

Who Was Shakespeare?

As the Poet Laureate, John Masefield, describes in the accompanying study of Shakespeare, little that is reliably true is known about England's greatest poet and playwright. The man's genius has utterly outlived the man.

STRATFORD-ON-AVON is cleaner, better paved, and perhaps more populous than it was in Shakespeare's time. Several streets of mean red-brick houses have been built during the last half-century. Hotels, tea rooms, refreshment rooms, and the shops where the tripper may buy things to remind him that he has been where greatness lived, give the place an air at once prosperous and parasitic.

The town contains a few comely old buildings. The Shakespeare house, a detached double dwelling, once the home of the poet's father, stands on the north side of Henley Street. A room on the first floor, at the western end, is shown to visitors as the room in which the poet was born. There is not the slightest evidence to show that he was born there. One scanty scrap of fact exists to suggest that he was born at the eastern end. The two dwellings have now been converted into one, which serves as museum. New Place, the house where Shakespeare died, was pulled down in the middle of the eighteenth century. For one museum the less let us be duly thankful.

The church in which Shakespeare, his wife, and little son are buried stands near the river. It is a beautiful building of a type common in Cotswold country.

THE church is rather larger and rather more profusely carved than most. Damp, or some mildness in the stone, has given much of the ornament a weathered look. Shakespeare is buried seventeen feet down near the north wall of the chancel. His wife is buried in another grave a few feet from him.

The country about Stratford is uninteresting, pretty and well watered. A few miles away the Cotswold hills rise. They have a bold beauty, very pleasant after the flatness of the plain. The wolds toward Stratford grow many oaks and beeches. Farther east, they are wilder and barer. Little brooks spring up among the hills. The nooks and valleys are planted with orchards. Old, grey Cotswold farmhouses, and little, grey, lovely Cotswold villages show that in Shakespeare's time the country was prosperous and alive.

It was sheep country then. The wolds were sheep walks. Life took thought for Shakespeare. She bred him, mind and bone, in a two-fold district of hill and valley, where country life was at its best and the beauty of England at its bravest. Afterward, she placed him where there was the most and the best life of his time. Work so calm as his can only have come from a happy nature, happily

fated. Life made a golden day for her golden soul. The English blessed by that soul have raised no theatre for the playing of the soul's thanksgiving.

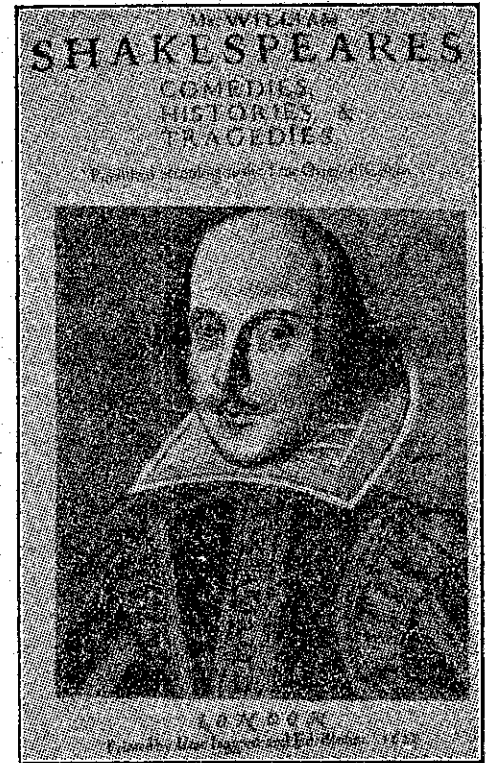
Legends about Shakespeare began to spring up in Stratford soon as there was a demand for them. Legends are a stupid man's excuse for his want of understanding. They are not evidence. Setting aside the legends, the lies, the surmises and the imputations, several uninteresting things are certainly known about him.

WE know that he was the first son and third child of John Shakespeare, a country trader settled in Stratford, and of Mary his wife; that he was baptised on April 26, 1564, and that in 1582 he got with child a woman named Anne or Agnes Hathaway, eight years older than himself. Her relatives saw to it that he married her. A daughter (Susanna) was born to him in May, 1583, less than six months after the marriage. In January, 1585, twins were born to him, a son and a daughter.

At this point he disappears. Legend, written down from a hundred to a hundred and sixty years after the event, says that he was driven out of the county for poaching, that he was a country schoolmaster, that he made a "very bitter" ballad upon a landlord, that he tramped to London, that he held horses outside the theatre doors, and that at last he was received into a theatrical company "in a very mean rank." This is all legend, not evidence. That he was a lawyer's clerk, a soldier in the Low Countries, a seaman, or a printer, as some have written books to attempt to show, is not evidence, nor legend, but wild surmise.

It is fairly certain that the company which first received him was the Earl of Leicester's company, then performing at The Theatre, in Shoreditch. The company changed its patron and its theatre several times, but Shakespeare, having been admitted to it, stayed with

In commemoration of the 315th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, a selection of his works will be broadcast from 1YA and 2YA on April 23.



The engraving by Martin Droeshout to which reference is made in the accompanying article.

it throughout his theatrical career. He acted with it at The Theatre, at the Rose and Globe Theatres, at the Court, at the Inns of Court, and possibly on many stages in the provinces. For many years he professed the quality of actor. Legend says that he acted well in what are "character parts." Soon after his entrance into the profession he began to show a talent for improving the plays of others.

Nothing interesting is known of his subsequent life, except that he wrote great poetry and made money by it. It is plain that he was a shrewd, careful, and capable man of affairs, and that he cared, as all wise men care, for rank and an honourable state. He strove with a noble industry to obtain these and succeeded. He prospered, he bought New Place at Stratford, he invested in land, in theatre shares, and in houses.

DURING the last few years of his life he retired to New Place, where he led the life of a country gentleman. He died there on April 23, 1616, aged fifty-two years.

Little is known of his human relationships. He is described as "gentle." Had he been not gentle we should know more of him. Ben Jonson "loved the man," and says that "he was, indeed, honest and of an open and free nature." John Webster speaks of his "right happy and copious industry." An actor who wrote more than thirty plays during twenty years of rehearsing, acting, and theatre management can have had little time for mixing with the world.

That we know little of his human relationships is one of the blessed facts about him. That we conjecture much is the penalty a