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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Born: Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England;
April 23, 1564

Died: Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England;
April 23, 1616

Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in English and one of the greatest writers of all time, famous for his use of language, character portraits, and keen insight into human nature and human problems.

BIOGRAPHY

Like many commoners who lived and died during the Renaissance, William Shakespeare left only a meager record on which scholars have been able to make inferences about his life both in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon and in London. Nevertheless, painstaking research of available church and civic records has allowed biographers to construct a reasonable portrait of the man commonly considered the greatest English writer and one of the world's most significant literary artists. The documentary record, collected and analyzed painstakingly in scholarly monographs such as Samuel Schoenbaum's *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975), suggests Shakespeare led a comfortable middle-class life, marketing his plays and managing a successful acting company, the profits from which made him wealthy and allowed him to spend considerable time in Stratford-upon-Avon during the final years of his life.

Baptismal records in Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, indicate that Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564; working backward, scholars have fixed by common agreement the date of his birth as April 23 of that year. He was the eldest son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, respectable city business people who achieved some status

in the little community along the Avon River in western England. John Shakespeare rose to become an alderman and served for a time as bailiff, the highest office in the city. His son was undoubtedly educated in the grammar schools there. If the plays are any indication, William received a sound grounding in Christian ethics, rhetoric, and classical literature. He obviously understood Latin and possibly even some Greek, though Ben Jonson complained that Shakespeare's classical education was seriously wanting. Because he did not attend a university, he did not benefit from the kind of entrée into polite society that contemporaries such as Jonson and later John Milton would have experienced. By the time Shakespeare began writing plays, he was conversant with ancient and modern historians and with philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne. His clear use of writers, such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer, supports the claim that he was also quite familiar with literary works of the Continent and his native England.

In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years older than he. The couple eventually had three children: a daughter, Susanna, and twins, a boy the Shakespeares called Hamnet and a girl, Judith. No doubt at some time during the decade of the 1580's the aspiring playwright left his family in their Stratford-upon-Avon surroundings to make his fortune in London. There is no evidence that during his time away from his hometown Shakespeare was ever estranged from his wife and children. On the contrary, available evidence

suggests he took great pains to maintain his domestic ties during the decades that he spent working in London.

By 1592, Shakespeare had become sufficiently well known in literary circles to be the object of a now-famous attack by the English poet and playwright Robert Greene, who complained that the young upstart was being presumptuous in trying to compete with more distinguished members of the literary establishment. Contemporary records refer to Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III* (pr. c. 1590-1592, pb. 1594-1595) as early as 1589, and from that date until 1613 his comedies, histories, and tragedies were performed in open-air theaters and later in the private venues frequented by nobility and well-to-do citizens. During the 1590's, Shakespeare also tried his hand at nondramatic poetry, publishing *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). He also began writing sonnets, a fashionable practice in the 1590's, eventually completing a sequence of 154 poems which were published in 1609.

Sometime around 1595 Shakespeare became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Company, an acting troupe. In addition to his work as a playwright, he also performed on stage, appearing in his own works and in those by others, including dramas by rival playwright Jonson. Shortly after the ascension of James I to the English throne in 1603, he joined the King's Men, a troupe that enjoyed the special patronage of the sovereign. During these years of intense business activity in London, he maintained close ties to Stratford-upon-Avon, purchasing property and occasionally finding himself the plaintiff or defendant in various lawsuits there. Meanwhile, every year saw the introduction of one or more new Shakespeare plays into the London "season." In 1608, he had become sufficiently well off to enter into a contract with half a dozen other theatrical entrepreneurs to purchase the second Blackfriar's Theater in London. By 1610, it appears he had tired of London life. Evidence indicates that in that year he returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he enjoyed a life of active retirement. He continued to work on various dramatic productions, collaborating with younger playwrights on a number of scripts. He died at his home in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616, and was buried there two days later.

ANALYSIS

The high opinion in which Shakespeare has been held since the middle of the eighteenth century has often led to hyperbole in discussion of his literary merits. In *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1974), Harry Levin has observed that Shakespeare's works have been "accorded a place in our culture above and beyond topmost place in our literature. They have been virtually canonized as humanistic scriptures, the tested residue of pragmatic wisdom, a general collection of quotable texts and usable examples" for guiding human actions. The dramatist's works rank beside the Bible as the documents most referred to when explaining and illustrating the variegated qualities of human nature.

