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IN SEARCH

OF
Shakespeare

MICHAEL WOOD

'In Search of Shakespeare is excellent. Faceless and yet forceful, Shakespeare emerges from the book as the master general he must have been.' CLIVE JAMES, *THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT*

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About the Book

The greatest writer of the English language as he lived and breathed - a spellbindingly immediate portrait of William Shakespeare and his world.

Almost four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare is still acclaimed as the world's greatest dramatist, yet the man himself remains shrouded in mystery. In this newly updated edition of his acclaimed biography, broadcaster and historian Michael Wood looks afresh at Shakespeare's life, brilliantly recreating the turbulent times through which the poet lived. Marked by murderous plots and state terror, religious divisions and rebellious movements, Shakespeare's world is conjured up here like never before.

About the Author

Michael Wood was born in Manchester and educated at Manchester Grammar School and Oriel College, Oxford, where he did postgraduate research in Anglo-Saxon history. A broadcaster and filmmaker, he is the author of several highly praised books on English history, including *In Search of the Dark Ages*, *The Domesday Quest* and *In Search of England*. He has over eighty documentary films to his name, including *Art of the Western World*, *Legacy*, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*, *Conquistadors*, *In Search of Shakespeare* and *In Search of Myths and Heroes*. The writer behind three BBC films about Shakespeare's early history plays, he was a contributor to *Shakespearean Perspective* (1985). Michael Wood is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

'In this enthralling book, Michael Wood evokes the physical and intellectual environment in which Shakespeare lived and worked with vivid and original immediacy.'

PROFESSOR STANLEY WELLS, Editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare*

'There are many books on Shakespeare by professional academics that are full of bright ideas and interesting information, but which lack the arts of the man himself: bringing characters and places to life, grabbing the audience through story-telling, transforming complex intellectual debates into the immediacy of drama ... Thanks to Michael Wood's gifts as a story-teller, populariser and interpreter of the past, Shakespeare's world is brought alive more vividly than in any other biography of him that I have read.'

JONATHAN BATE, Sunday Telegraph

'An evocative and occasionally enchanting retelling of the known facts, which are, in reality, numerous. On the question of whether Shakespeare was a secret Catholic like his father - now, much discussed, especially among Catholics - Wood is at his eloquent best. He describes vividly the insecurity of the changing times ... A perceptive, entertaining companion, his account of the late plays conjures a poignant farewell to a playwright we would love to have known.'

FERDINAND MOUNT, *Sunday Times*

'Wood has now brought his unusual talents for research and exposition to the subject of Shakespeare and his times. The results are ... exciting [and] tendentious ... His account of the London of Shakespeare's day is excellently done, and interestingly illustrated, sometimes with 19th-century

photographs of Jacobean streets and buildings long since destroyed.'

SIR FRANK KERMODE, *The New York Times*

'Michael Wood has distilled the dangerous mix of scholarship and controversy to conjure up a Shakespeare who is inspired and practical, engaging and mysterious. Wood's Shakespeare is above all believable and will create the popular image of the Elizabethan past for the next generation.'

PROFESSOR KATE McLUSKIE, Director of the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon

'Wood succeeds in putting together a complete account of the greatest poet and dramatist in history, one that is both convincing in its narrative and compelling in its detail.'

BBC History Magazine

'Michael Wood is such an accomplished popular historian that he could write about anything and readers would pay for the finished product. Wood shows that though there isn't a huge amount of documentary evidence about Shakespeare's life, there is enough to place his extraordinary talent in its proper historical context. A lucid, extended footnote to the complete works of the world's greatest writer.'

BARRY FORSHAW, *Publishing News*

'This wonderful book transports us back to the world in which Shakespeare lived and worked. Wood uses previously unexplored archive evidence to shed new light on the bard's life, which remains shrouded in mystery, and in so doing brilliantly recreates the sights and sounds of 16th-century London. This vivid text, with stunning breadth of

research and information, is both intellectual and entertaining ...'

Good Book Guide

'Wood has crafted a book of substance and originality. Combing a wealth of scholarship and a bit of his own sleuthing, Wood presents a portrait of Shakespeare as very much a child of Stratford, a poet from whom the people and countryside of his youth were always a part of his conscious, creative life. We are also given a convincing portrait of the artist's struggles in the unpredictable world of the Elizabethan theatre ... A highly readable, informative, and artfully illustrated volume for bardolaters and common readers alike.'

