minor parts of a much larger pattern of argumentation.

PART 1

Towards a Chronological Framework

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Chapter 1

In Stratford

The incontrovertible facts of Shakespeare's pre-London existence are minimal. The exact date of his birth cannot even be determined. Tradition has assigned his nativity to 23 April 1564, St. George's day, but this tradition is motivated by happy coincidence rather than documentary evidence. He was christened on 26 April, so could not have been but a few days old at that point; beyond this, nothing can be said with any certainty about his birth.¹ He was the third child born to John and Mary Shakespeare, but the first to make it past the age of two; Joan, christened 15 September 1558, seems to have died soon thereafter, and Margaret too passed away shortly after her christening on 2 December 1562. The family continued to grow after William's birth: Gilbert was christened on 13 October 1566, a second Joan on 15 April 1569, Anne on 28 September 1571, Richard on 11 March 1574, and Edmund, who, like his eldest brother, would become a player, on 3 May 1580, just over a year after the death of his sister Anne (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 23–8; Loomis 6–13).

After his christening, William Shakespeare is not heard of again until 1582, when, on 27 November, according to the Episcopal Register of the diocese of Worcester, he and Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton were issued a marriage license; the next day, a bond was granted allowing young William to marry an Anne *Hathaway*. The general consensus is that the clerk keeping the register that day made a mistake in taking down the bride's name, but several biographers, such as Frank Harris (1909), have seized upon the possibility William wanted to marry Anne Whateley, only to be coerced into a union with the other Anne. Whatever the truth of William's marital intentions, it was definitely Anne Hathaway, seven or eight years his senior, who became his bride, and who, six months later, gave birth to their first child, Susanna, christened 26 May 1583. Less than two years later, she gave birth to the twins Hamnet and Judith, christened 2 February 1585 (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 75–94; Loomis 17–21).²

After 1585, William Shakespeare disappears from the records until 1588, when he is mentioned in a lawsuit brought against his father. The suit, however, merely says he is John's son; it says nothing about his activities, employment, or whereabouts

¹ For a more in-depth discussion of the dating of Shakespeare's birth, see Bearman, *Shakespeare* and Schoenbaum, *Compact* 24–6 and 325, note 3.

² For a concise consideration of the problems surrounding Shakespeare's marriage, see Ingram, *The Business of Playing* 19–24. Joseph Gray's *Shakespeare's Marriage* (1905) is another useful study of all of the circumstances surrounding the marriage.

(Schoenbaum, *Compact* 39–40; Loomis 23–5). He may have been engaged in some sort of theatrical occupation by that time since, by 1592, he was a dramatist of sufficient note to draw the wrath of Robert Greene, or someone writing under Greene's name (the authorship, nature, and reliability of this attack will be discussed in the next chapter). Greene's well-known attack clearly indicates Shakespeare was an actor before he was a dramatist. He must therefore have started acting some time before 1592. Perhaps Shakespeare was an actor for years before he began writing; alternatively, he could have taken up playwriting shortly after he began to act. He must have left Stratford well before 1592, as he would have needed at least some time to establish himself within the London theatre scene. Did he go directly into theatre? Would he have first joined a provincial acting company, or would he have gone directly to London and joined a company there? Did he start writing before or after he went to London? Could he have had other occupations outside of Stratford before going to London or going into theatre? There is no consensus on any of these questions, as the ensuing chapters will demonstrate.

There is no other direct evidence for Shakespeare's activities before his London emergence, and one is reminded of George Steevens's famous comment:

As all that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakespeare is—that he was born at Stratford upon Avon,—married and had children,—went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays,—returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried—I confess my readiness to combat every unfounded supposition respecting the particular occurrences of his life. (Malone, *Supplement* i.654)

Happily, more evidence survives concerning John Shakespeare's activities, which in turn shed some light on William's early life. Despite several reports which describe the father as a butcher (John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*) or wool-dealer (Nicholas Rowe's "Some Account of the Life, &c. of Mr. William Shakespear"), surviving documents clearly indicate John Shakespeare was primarily a glover, although he did have dealings in other trades, including wool, timber, and barley; he also rented out property. Like many people of his station in Elizabethan England, he was often involved in lawsuits, both as plaintiff and defendant (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 30–32). He was well regarded among his fellow Stratfordians: in 1556, he was named one of the town's two ale-tasters, and in 1558 he was one of the town's four constables. The next year he served as the town's aferor, and about this time he became one of the community's fourteen burgesses. From 1561 to 1563 he was one of Stratford's two chamberlains, and he served as acting chamberlain in 1565 and 1566. In 1565 he received the additional honor of being elected one of the town's fourteen aldermen, and in 1567 he was elected bailiff, Stratford's highest office. Although he served only one term as bailiff, he remained an important community figure, serving as chief alderman and deputy to the bailiff in 1571 (33–7). John Shakespeare's status as burgess is particularly important in regards to William's early life, because the children of Stratford burgesses were entitled to a free education at the King's New School of Stratford-Upon-Avon (Schoenbaum, *Lives* 8). There is therefore no

reason why William could not have attended the school when he was old enough. Unfortunately, the records for the school's sixteenth-century pupils vanished well before any scholars were interested in perusing them for the name of the boy who would become the school's most famous student (10).