Any analysis of the general qualities of Shakespeare's plays must focus initially on the writer's ability to create characters. More than any other author in English, Shakespeare has been able to bring to life individuals who have the mark of reality about them. Throughout the dramas, Shakespeare tries to avoid the use of type characters, working instead to individualize his creations through patterns of speech and thought. In an age when society believed people were governed by "humors" and the dominant characteristics one exhibited were a consequence of these physical states, Shakespeare was somewhat unusual. His great contemporary, Ben Jonson, prided himself on his ability to capture the essence of types in his dramas. Shakespeare, on the other hand, strives always to achieve distinction among his kings, fools, lovers, and villains.

Like most of his contemporaries, Shakespeare makes extensive use of both literary and historical sources for his dramas. Almost nothing in the Shakespeare canon is wholly original. Some of the earliest works are highly derivative; *The Comedy of Errors* (pr. c. 1592-1594, pb. 1623), for example, is taken from a Roman comedy. As he matured in his art, Shakespeare was able to transform materials from diverse sources, such as Plutarch's *Bioi paralleloi* (c. 105-115 C.E.; *Parallel Lives*, 1579) and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) into original works of dramatic art. His *Julius Caesar* and *Brutus*, his *Richard II* and *Prince Hal*, are modeled on the figures Shakespeare discovered in the histories he read. He was not at all averse, however, to changing his characters' motivations or even making them younger or older than they actually were if the dramatic interest of his plays was better served.

As important to him as the historical records on which he drew were the writings of both ancient and contemporary philosophers, whose ideas Shakespeare incorporates into his dramas. His writings are filled with allusions to various ancient authors, as well as to works by his contemporaries. He seems to have been especially influenced by the new movement in Humanism, exemplified best by the works of the French essayist Michel de Montaigne. Many of Shakespeare's plays exhibit an appreciation for the Aristotelean concept that virtuous action is a kind of golden mean between two extremes; for example, heroism lies between cowardice and foolhardiness.

Among Shakespeare's most notable contributions to literature was his innovative use of language. Like many of his contemporaries, he wrote much of his work in blank verse, the unrhymed iambic pentameter lines first used in English by Chaucer almost two hundred years earlier. He freely invented words and phrases that have since passed into the English language; to him is attributed the first use of words such as "lonely," "laughable," and even "critic." Additionally, his ability to turn out particularly apt and pithy phrases has resulted in the elevation of many of his coinages into aphorisms. "The devil can quote scripture" and "All that glitters is not gold," both adapted from *The Merchant of Venice* (pr. c. 1596-1597, pb. 1600), are but two examples. Many of the speeches he created for his characters have been taken out of context and recited as philosophical or patriotic dicta: Jacques's discourse on the seven ages of man in *As You Like It* (c. pr. 1599-1600, pb. 1623), or John of Gaunt's poetic survey of his homeland, "This royal throne of kings. . . . This blessed plot . . . this England," in *Richard II* (pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1600), are examples of many that could be cited.

Because the Elizabethan stage was usually a bare platform with little scenery and few props, Shakespeare often uses language to paint the scene for his audience. Direct references spoken by the characters make it clear to the audience, in the theater or at home with their texts, where a scene is taking place: "This castle hath a pleasant seat," King Duncan says upon arriving at Macbeth's home, notifying the audience that the scene has shifted; the young exiles in *As You Like It* are told that "This is the forest of Arden," so that the audience, too, will know where the action is now occurring.

More than any other dramatist, Shakespeare makes extensive use of metaphor to drive home a point. What some have dismissed as excessively "flowery" language is actually the dramatist's way of creating vivid pictures in the imagination of playgoers and readers. Hence, when Richard II returns from the wars in Ireland, he acknowledges his joy by comparing himself to "a long-parted mother with her child" who, upon reunion, "plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting." In the same play, when the soon-to-be-deposed king realizes how little support he has, he complains to his henchmen that it is now time to "Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes/ Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth." Among Shakespeare's favorite metaphors is that of the garden, to which he compares both individuals and the state. In *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622), the villain Iago dismisses the excuses made by Othello's rival, Roderigo, for failing to win Desdemona by reminding him that "our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners." In both *Richard II* and again in *Henry IV, Part I* (pr. c. 1597-1598, pb. 1598), the state of England is compared to a garden, which is in disarray because of the civil strife brought on by the king's profligacy and his usurper's inability to unite the rebels after Richard is deposed. Through the use of such language, Shakespeare makes his audience aware of the state of both individual and political affairs, drawing them into the action and allowing them to see the consequences of human acts.

HENRY IV, PARTS I AND II

First produced: *Part I*, c. 1597-1598 (first published, 1598); *Part II*, 1598 (first published, 1600)

Type of work: Play

An errant young prince learns how to rule his people before ascending the throne as England's greatest monarch.