Booklist

'This life of Shakespeare has all the vividness of a good television profile, backed up with a keen and contentious historical perspective on his turbulent era ... As an old medieval hand Wood positions Shakespeare on the cusp of the modern age, but with a firm background in the old traditions. He's also superb at bringing together the Warwickshire idiom and rural nomenclature that runs through the plays. Wood brings 16th-century London to raucous life [and] throughout Shakespeare is treated as a living person inhabiting his time.'

US Publishers Weekly

IN SEARCH OF
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PROLOGUE:

'THE REVOLUTION OF THE TIMES'

IN THE WINTER of 1563, four or five months before William Shakespeare was born, his father was called upon by the corporation of his home town to oversee a troubling task. John Shakespeare had served Stratford diligently as constable and ale-taster, and was now the chamberlain or treasurer, responsible for the town accounts. And on a cold day in the darkest time of the year it was his job to hire workmen, with ladders, scaffolding poles and pots of limewash, to desecrate the town's religious images: to destroy the medieval paintings that covered the walls of the guild chapel, next door to the guildhall and the school.

In the old days, before King Henry's time, the chapel of the Guild of the Holy Cross had been the centre of Stratford's civic life and ceremonies. The guild had endowed and run the grammar school, held feasts, disbursed charities and run the town's almshouses. Inside the chapel, every inch of wall was covered with splendidly gaudy paintings depicting tales loved by all English people, stories rooted in the fabric of the nation's culture for nearly 1000 years. There was St George and the Dragon, the Vision of the Emperor Constantine, and St Helena and the Finding of the True Cross, the subject of Old English poetry 700 years earlier and more recently retold in Caxton's *Golden Legend*, one of the first books to be printed in English. Near the door were images of local female saints, familiar friendly intercessors, such as Modwenna, whose sacred well at Burton-on-Trent was still much visited by

traditional folk in Warwickshire. There was a depiction of the murder of Thomas Becket, whose great pilgrimage had been immortalized by Chaucer. Over the nave arch was a painted wooden crucifix, the Holy Rood, and behind it a great mural of the Last Judgement: Christ seated on a rainbow, the world as his footstool, with souls on their way to heaven, hell or purgatory, red-hot chains encircling the damned, alongside the seven deadly sins and devils blowing horns and wielding clubs: images of warning and consolation, of fear and bliss.

These were the stories of John Shakespeare's childhood and youth in the first half of the sixteenth century. Like most countrymen of his age, his mental world had been shaped by the traditional Christian society of England: the old rhythms of the farming seasons and the religious calendar, and the feasts and holy days that accompanied them. But such things were now officially condemned as childish superstition. At the start of Elizabeth's reign a royal injunction had instructed town councils to enforce 'the removal of all signs of idolatry and superstition, from places of worship, so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glasses, windows, or elsewhere within their churches and houses'. The aldermen of Stratford had put it off for five years, but now the time had come. Whatever his private feelings, it was John's duty to vandalize images that represented a world of encoded memories built up over the centuries. These were the familiar and beloved observances of his parents and grandparents, a vast and resonant world of symbols that linked him to the ancestors and to the old idea of the community of England.

How had it come to this? It's the kind of thing we associate with the religious conflicts that mar our modern world, the rage of iconoclasts - but this was in England. It had been Elizabeth's father Henry VIII, back in the 1520s and 1530s, who had begun the revolution that would turn England from a medieval Catholic society into a modern

Protestant state. Henry's Reformation had begun with his love for Anne Boleyn and his desire for a divorce from his first wife, Katherine of Aragon. A battle for supremacy resulted: who was the ultimate authority in his kingdom, the king or the pope in Rome? Eventually this led to the breaking of the link with Rome, which had been maintained steadfastly by the English since the mission of St Augustine in 597 to convert them to Christianity. In pursuit of his divorce, the king made himself supreme head of the Church of England, in place of the pope. Henry had intended change to stop there; and so it might have done, but for two things. First, in 1536 Henry's money troubles led to his seizing the lands, buildings and treasures of the monasteries, many of which went back to the beginnings of English Christianity. The second major factor was the influx of new Protestant ideas from Germany, where Martin Luther had defied pope and emperor and become a national hero. For Luther the way to God was a matter of individual conscience grounded in scripture, that did not need either the institution of the Catholic Church or its 'superstitious' doctrines, which he perceived as chains to bind the simple-minded. The dissolution of the monasteries and the Protestant Reformation that followed inaugurated a permanent shift of power in England, the creation of an absolutist state and a new landed class that would have a vested interest in supporting the new regime and its state religion. Out of these convulsions, involving religion, class conflict and civil war, modern secular Britain would emerge.