As a student at the King's New School, William Shakespeare would have received the typical and rigorous primary education of the day.³ It is unclear, however, if he finished the school's course of study. Nicholas Rowe, for instance, reports that William was withdrawn from school owing to his father's growing financial difficulties (i.ii–iii). Surviving records testify to John's troubles: in 1576 he stopped attending local meetings for the most part, and beginning in 1578 he faced a series of debts, lawsuits, and mortgages pointing to strained financial circumstances for the Shakespeare family. John's fellow burgesses and aldermen made efforts to accommodate his difficulties, exempting him from certain fees, but this aid apparently failed to alleviate John's financial condition, as he attended his last council meeting in 1582; after four years' grace, the council elected a replacement for him. He still occasionally was asked to perform important town duties, indicating the esteem he once enjoyed had not completely eroded, money problems and delinquency as an alderman notwithstanding; nevertheless, as late as 1592 John was avoiding church attendance for, he asserted, fear of debt collection (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 39–43; Loomis 30). The facts, however, do not necessarily lend credence to Rowe's claim that William was withdrawn from school. Such an action on his father's part certainly was possible, but it may not have been a necessity. Stratford, like much of rural England, was deep in recession during this period (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 42), so John's difficulties were likely not isolated; not only that, in spite of the evidence of John's financial strain, other records indicate he was able to produce significant sums of money during the time of his supposed financial disarray. For instance, he was able to raise £10 for someone's bail bond (43). Coupled with the fact William's education would have been free until John was replaced as burgess in 1586, it is distinctly possible that William could have finished his course of education despite his family's troubles.

Even if Shakespeare did prematurely leave the King's New School, it cannot have been very long before he would have finished his studies. His father's financial problems began around 1576, when William was twelve, and most students finished grammar school at the age of fourteen or fifteen (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 73). Whatever the case, Shakespeare found himself in need of employment around 1578 or 1579. Once again, there is no evidence whatsoever indicating what occupation he took up at this time, although two early sources (both removed from the events by over a century) independently report he entered the family business: Nicholas Rowe (1709) simply asserts William entered his father's employment, while John Aubrey reports (c. 1681)

³ The definitive works on this topic remains T.W. Baldwin's *William Shakspeare's Petty School* (1943) and *William Shakspeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (1944), which meticulously trace the typical sixteenth-century grammar school curriculum and how it is manifested in Shakespeare's works.

more specifically, and erroneously, that William, like his father, became a butcher (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 74–5). Rowe and Aubrey base their assertions on legends which, Richard Dutton notes, were reported too long after Shakespeare's death to be entirely trustworthy, “but too early to be dismissed out of hand” (*Literary Life* 3). Other possibilities that have been advanced for his early employment include law clerk, soldier, seaman, barber, surgeon, physician, and schoolmaster (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 109–11). The proponents of most of these conjectures maintain he held a non-theatrical occupation for some years before entering the theatre, gaining such entrance with either his emigration to London, or else with the visit of a playing company to Stratford in the mid-to-late 1580s. It is, however, at least possible he began his theatrical career earlier, perhaps even upon his completion of, or withdrawal from, school. The difficulties posed by such a scenario—namely how Shakespeare, if a traveling player, could have met, impregnated, and married Anne Hathaway—have not stopped several biographers, such as Katherine Duncan-Jones (*Ungentle Shakespeare*) and John Southworth (*Shakespeare the Player*), from making just such an argument. Most biographers ground themselves in the more traditional assumption that he worked in Stratford for a number of years before joining a playing company, although there is a notable group that contends Shakespeare traveled north for a time, finding employment, possibly theatrical, in Lancashire (see Chapter 9).

