



William Shakespeare

(c. 1564-1616)

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William Shakespeare, often called England's national poet, is considered the greatest dramatist of all time. His works are loved throughout the world, but Shakespeare's personal life is shrouded in mystery.

Who Was William Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare was an English poet, playwright and actor of the [Renaissance](#) era. He was an important member of the King's Men company of theatrical players from roughly 1594 onward.

Known throughout the world, Shakespeare's writings capture the range of human emotion and conflict and have been celebrated for more than 400 years. And yet, the

There are two primary sources that provide historians with an outline of his life. One is his work — the plays, poems and sonnets — and the other is official documentation such as church and court records. However, these provide only brief sketches of specific events in his life and yield little insight into the man himself.

When Was Shakespeare Born?

No birth records exist, but an old church record indicates that a William Shakespeare was baptized at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564. From this, it is believed he was born on or near April 23, 1564, and this is the date scholars acknowledge as Shakespeare's birthday.

Located about 100 miles northwest of London, during Shakespeare's time Stratford-upon-Avon was a bustling market town along the River Avon and bisected by a country road.

Family

Shakespeare was the third child of John Shakespeare, a leather merchant, and Mary

three younger brothers, Gilbert, Richard and Edmund.

Before Shakespeare's birth, his father became a successful merchant and held official positions as alderman and bailiff, an office resembling a mayor. However, records indicate John's fortunes declined sometime in the late 1570s.

Childhood and Education

Scant records exist of Shakespeare's childhood and virtually none regarding his education. Scholars have surmised that he most likely attended the King's New School, in Stratford, which taught reading, writing and the classics.

Being a public official's child, Shakespeare would have undoubtedly qualified for free tuition. But this uncertainty regarding his education has led some to raise questions about the authorship of his work (and even about whether or not Shakespeare really existed).

Wife and Children

Shakespeare married [Anne Hathaway](#) on November 28, 1582, in Worcester, in Canterbury Province. Hathaway was from Shottery, a small village a mile west of Stratford. Shakespeare was 18 and Anne was 26, and, as it turns out, pregnant.

Their first child, a daughter they named Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. Two years later, on February 2, 1585, twins Hamnet and Judith were born. Hamnet later died of unknown causes at age 11.



Shakespeare's Lost Years

There are seven years of Shakespeare's life where no records exist after the birth of his twins in 1585. Scholars call this period the "lost years," and there is wide speculation on what he was doing during this period.

One theory is that he might have gone into hiding for poaching game from the local landlord, Sir Thomas Lucy. Another possibility is that he might have been working as an assistant schoolmaster in Lancashire.

It's generally believed he arrived in London in the mid- to late 1580s and may have found work as a horse attendant at some of London's finer theaters, a scenario updated centuries later by the countless aspiring actors and playwrights in Hollywood and Broadway.

The King's Men

By the early 1590s, documents show Shakespeare was a managing partner in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in London with which he was connected for most of his career.

Considered the most important troupe of its time, the company changed its name to the King's Men following the crowning of King James I in 1603. From all accounts, the King's Men company was very popular. Records show that Shakespeare had works published and sold as popular literature.

Although the theater culture in 16th century England was not highly admired by people of high rank, some of the nobility were good patrons of the performing arts and friends of the actors.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

PLAYWRIGHT | C. 1564–1616

William Shakespeare was an English playwright and poet who is widely considered to be the greatest dramatist of all time. His most notable

QUICK FACTS



Wrote 37
plays



Father
of three



Married
Anne Hathaway



Created the
Globe Theater



Mysterious
personal life

"To be, or not to be, that is the question."

BIOGRAPHY

Photo: Getty Images

Actor and Playwright

By 1592, there is evidence Shakespeare earned a living as an actor and a playwright in London and possibly had several plays produced.

The September 20, 1592 edition of the *Stationers' Register* (a guild publication) includes an article by London playwright Robert Greene that takes a few jabs at Shakespeare:

"...There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart
wrapped in a Plover's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as

the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country," Greene wrote of Shakespeare.

Scholars differ on the interpretation of this criticism, but most agree that it was Greene's way of saying Shakespeare was reaching above his rank, trying to match better known and educated playwrights like [Christopher Marlowe](#), Thomas Nashe or Greene himself.

Early in his career, Shakespeare was able to attract the attention of Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, to whom he dedicated his first and second published poems: "Venus and Adonis" (1593) and "The Rape of Lucrece" (1594).

By 1597, Shakespeare had already written and published 15 of his 37 plays. Civil records show that at this time he purchased the second-largest house in Stratford, called New House, for his family.

It was a four-day ride by horse from Stratford to London, so it's believed that Shakespeare spent most of his time in the city writing and acting and came home once a year during the 40-day Lenten period, when the theaters were closed.

Globe Theater

By 1599, Shakespeare and his business partners built their own theater on the south bank of the Thames River, which they called the Globe Theater.

In 1605, Shakespeare purchased leases of real estate near Stratford for 440 pounds, which doubled in value and earned him 60 pounds a year. This made him an entrepreneur as well as an artist, and scholars believe these investments gave him the time to write his plays uninterrupted.

Shakespeare's Writing Style

Shakespeare's early plays were written in the conventional style of the day, with elaborate metaphors and rhetorical phrases that didn't always align naturally with the story's plot or characters

However, Shakespeare was very innovative, adapting the traditional style to his own purposes and creating a freer flow of words.