But at grass-roots level in towns such as Stratford, and in the countryside round about where John Shakespeare grew up, little had changed by the time of Henry's death in 1547. In the years after the break with Rome a half-Protestant, half-Catholic Church with a Protestant prayerbook had been established. It was in the short reign of Edward VI, Henry's son from his third marriage, to Jane Seymour, that

the real revolution began. Edward was a pious, cold-hearted swot, who was surrounded by a tight-knit group of politically motivated men. Now the fury of destruction that had visited the monasteries fell on all churches, cathedrals and chapels, which he ordered to be stripped of their screens, statues and paintings. In many places, however, the pace of such change was slow, and when Edward died in 1553, still in his teens, his half-sister Mary, daughter of Katherine of Aragon and an ardent Catholic, became queen. Greeted with a burst of enthusiasm on her accession, Mary soon lost public goodwill because of her intolerance. She attempted to reverse Henry's revolution, to turn the clock back, and in her brief time on the throne she earned the name Bloody Mary by burning Protestants up and down the land. In this story, terrible things were done in the name of God by England's rulers on both sides of the religious divide.

So when Mary died and Elizabeth, daughter of Henry's second wife, Anne Boleyn, came to the throne in 1558 the country was caught between old and new. Elizabeth was a convinced but not zealous Protestant. This brilliant, vulnerable and psychologically damaged monarch gambled that she would outlive the troubles she had inherited, and with her advisers set out to return the country to the path of her father's and half-brother's 'reformation' of religion.

Back in Stratford in that winter of 1563, then, they had gone through three changes of religion in less than twenty years when John's workmen began to cover up the great cycle of medieval paintings. With that the story was supposed to be over: in Elizabethan terms it was the end of history, or of one version of history. Such at least was the government's intention. The town was to lay its past aside, put its best foot forward and walk into a brave new Protestant future. Its children, the next generation such as John's son William, were to be obedient citizens of Elizabeth's reformed state.

But was that really how it was? It is generally believed that the defacing proves Stratford was by then a Protestant town, and John himself a conforming member of the Church of England – even a zealous one. But scrutiny of the town minutes reveals a rather different story. The corporation of Stratford and their treasurer in fact left all the stained glass in place and refused to sell off their finely embroidered vestments and cloths. They left wall paintings untouched where they thought they could get away with it, and even partitioned off the chancel so that none of the paintings there was destroyed – they were still visible on the eve of the Civil War in 1641. And as for those images defaced that day, they were so thinly covered over that they were still vivid and intact when discovered centuries later. So John had acted contrary to the 1559 injunctions, leaving images ‘slubbered over with whitewash that in an hour may be undone, standing like Diana’s shrine for a future hope and daily comfort of old and young papists.’ The work, then, was reversible, and surely deliberately so. After all, no one in Stratford at that moment knew which way history would go.

So here’s a parable at the start of our tale, but one full of ambiguity. What lies under the whitewash? What lies behind actions and words in an age when covering up, concealment and dissimulation became the order of the day? Such questions are as relevant to the life of the greatest poet of all time as they are to untangling the tale of his father and his neighbours in his home town.

This is the tale of one man’s life, lived through a time of revolution – a time when not only England, but the larger world beyond, would go through momentous changes. In one of her most famous painted portraits, Elizabeth stands on a map of little England with her foot on Ditchley in Oxfordshire – a huge figure on a small country. And when Shakespeare was born her England was a small place, nothing compared with the great contemporary

powerhouses of civilization: Moghul India, Safavi Iran, Ottoman Turkey and Ming China. When the Persian Shah and the Great Moghul stand on their map in another emblematic picture of the age, the world beneath their feet spreads from China to the Mediterranean, embracing the old heartlands of civilization. England, with a population of less than 3 million, was an old-fashioned, backward place out on the fringe of Europe. But as the centre of gravity of history began to shift, as the old civilizations of Asia were outflanked by the new maritime states of the Atlantic seaboard, England's moment was about to arrive.

Shakespeare, then, was lucky to be born on the cusp of history. If he had been born in his parents' generation, two or three decades earlier, his mind might not have been open to the challenges of the modern world; a few decades later and he would not have been in touch with the old world view, the imaginal universe of the medieval Christian civilization of England and Europe. Shakespeare may be, as has been claimed in our time, the first modern man, the creator of our modern idea of personality, the 'inventor of the human', but he was also the last great product of the Gothic Christian West. If great writers are made by their times, then to be born in 1564 was to be born in very interesting times indeed.

