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opening extract from

The Life and Times of William Shakespeare

Written by

Kristen McDermott, PhD
and Ari Berk, PhD

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The Life and Times of *William Shakespeare*

A recollection of his years and works, done in April, the yeere of oure Lord 1613, upon the eve of his departure from *London* to retirement in *Stratford-upon-Avon*



Written and Compiled by
Kristen McDermott, PhD and Ari Berk, PhD

Including extracts from the works of
William Shakespeare, gentleman and poet

ILLUSTRATED

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Childhood Days & Stratford Ways

"WHEN THAT I WAS AN' A LITTLE TINY BOY..."
TWELFTH NIGHT, 5.1

I may dwell in London, the greatest city in Christendom, but in sooth I remain a country lad right enough, who walked the same lanes and hedgerows as you, dearest, and your sister Susannah and your poor brother Hamnet. My earliest memories are of May Day and harvest home, sailing ships of straw upon the River Avon and tormenting the geese in the cornfields. I loved well the forest of Arden, named for my mother's family. To myself and my adventurous siblings, Joan, Gilbert, Dickon and Ned, it was a magical wood where the fair folk watched us act our little plays of hunters, of pirates and of course, of Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

Small wonder my plays are filled with country folk – the shepherds, the herdsmen, the tillers and the sicklemen of my youth. Listen carefully – the wisest of my characters are "hard-handed men", who know the ways of the land and the people who live in and on it. They may speak roughly, but they speak true.

William Shakespeare was an ordinary boy, the eldest son in an ordinary family of farmers and tradesmen, who lived in an ordinary little town called Stratford-upon-Avon, in the green heart of England. He was born in 1564, and the world he lived in was, in many ways, both like and unlike our own, four-and-a-half centuries later.

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Little Will was the especially cherished child of John and Mary Shakespeare; his parents' first two babies, Joan and Margaret, both died in infancy, and William himself lived through a particularly bad outbreak of the bubonic plague. His parents were lucky compared to many others: of their eight children, five – Gilbert, another Joan, Richard, Edmund, and William – lived to adulthood. (William himself suffered the loss of his only son, Hamnet, in 1596.)



I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine.
A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2.1

Fishing on the Avon

Ah, sweet Avon, river of my dreams! You were in my mind when I made my beautiful Cleopatra an avid fisherwoman.