Before he joined a company, however, young Shakespeare could have been exposed to theatrical entertainment in several different ways in and around his home town. First, Stratford was home to Whitsuntide entertainments, which Shakespeare might have participated in as a youth and young man; in 1583 the corporation actually paid 13s, 4d to a Davy Jones “and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide” (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 112). While no other such payments are recorded around this time, it is certainly possible such entertainments were performed on other Whitsuntides during Shakespeare's youth. Second, he may have participated in Christmas mummings. Aubrey, believing John Shakespeare was a butcher and that William worked for him, says when William “killed a calf, he would do it in a *high style*, and make a speech” (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 74). Of course, John Shakespeare was not a butcher, so the reliability of this anecdote is in doubt; however, some biographers, such as A.L. Rowse (*William Shakespeare: A Biography*) and Ian Wilson (*Shakespeare: The Evidence*), suggest this report is in fact a corrupted recollection of William's participation in the traditional Christmas mumming play of killing the calf (Schoenbaum, *Lives* 67; Rowse 86; I. Wilson 61–2). Such speculation is impossible to verify. Third, Shakespeare almost certainly would have had to read various classical plays as part of the King's New School curriculum, as was common practice in English schools at the time (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 68–9); perhaps there were opportunities to hold recitations, or to mount productions, in the course of his study (69). But of course there is no evidence for such activities.

During his youth, Shakespeare would also have had at least two opportunities to see spectacular entertainments near Stratford. In 1575, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, entertained Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth, only twelve miles from Stratford, and many locals flocked to the spectacular entertainments Dudley staged. What the crowd

witnessed on this occasion was a water-pageant which had more in common with later court masques than with the sorts of plays Shakespeare would write; nevertheless, it is possible John Shakespeare, at the time an alderman, might have journeyed to Kenilworth with his eldest son, then aged eleven, in tow (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 115–16). Stephen Greenblatt cites a number of incidents in Shakespeare's plays which might allude to Kenilworth; while Greenblatt does not argue Shakespeare was actually at the entertainment, he contends that Shakespeare would have heard, and may have read, about it (43–50). A few years later, when he was fifteen, Shakespeare would have had the opportunity to make the slightly lengthier trek to Coventry to witness one of the last performances of that city's famous Mystery cycle. In both cases, there is no evidence to suggest the future playwright took advantage of these opportunities, but in both cases his attendance at these events is clearly within the realm of possibilities (Schoenbaum, *Compact* 111, 161).

During Shakespeare's early years, Stratford records also record numerous visits by professional playing companies. During the 1568–69 fiscal year, when his father was bailiff, the Queen's players (predecessors to the more famous Queen's Men, formed in 1583) visited Stratford, as did Worcester's Men, which would return in 1574–75, 1576–77, 1580–81, 1581–82, and 1583–84. Leicester's Men passed through Stratford in 1572–73 and 1576–77; Warwick's Men made its sole Stratford visit in 1574–75. Strange's Men made its Stratford debut on 11 February 1579, followed by the Countess of Essex's players sometime before September 1579. Derby's Men made its way to Stratford in 1579–80; the next year, Berkeley's gave a performance, followed by another in 1582–83, a year in which Chandos's Men also made an appearance. In 1583–84, Oxford's and Essex's Men made their first Stratford visits; no companies visited in 1584–85, and an unnamed company (perhaps Sussex's Men) passed through town in 1585–86. During the 1586–87 fiscal year, no fewer than five companies visited Stratford: the Queen's, Essex's, Leicester's, Stafford's, and an unnamed company all performed. This fiscal year represents the apex of professional activity in Stratford, as playing company notices trail off. The Queen's Men passed through twice in the early 1590s, and four unnamed companies visited the town at the end of the 1590s (*Minutes and Accounts* ii.68–9, 77, 105–6, iii.13–14, 43, 46, 98, 119, 136–37, 148–49, iv.16, 31–2, v.7, 19, 123). All these playing notices were recorded, of course, because the town paid each of these companies; it may be that there were other visits during Shakespeare's youth which, for whatever reason, were not recorded. In any event, Shakespeare had ample opportunity to see professional playing companies during his youth, and it may be he joined one of the companies named in the Stratford records. Indeed, of the thirteen separate companies named in the Stratford Chamberlains' accounts, six of them have, at some point, been advocated as the company he first acted, and by extension wrote, for.⁴

Throughout his childhood and early adulthood, then, William Shakespeare had numerous chances to see and participate in local theatrical entertainments and also

⁴ The six companies in question are: The Queen's Men, Leicester's Men, Warwick's Men, Oxford's Men, Worcester's Men, and Strange's Men. For the particular advocates for each of these companies, see the corresponding chapters in Part Three.

had the opportunity to witness performances by a number of professional playing companies. Sometime after 1577 (at the absolute earliest) he sought out theatrical employment. He may have done so by joining a professional company which visited Stratford, perhaps soon after finishing (or leaving) school, perhaps after having first worked in a non-theatrical capacity for several years. He may have left Stratford for London for non-theatrical work and subsequently found his calling on the London stage. Or he may have left Stratford with the goal of “making it” as a London actor or playwright. Whatever the case, by 1592 he was a playwright of sufficient note to attract the attention—and enmity—of a fellow writer.