Such dramatic changes would provide the raw material for the artists, poets and thinkers of Shakespeare's lifetime, a time that would lead to civil war and the execution of the king. And from the macrocosm to the microcosm, these ideas run through Shakespeare's works. New worlds are discovered, old worlds are lost; the people rise up; kings are overthrown; women speak up for equality with men; black people find a voice in England. Ships sail across the world loaded with people, spices and ideas; potatoes rain out of the sky; tales are told of Lapland sorcerers, Persian emperors and embassies to the Pigmies. Off Sierra Leone, African dignitaries watch *Hamlet* on a British ship; the

Native American princess Pocahontas attends a masque in London. Then as now, globalization means that ideas are globalized too.

The winter light is falling over Chapel Street as the last lime is sloshed over Christ's rainbow throne and drips down the face of Jesus. The workmen untie the ropes on the scaffolding, looking forward to their wages and a jug of ale in Burbage's tavern in Bridge Street. John Shakespeare stamps his feet to keep warm in the chilly chapel. The job is done, to be entered into his January account along with repairing the vicar's chimney and mending the bell rope: 'Item payd for defaysing ymages in the chappell iis' (years later, uncannily, his poet son would write of 'defacing the precious image of our dear Redeemer'). At this moment, in Stratford in the winter of 1563-4, John Shakespeare might not have been able to see it yet, but the world was poised between old and new, between no longer and not yet; or, as his son would put it, between 'things dying and things newborn'.

CHAPTER ONE

ROOTS

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON IN WARWICKSHIRE, where Shakespeare was born in April 1564, was a rural market town 100 miles from London – not so far in physical distance, perhaps, but a long way in terms of mental horizons. The best place to get an idea of the lie of the land today is outside the town, at Welcombe, where low winter sunlight sharpens the patterns of ridge and furrow etched long ago by the medieval ox teams: the faint skeleton of Shakespeare's England. From the ridge above, where the wind, as they would say, comes 'rowling and gusting' across the valley, you can see the Avon like a silver ribbon snaking down from the hills of Northamptonshire. To the south in his day were arable fields; to the north the Forest of Arden. Stratford itself, the crossing point on the river, was where the produce of the two regions was bartered and sold in its markets and fairs. Even including outlying hamlets the town had a population of less than 2000, with no more than 100 good houses. A small place, then, ranked below the county town of Warwick and the urban centre of Coventry, now decaying as a result of the mid-century recession.

In those days it took three days and nights to get there from London. The roads were bad, and infested by robbers at lonely spots: it was safest to travel in a group, or on horseback with the regular packhorse trains. Every two weeks the Stratford carriers, the Greenaways, took goods for sale in London – country produce, such as linen shirts, bespoke gloves, wool, cheeses and linseed oil – a small

contribution to the flood of rural wealth that poured into the markets at Smithfield to feed the conspicuous consumption of the capital. On the return journey they carried the kind of imported luxuries that went down well in Warwickshire on middle-class tables, or at sheep shearings and other country feasts: dates, sugar, rice, figs, raisins and almonds. After crossing the river at Clopton Bridge, the homebound pack trains unloaded in the Greenaways' yard near the Market Cross, a few doors from the Shakespeares' house in Henley Street, where it is thought the poet was born.

SHAKESPEARE'S FAMILY AND ANCESTORS

The story of a person's life begins before he or she is born. It is our family that shapes our values and our ways of seeing, that gives us our deepest fund of tales and images: stories at our mother's knee; our observations of the way the family works; the relationship between our parents; the way they resolve conflicts or tell jokes; their attitude to work and play, to life and love, to public success and failure, and to the law.

On both sides of the family William Shakespeare came from farming stock: old families rooted in the Warwickshire countryside, families who, like all English people in the mid-sixteenth century, went through the traumatic religious crises out of which Britain's modern secular, capitalist society emerged. Contrary to the myth of the poet's lowly origins, the Shakespeares were an aspiring lower middle-class family - they were people with money, and his father later became mayor of Stratford. But both his parents were descended from husbandmen, small to middling yeomen with a peasant house and 100 acres, horses, barns and an ox team; people grounded in the penny-pinching realism of a class who laboured to build themselves up. Many of his

relatives continued to live that life: Aunt Joan and Uncle Harry stayed farmers to the end.