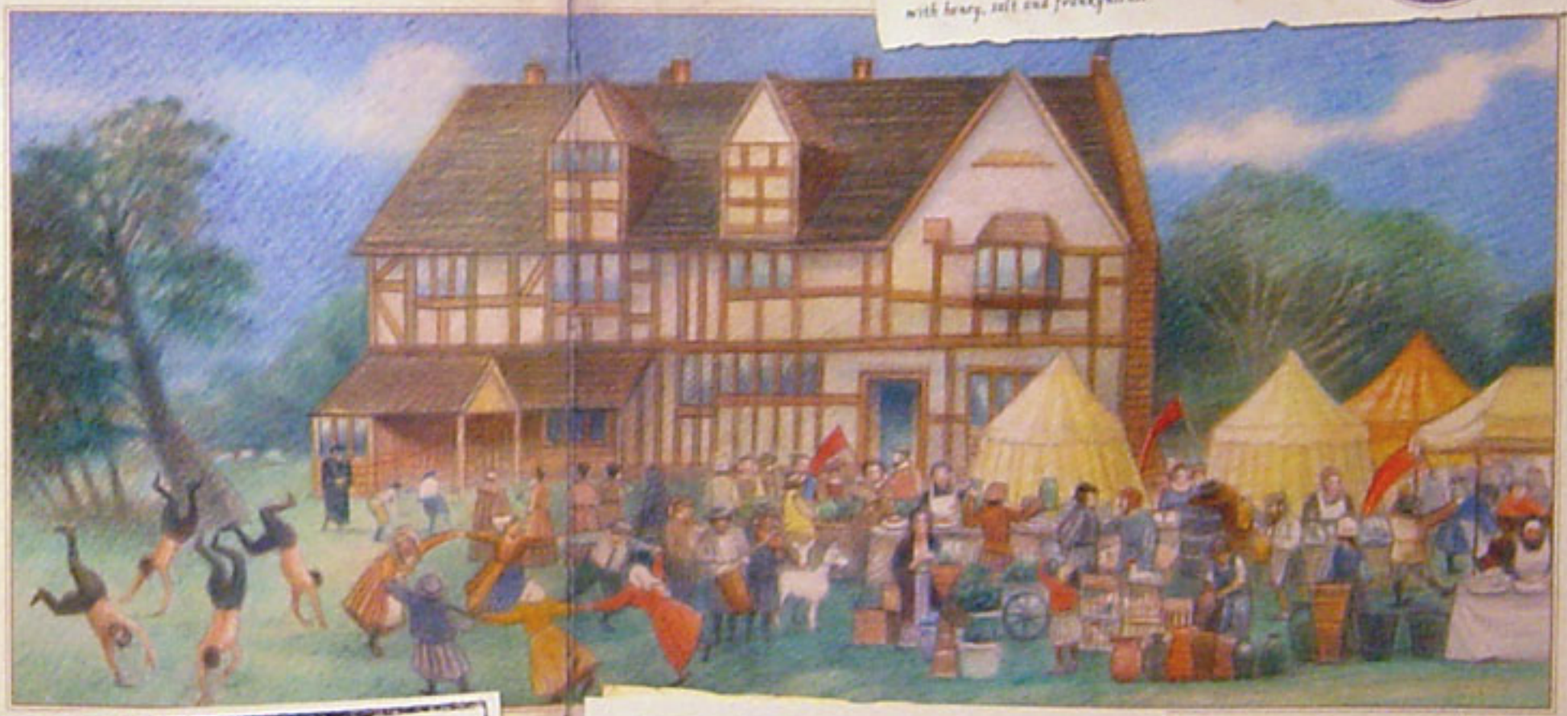
Give me mine angle; we'll to the river there,
My music playing far off, I will betray
Tawny-finn'd fishes; my bended hook shall pierce
Their slimy jaws; and as I draw them up,
I'll think them every one a Cleopatra.
Antony & Cleopatra, 2.5

I fish only in the waters of memory now, but soon I will tickle trouts in our own fresh stream once more.

Child-rearing Advice

Some old wives' advice from my mother's household book – though I do not recall boiling hare's brains for thee – and heaven knows thou were not slowe to speake!

- *The finest myelke comes from a wet nurse who is not ireasked, or squint eyed, nor with a misshapen nose or broke, or with blacke ill favoured teeth or with stynking breath.*
- *A twisking childe should be given hare's brains reduced to jelly.*
- *Thumb-suckyers should be off red a piece of liquorice root to mouthe.*
- *If the childe will not stop crying, toye placing it in a freshly dugge hole in the ground.*
- *For a childe that is slowe to speake, rub its tongue with honey, salt and frankyncense.*





IN JUNE A GOATHERD AND SHEPHERD ARGUE OVER WHO IS MOST VIRTUOUS – THOSE IN HIGH PLACES OR THE LOWLY AND MEEK.

Shepherd's Calendar

Edmund Spenser, the great poet, grew up most joyous visions of shepherds and milkmaids in the twelve parts of his 'Shepherd's Calendar'. However, they bear little likeness to the hearty Midland folk I know. No fierce quarrels or pining pastorals for my neighbours – give them a drum and fiddle, plenty of ale and the story can go hang!

John Shakespeare was prosperous and well-liked during his son's early years. He served as an alderman of their comfortable town and was even the high bailiff, or mayor, for a term. He also had the enviable post of town ale-taster. John was rich enough to send William to school, and to afford a large two-storey house with a vegetable garden. His wife's family owned several farms nearby, where William probably played and learned many of the country customs that are described in his plays.

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John Shakespeare worked hard for a living, but he had hopes that his bright and imaginative son William would grow up to be someone special.