With only small degrees of variation, Shakespeare primarily used a metrical pattern consisting of lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse, to compose his plays. At the same time, there are passages in all the plays that deviate from this and use forms of poetry or simple prose.

William Shakespeare: Plays

While it's difficult to determine the exact chronology of Shakespeare's plays, over the course of two decades, from about 1590 to 1613, he wrote a total of 37 plays revolving around several main themes: histories, tragedies, comedies and tragicomedies.

Early Works: Histories and Comedies

With the exception of the tragic love story *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's first plays were mostly histories. *Henry VI (Parts I, II and III)*, *Richard II* and *Henry V* dramatize the destructive results of weak or corrupt rulers and have been interpreted by drama

Historians of Shakespearean drama justify the origin of the **Tudor Dynasty**.

[Julius Caesar](#) portrays upheaval in Roman politics that may have resonated with viewers at a time when England's aging monarch, [Queen Elizabeth I](#), had no legitimate heir, thus creating the potential for future power struggles.

Shakespeare also wrote several comedies during his early period: the whimsical *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the romantic *Merchant of Venice*, the wit and wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing* and the charming *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.

Other plays written before 1600 include *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *King John*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry V*.

Works after 1600: Tragedies and Tragicomedies

It was in Shakespeare's later period, after 1600, that he wrote the tragedies *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. In these, Shakespeare's characters present vivid impressions of human temperament that are timeless and universal.

Possibly the best known of these plays is *Hamlet*, which explores betrayal, retribution, incest and moral failure. These moral failures often drive the twists and turns of Shakespeare's plots, destroying the hero and those he loves.

In Shakespeare's final period, he wrote several tragicomedies. Among these are *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Though graver in tone than the comedies, they are not the dark tragedies of *King Lear* or *Macbeth* because they end with reconciliation and forgiveness.

Other plays written during this period include *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, *Pericles* and [Henry VIII](#).

When Did Shakespeare Die?

Tradition holds that Shakespeare died on his 52nd birthday, April 23, 1616, but some scholars believe this is a myth. Church records show he was interred at Trinity Church on April 25, 1616.

The exact cause of Shakespeare's death is unknown, though many believe he died following a brief illness.

In his will, he left the bulk of his possessions to his eldest daughter, Susanna. Though entitled to a third of his estate, little seems to have gone to his wife, Anne, whom he bequeathed his "second-best bed." This has drawn speculation that she had fallen out of favor, or that the couple was not close.

However, there is very little evidence the two had a difficult marriage. Other scholars note that the term "second-best bed" often refers to the bed belonging to the household's master and mistress — the marital bed — and the "first-best bed" was reserved for guests.

Did Shakespeare Write His Own Plays?

About 150 years after his death, questions arose about the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. Scholars and literary critics began to float names like Christopher Marlowe, Edward de Vere and [Francis Bacon](#) — men of more known backgrounds, literary accreditation, or inspiration — as the true authors of the plays.

Much of this stemmed from the sketchy details of Shakespeare's life and the dearth of contemporary primary sources. Official records from the Holy Trinity Church and the Stratford government record the existence of a Shakespeare, but none of these attest to him being an actor or playwright.

Skeptics also questioned how anyone of such modest education could write with the intellectual perceptiveness and poetic power that is displayed in Shakespeare's works. Over the centuries, several groups have emerged that question the authorship of Shakespeare's plays.

The most serious and intense skepticism began in the 19th century when adoration for Shakespeare was at its highest. The detractors believed that the only hard evidence surrounding Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon described a man from modest beginnings who married young and became successful in real estate.

Members of the Shakespeare Oxford Society (founded in 1957) put forth arguments that English aristocrat and poet Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true author of the poems and plays of "William Shakespeare."

The Oxfordians cite de Vere's extensive knowledge of aristocratic society, his education, and the structural similarities between his poetry and that found in the works attributed to Shakespeare. They contend that Shakespeare had neither the education nor the literary training to write such eloquent prose and create such rich characters.

However, the vast majority of Shakespearean scholars contend that Shakespeare wrote all his own plays. They point out that other playwrights of the time also had sketchy histories and came from modest backgrounds.

They contend that Stratford's New Grammar School curriculum of Latin and the classics could have provided a good foundation for literary writers. Supporters of Shakespeare's authorship argue that the lack of evidence about Shakespeare's life doesn't mean his life didn't exist. They point to evidence that displays his name on the title pages of published poems and plays.

Examples exist of authors and critics of the time acknowledging Shakespeare as the author of plays such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *King John*.

Royal records from 1601 show that Shakespeare was recognized as a member of the King's Men theater company and a Groom of the Chamber by the court of King James I, where the company performed seven of Shakespeare's plays.

There is also strong circumstantial evidence of personal relationships by contemporaries who interacted with Shakespeare as an actor and a playwright.

Literary Legacy

What seems to be true is that Shakespeare was a respected man of the dramatic arts

Beginning with the Romantic period of the early 1800s and continuing through the Victorian period, acclaim and reverence for Shakespeare and his work reached its height. In the 20th century, new movements in scholarship and performance have rediscovered and adopted his works.

Today, his plays are highly popular and constantly studied and reinterpreted in performances with diverse cultural and political contexts. The genius of Shakespeare's characters and plots are that they present real human beings in a wide range of emotions and conflicts that transcend their origins in Elizabethan England.

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