The search for Shakespeare starts not in Stratford, then, but a short way to the north, for both sides of his family originated in a tiny cluster of villages in the Forest of Arden. His mother's name, indeed, was Arden. Warwickshire poets liked to call Arden the heart of England. Today, south of Birmingham and west of Warwick, only fragments of woodland remain alongside the roar of the M42 motorway. In the sixteenth century there were still sizeable tracts of forest, all part of what the Normans, who had hunted there, called Beaunesert, 'beautiful wild country', and a completely different world from the crowded streets of London where Shakespeare would spend so much of his life.

This was a place to fire the imagination. Unlike the works of most of his urban or university-educated contemporaries, Shakespeare's plays are full of images of flowers, trees and animals. His linguistic roots are here too - not in the more socially acceptable speech of London or the court. Shakespeare spoke with a Warwickshire accent, like Brummie today: more Lenny Henry than Laurence Olivier. The veneer of high culture and high society would come later, but in his plays the Warwickshire boy would still constantly betray his origins in the easy way he slipped into rural custom and country talk. Indeed, he would use it deliberately as an imaginal world to counterpoint with that of kings and nobles: Joan blowing her nails, frozen pails, the shepherd's son with his tods of wool and rice and dates for the fair. Long into his fame he still used idiosyncratic phonetic spellings of Warwickshire words, which perplexed his London printers; he would drop in minutely observed Midlands images, in dialect words still used well into the twentieth century, to describe the turn at the top of a furrow made by a plough team ('hade land'), the wheat sown in Gloucestershire at the end of August ('Red

Lammas'), Cotswold apples ('redcoats' and 'caraways') or the kind of grass with which kids make whistles ('kecksies' – a word still known in Warwickshire). Shakespeare would use 'breeze' in a memorable image when describing the Egyptian queen's flight from the battle of Actium in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

The breeze upon her, like a cow in June,
Hoists sail and flies

'Breeze' here has nothing to do with wind; it is an Anglo-Saxon word that was still used in Midlands dialect in Tudor times. It refers to the gadflies that, in summer, trouble cows, who all at once lift their tails high in the air and stampede away. That's the kind of knowledge you don't get at Oxbridge, or in a rich man's house.

This rich seam of peasant vocabulary in Shakespeare's language survived in the West Midlands into our own time. As late as the 1930s in the Cotswolds, you could still hear Shakespeare's 'mazzard' for head, 'lush' for rich, 'plash' for pool, 'twit' for blab, 'slobberly' for sloppy and 'orts' for the leftovers of food. More specifically, farming people still used 'reeds' for thatch, and 'pleaching' or 'plushing' for laying a hedge. In the village of Compton Abdale at this time one seventy-five-year-old farmer still used 'on a line' for in a rage and Iago's 'speak within doore' for speak softly.

So although the poet was born in a small country town, his forebears were of farming stock. The Shakespeares' ancestors came from around the village of Balsall, with its old chapel and hall of the Knights Templars. Nearby, down Green Lane, shrouded by thickets of ash and silver birch, across a ford that runs deep in winter, there is still a red-brick farm where one Adam of Oldeditch lived in the fourteenth century. Rewarded by the king with land for service in war, his son gave himself the surname

'Shakespeare', perhaps to denote his deeds on the battlefield. There were still Shakespeares at Oldeditch 100 years later, in early Tudor times, and almost certainly the clan descended from them.

By the sixteenth century Shakespeares were thick on the ground and had spread to four villages: Rowington, Wroxall, Knowle and Packwood, with its moated hall and church surrounded by ancient yew trees. The Shakespeares at Packwood were business partners of William's father John, and probably his kinsmen. (Interestingly enough, the historian Raphael Holinshed passed his last days here as steward until 1580. Shakespeare would later use his *Chronicles* (1577) as the main source of his history plays - might he perhaps have known Holinshed in person?)

A SENSE OF HISTORY

All families have tales about their past. Today, they might be about the Second World War or the Depression, centred on an old box of photos, service medals and cuttings. One particular tale suggests that the Shakespeares were like that too. In 1596, when William was thirty-two and famous, he and his father went to London to try to obtain a coat of arms for John, to gain him the status of a gentleman. In the files of the Royal College of Arms their submission survives, including a rough draft with the herald's notes. That day Shakespeare claimed that long ago an ancestor had won reputation and 'lands and tenements' when he had done King Henry VII 'valiant and faithful service'. That meant deeds in war, and implies that William's ancestor had fought with Henry Tudor against Richard III at Bosworth in 1485.