Chapter 2

Greene's Groatsworth of Wit and Shakespeare's First Plays

After his 1585 marriage in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare disappears from view until 1592, when he emerges as a playwright in London. Two allusions in 1592 verify his presence in the city, and both seemingly testify to Shakespeare's prominence as a popular playwright. In the first edition of *Pierce Pennilesse*, entered into the Stationers' Register on 8 August 1592 (Arber ii.619), Thomas Nashe comments on the condition of the London stage:

How it would have ioyed brave *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he head lyne two hundred years in his tombe, he should triumphe agane on the stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times) who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (87)¹

Only one extant Elizabethan play—Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI*—features Talbot, although it is possible there may have been other Talbot plays by 1592. In the absence of additional evidence, however, it is probable, though not certain, that Nashe was referring to *1 Henry VI*. If so, this means that by August 1592 Shakespeare had written a phenomenally successful play seen by “ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times).” It also means Shakespeare, or at least one of his plays, had impressed one of the prominent writers and literary commentators of the day.² Such approval was not, however, universally the case.

Robert Greene: Death and Deathbed Confessionals

A second allusion to Shakespeare appeared soon after Nashe's first edition of *Pierce Pennilesse*. A pamphlet entitled *Greenes Groats-worth of witte, bought with a million*

¹ I quote G.B. Harrison's edition. Harrison uses *Pierce Pennilesse*'s third edition, published late in 1592 (ix).

² Gary Taylor has suggested in his article “Shakespeare and Others: The Authorship of *Henry the Sixth, Part One*” that Nashe's enthusiasm may have had ulterior motives. Specifically, Taylor suggests Nashe collaborated with Shakespeare on this play. Edward Burns, editor of the Arden *King Henry VI Part 1* similarly regards the text as collaborative, but he does not speculate as to the identity of Shakespeare's collaborators (75, 79). For objections to Taylor's argument, see Hattaway's introduction to the 1990 Cambridge edition of *1 Henry VI* (1–2, 42–3).

of Repentance, entered into the Stationers' Register on 20 September 1592 (Arber ii.620), is often cited as the first definite allusion to Shakespeare as a playwright, as well as the earliest definite evidence of Shakespeare's London—and indeed theatrical—activities. This short work has generated several controversies, most of them pertaining directly to what, if anything, it has to say about Shakespeare. Because *Groatsworth*, as it is referred to hereafter, is such a contentious document, and because it is pivotal for Shakespeare's biography, the circumstances, characters, and implications contained in it warrant close scrutiny.

Groatsworth is allegedly the deathbed confession of Robert Greene, who died on 3 September 1592. Greene had been a leading literary figure of his day, writing numerous poems, novels, plays, and pamphlets, the latter not infrequently containing satirical jibes at other active writers of the time. As a playwright, he was, with Thomas Nashe, George Peele, and Christopher Marlowe, one of the university-educated group of playwrights often referred to retrospectively as the University Wits. Greene was one of the more successful, and prolific, of the Wits, and a number of his works sold well for the time; in fact, on more than one occasion the type size for his name was much larger than that of the work's title (*Groatsworth* itself being an example; see Carroll, *Groatsworth* v). Part of Greene's success, however, was tied to his character, or at least his persona in the popular imagination of his readers. Greene was notorious for fraternizing with underworld types and leading a life of general dissipation. Some of his last works were "conycatching pamphlets" that described the lifestyle and practices of various groups of ill-repute. The extent of Greene's real-life underworld connections is debatable, but by 1592 many London bookstall patrons would have heard rumors of Greene's riotous living.³

In the late summer of 1592, Greene took ill; he was dead by 3 September. Almost immediately, writings about Greene's last days were being sold at the bookstalls. Gabriel Harvey, Greene's literary nemesis, set out what he understood to be the facts of Greene's last days in a letter dated 5 September and published soon thereafter (Carroll, *Groatsworth* 7). Harvey characterizes Greene as a man who "sought Fame by diffamation of other" (5), a "madde libeller," "the king of the paper stage," "the Monarch of Crosbiters," and "the very Emperour of shifters" (5–9).⁴ Despite his certainty that all Londoners had "heard of his dissolute, and licentious liuing" (9), Harvey catalogues various nefarious deeds of Greene's: his "vnseemely apparell," his "impious profaning of sacred Textes," and his "forsaking of his owne wife" (9–10). Harvey claims Greene took up with a prostitute, had a child by her, and then descended into poverty and lice-infested squalor. After "a surfett of pickle herringe and rennish wine" (5) Greene took ill and his friends abandoned him. At the end, Harvey says, the prostitute and Greene's landlady were his only companions. Harvey alleges that he visited the landlady, who gave him some of the details of Greene's last days and showed him a letter Greene had written to his wife, asking her to pay

³ For more on the life of Robert Greene, see Charles W. Crupi, *Robert Greene*.

⁴ I quote G.B. Harrison's edition of Harvey's *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets*.