Of course, it may have been pure fantasy, a family myth that had lost nothing in the retelling. But maybe the tale was true: handed down from the grandparents, or gleaned

from a crumbling old title deed bearing the king's name in the family box under the bed. This particular ancestor has never been traced, but the likeliest candidate is Thomas Shakespeare of Balsall who, with his wife Alicia, affirmed his status by joining the well-to-do guild of the chapel at Knowle in 1486. Perhaps Thomas had been in the army, in the retinue of his local lord, and was rewarded with a small parcel of land in the victor's share-out, which included the Warwickshire estates of Richard and his supporters. The real point here, though, is not whether the tale is true or not, but that it was a family tradition. Because it comes from words spoken and jotted down that day in 1596, it enables us to say confidently that history – national history, indeed – was part of the Shakespeares' family story.

As an adult Shakespeare would be fascinated by English and British history: the national narrative of the past two centuries with its good kings and bad kings; the sacredness of monarchy; the struggle between justice and might, power and conscience; the relation of poor people to the mighty; and what constitutes patriotism. All this was of particular fascination because the national narrative was up for grabs in Elizabeth's day as history was being rewritten root and branch. His early fame would rest not on comedy or tragedy, but on history.

There are many ways in which history is important. It shapes our identity; it gives reality and authenticity to our family and communal life; it creates for us a sense of a shared past; and, not least, it fashions our sense of justice. The Shakespeare family motto – composed, it would seem, by William for that meeting with the herald, and intended to sum up the family and their ancestry – makes precisely that point: 'Not without right'.

RELIGIOUS ROOTS: THE SOCIETY OF ARDEN

Warwickshire was a focus for the ideological struggles of the time in the clash between Elizabeth's new elite and the old gentry of the shire. Elizabeth's enforcer Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who drove her Protestant revolution in these parts, was a new man, as were his local agents, such as the influential Lucy family at Charlecote. But old families like the Ardens, the poet's mother's kin, who were Catholic, resented the power of Dudley and his henchmen. The head of the Ardens, Edward Arden, called him an upstart and an adulterer; and he pointedly refused to wear Dudley's livery on the queen's visit to Kenilworth in 1575. From Henry VIII's day wills survive of these old-fashioned stalwarts of the shire - Underhills, Throgmortons and Ardens - which give a sense of this deep-rooted, almost medieval culture: the last gasp of the Old Religion, still rebuilding churches, leaving pious bequests and making provision for good works, all out of affection for the old saints and the 'dear familiar place'. In 1526 John Arden, for example, left Aston church 'my best black damask gown to be made into a cope ... my suit of armour to dress an image of St George to be placed over the pew where I was accustomed to sit ... and two two-year-old heifers to help towards the maintenance of the church bells'.

In the Stratford area many families of this class kept loyal to the Old Faith right into the seventeenth century - the Treshams, Winters, Catesbys and Throgmortons prominent among them. The wooded countryside hereabouts was dotted with their isolated houses: Huddington, Packwood, Bushwood and 'moated granges' like Baddesley, with its moat, priest holes and secret tunnels. These places were safe houses for the Catholic underground in the 1580s and 1590s, and the scene of open warfare in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, when members of eminent Warwickshire families, well known to Shakespeare, would die fighting, clinging hopelessly to their older version of English history.

Below the gentry, many of the husbandmen in the villages of the Forest of Arden were of the same persuasion. Twenty-five years into Elizabeth's reign a Rowington man told friends that, given a free choice, 'less than ten' in his large parish would attend Protestant church. He was probably right: government surveys and interrogations reveal the strength of such loyalties well into Shakespeare's adulthood.

Just before Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries Shakespeares and Ardens were associated with the local gentry in the guild book of the chapel at Knowle, which survives in Birmingham Public Library. The entries for 1526 include Shakespeares from Packwood and Rowington, among them a Richard who may be the poet's grandfather, alongside the old names of the shire:

Domina Jane Shakespeare
Robert Catesby and his wife Jane
George Throgmorton, knight, and his wife Katherine
Edward Ferrars, knight, and Constance his wife
William Clopton, knight, and Elizabeth his wife
Richard Shakespeare and Alicia his wife
William Shakespeare and Alicia his wife
John Shakespeare and Joanna his wife

There we have an image of the old community of the shire, the local farmers and gentry of Arden, as they were on the eve of Henry VIII's revolution: rooted in the soil, deferential to the old landed families, devoted to the local shrines and guilds. This is an image in microcosm of the early sixteenth-century society of Arden into which Shakespeare's parents were born, and out of which his view of England, and its history, emerged.

MOVING OUT AND UP

Although these family connections do not by themselves prove anything about William's own allegiances, they give precious hints about the world view handed down to him by his parents and grandparents. His was a traditional society in which such loyalties were valued and remembered. In our modern world we tend to think of close family in terms of no more than three generations, and our view of kinship can be quite narrow. Tudor people had a much wider sense of family relations; 'cousin', for example, meant something even when once or twice removed. And people had a bigger picture of their place in the family tree.

Yet even in a traditional society this kind of rooted local culture has many strands. The Shakespeares, like all families, could thrive only by means of work, enabling them to achieve practical and material advancement. William's paternal grandfather, Richard, struck out from the family roots around Wroxall and Rowington and, as a young man in the 1520s, leased land at Snitterfield, a village five miles northeast of Stratford off the old Warwick road. Here he farmed for the next thirty-five years.

The site of the Shakespeares' house has recently been identified. Richard had an 80-acre plot on the corner of Bell Lane, running down the hill to the ford over Snitterfield brook, and the present house incorporates part of a Tudor farm building. The land was originally leased from the local branch of the Ardens - a family of similar sturdy farming stock, with the same kind of holding, the same kind of outlook on life, and the same faith. In that house in Snitterfield Richard's wife bore him two sons, John and Henry. Henry - the poet's Uncle Harry - stayed on the land as a farmer all his life; an outbuilding of his house survives by the church. But John, born perhaps in the late 1520s, made the move to become a townsman and to rise above his peasant status. Ambitious, charming and hard-working (but also canny and litigious), John could have stayed a farmer but had different ideas. Working partly on some

land he leased in Snitterfield and partly in town, he apprenticed himself for seven years to a glover in Stratford.

THE RISE OF JOHN SHAKESPEARE

The towne of Stratford stondithe upon a playne ground on the right hand of Avon, as the water descendithe. It hath 2 or 3 very lardge stretes, besyde back lanes. One of the principall streets ledithe from est to west, another from southe to northe. The bishop of Worcester is lord of the towne. The towne is reasonably well builded of timbar. There is once a year a great fayre at Holy-Rode Daye. The parish church is a fayre large peace of worke, and stonduith at the southe end of the towne The church is dedicated to the Trinitie.

Riding into the town in the late 1530s or 1540s, during the days of John Shakespeares apprenticeship to Dixon the glover, this is how the traveller John Leland described the place with all the accuracy of a modern guidebook. He also mentioned the fine stone bridge, the grammar school, the almshouses and the 'right goodly chapel' with its murals of the Dance of Death. Despite development and tourism, his portrait is recognizable today: the guild chapel, the Clopton Bridge and the almshouses (still occupied by poor people, but now administered by the local authority), the guildhall and the grammar school (refounded in 1553), and many of the half-timbered houses remain, although the 'pretty house of brick and timber', where Shakespeare died, is long gone.

Sixteenth-century Stratford was a small but thriving town of 1500 people. The fair held every 14 September was where hired labour was recruited and paid; where freelance dealers - 'higglers' - bought up eggs and poultry

to sell at a profit in the big towns. It was where the well-off country 'broggers' – illegal wool merchants – came to buy bricks and tiles, and ironwork from the smiths in Henley Street. There was plenty of business for tradesmen and craftsmen working in small-scale industries as the economy slowly picked up after the recession of the 1540s and 1550s.

Even luxury goods were to be found now. On their boards shopkeepers sold goods imported into London and carried here by the Greenaways' pack trains: fruit and nuts from the Mediterranean and soon potatoes from Virginia. The growth of a new middle class encouraged specialized trades: people were beginning to covet smart clothes, for instance. The opportunities were here, not driving an eight-ox team up and down a piece of ploughland at Snitterfield. And it was here that John Shakespeare made his career as a glover.

The earliest record of John in Stratford is in a document of 1552, the first case in a long career of litigation that seems to have run in the Shakespeare family. He was fined for leaving a 'dung heap' – a rubbish tip – in Henley Street; perhaps a rotting heap of leather shavings and offcuts. Once he had done his apprenticeship, John became a bespoke glover who sold his work on a stall with the other glovers at Market Cross. He would have cut and worked the leather in his own home – quite a cottage industry, perhaps, with outworkers, and with women in his outhouse doing the sewing.

As late as 1561 he appeared in the Snitterfield post-mortem of his father as *agricola*, a farmer, but by then he had risen in social status in Stratford and become a town councillor, justice of the peace, constable and ale taster. By then, this 'merry cheeked man who durst have cracked a jest at any time' had become part of the town's ruling elite and was clearly a popular and respected man of good judgement and capacity. So the Snitterfield farmer was now

a member of Elizabeth's new civic order, part of what they called the 'commonwealth' of England. It seems he never learned to write: he always signed with a mark depicting the glovers' compasses or the 'donkey' on which leather was stretched. But he must have had basic reading skills simply to fulfil his civic role, let alone to keep his account books.

English local government was part of a very old tradition of consultation and representation; looking after what, even three centuries before, had been known to well-to-do peasants as 'the welfare of the community of the realm' - a national community personified by the monarch, who was the focus of their allegiance provided that he or she was sensitive to local feelings. John's twenty-four fellow-councillors or aldermen were middle-class propertied sorts: glovers, hatters, haberdashers. Meetings were held behind closed doors in the guild rooms. The job of the council was to run the town: to supervise education and ensure cleanliness; to look after the poor, sick and unemployed; and to keep order and resolve conflicts. Its members were reimbursed for expenses, but not paid. They were not expected to refuse office, nor could any of them resign their appointment; it took a serious misdemeanour or a dramatic falling out to be struck off, as John would eventually be.

His role as town councillor is significant for his son's story, for Shakespeare's father and his colleagues were compelled to engage with national politics and history. As representatives of central government they had to control, to encourage conformity and to identify dissent. They were the people whose fate it was to negotiate change, to guide the town through the dangerous times of the Catholic Queen Mary and her Protestant successor Elizabeth; times in which England would be changed for ever.

THE ARDENS: SHAKESPEARE'S MOTHER'S FAMILY

In the late 1550s - at the end of Queen Mary's reign - John was probably getting on for thirty. The average age for a man to marry in Tudor England was twenty-eight, and twenty-six for a woman. So off he went to seek a wife. She was the daughter of his father's old Snitterfield landlord, a girl he might have known since childhood: Mary Arden.

Shakespeare's mother adds another dimension to the poet's biography, in terms of his cultural and social background. For Mary came from a family of real status in Warwickshire, with links to some of the powerful Catholic families in the shire. For a start - and how could this not have impressed itself upon a child? - they bore the ancient name of the forested region of Warwickshire north of Stratford. According to seventeenth-century local antiquarians, the Ardens traced their ancestry back to the Anglo-Saxon lord Thurkill of Arden (and, according to *Domesday Book*, their land at Curdworth was indeed held by Thurkill in 1066). But tradition took them back further still to legendary figures such as the hero Guy of Warwick, who figured in poems of the sixteenth century that William Shakespeare certainly knew. The Ardens' ancestry reinforced the family's sense of national history. Thomas Arden had fought for the Barons and Simon de Montfort in the civil war of the thirteenth century; Robert Arden, who had fought for the Yorkists in the Wars of the Roses, had been executed in 1452. More recently John Arden, Mary's great-uncle, had been in service at the court of Henry VII as an Esquire of the Body. The family even had a room in Park Hall, their house at Curdworth 20 miles away, called the King's Chamber - perhaps Henry had actually stayed there.

There is still some uncertainty over Mary Arden's exact relation to the Park Hall Ardens, but the evidence suggests she was descended from Thomas Arden, one of several younger sons of Walter Arden of Park Hall, who recovered the family estates during the Wars of the Roses. Thomas had land in Warwickshire at Wilmcote and Snitterfield. His son Robert, who farmed in both places, was called a 'gentleman of worship' by Shakespeare in his submission to the Royal College of Arms in 1596. That was to rewrite history a little. In reality Robert was just a well-to-do local farmer who called himself a husbandman. But, however distantly, he came from an ancient family, and he was the father of Mary, the poet's mother.

MARY ARDEN'S CHILDHOOD HOME: A PLACE OF SUBSTANCE

Thanks to a fascinating piece of archival detective work, the house in which Mary lived up to her marriage was identified in 2001 as Glebe House in Wilmcote, four miles north of Stratford. The house has a Victorian brick skin, but up on the second floor is Tudor lath and plaster, and beams whose tree rings reveal they were cut in 1514. It started life as a plain hall house 55 feet long with an open hall in the middle, and a chamber with a bedroom floor at one end and the kitchen at the other; outside was a workshop. In the yard stood cattle and hay barns, a stable, a well and a privy. Mary's father had about 135 acres, with another holding of 30 acres called Asbies and further land at Snitterfield. It was a sizeable holding for a husbandman of the day.

So Mary, one of seven sisters, grew up as the daughter of a prosperous farmer and bearer of the oldest name in Warwickshire. By a great stroke of luck Robert Arden's will, dated November 1556, survives in Worcester Record Office.