It is no surprise that, near the beginning of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare and others in England were much concerned about the problems of royal succession. The aging Queen Elizabeth

I had no direct heirs. Some feared a bloody war among potential claimants to the throne. As a means of illustrating what might happen should usurpation occur, the playwright drafted four plays centered on the deposition of an earlier monarch, Richard II, and the eventual rise to power of one of England's greatest monarchs, Henry V.

The two parts of *Henry IV* dramatize the rebellion that plagued the reign of Henry IV, who had replaced his weak cousin, Richard II, as England's ruler. At the play's opening, the king's forces are assembled to battle those of the rebels, led by Henry Percy, called Hotspur. While political machinations go on at court, Henry IV's eldest son, Prince Hal, spends his time consorting with a group of dissolute brigands headed by the fat, life-loving Sir John Falstaff. Not until battle is imminent does Hal join his father; yet on the field at Shrewsbury he acquits himself well, felling Hotspur and leading the king's forces to victory.

In the second play, which continues the story after the Battle of Shrewsbury, Hal seems to slip back into his old habits. Falstaff appears to be leading the prince into a life of crime, and the Lord Chief Justice enters the fray to arrest the criminals Hal calls friends. At the end of the second play, however, when Henry IV dies, Hal assumes the throne and immediately banishes his friends, including Falstaff, directing that they be tried and punished for their crimes.

One of the enduring critical questions about these plays is why the prince turns on his friend almost immediately after ascending the throne. The answer lies in a clear understanding of the dramatist's thematic interests. In both plays, Shakespeare is concerned with the issue of regal succession. Even more important, however, he is interested in displaying the development of Prince Hal as a monarch. The young prince deals throughout with two "fathers": his real father, Henry IV, whose whole life is consumed with politics, and Jack Falstaff, who recognizes no laws but those that satisfy his own interests. That Hal must eventually choose between the two is made apparent in a long scene early in *Part I*, when the prince and Falstaff engage in role-playing. Speaking in his father's voice, Hal tells his friends that, when the time comes, he will indeed banish Falstaff. Such is the way, he suggests, that kings must act. Even before this point, however, he acknowledges

he is merely humoring himself by associating with Falstaff and his band of robbers, learning from them how the commoners view their ruler. In his first soliloquy, he says, in reference to them, "I know you all, and will awhile uphold/ the unyok'd humor of your idleness." Hal may enjoy cavorting with Falstaff and his crew, but he recognizes he will one day be required to assume his rightful position as England's ruler.

Hal's progress throughout the two plays dramatizes the proper education for kingship. He is intent on mastering the qualities that mark a good monarch: majesty, grace, and courage. In *Part I*, Hotspur and Falstaff serve as foils for the prince; the former's rash behavior leads to the downfall of the rebels, while the latter's cowardice almost costs the king's forces a victory. Similarly, in *Part II* Falstaff stands in opposition to the Lord Chief Justice, as Hal is able to see how important adherence to the law is for a man who would rule well.

AS YOU LIKE IT

First produced: c. 1599-1600 (first published, 1623)

Type of work: Play

Four couples explore the nature of love and discover its importance to society while wandering in the forest of Arden.

As You Like It is typical of Shakespeare's great comedies in many respects. The action of the play occurs in two locales, so that the values taken for granted at court may be presented for examination in the foreign setting of the forest. What might be described as the pattern of pastoral comedy is played out in this drama. The heroes and heroines of the play are forced to leave the city and retreat to the forest, where they learn the simple values of rustic life.

The dramatic action is precipitated by the usurpation of the country's throne by Duke Frederick, who deposes his elder brother, Duke Senior. When the play opens, Duke Senior has retreated to the forest of Arden. His daughter Rosalind has been allowed to remain at court, but her popularity makes Frederick jealous, so she too is banished.

Frederick's daughter Celia, bound to Rosalind by strong ties of affection, accompanies her to Arden. They are pursued there by Orlando, also a victim of persecution; his older brother Oliver hates him simply because he also is popular. In the forest, Rosalind disguises herself as a man for safety's sake. Her disguise allows her to test Orlando's love and to offer sage advice to other pairs of lovers, notably the shepherd Silvius and his beloved Phebe; the fool, Touchstone, and the object of his desire, Audrey; and Celia and Oliver who, while visiting Arden in search of his brother, is converted miraculously from his hatred for Orlando when the latter saves him from an attack by a lioness.

In the forest of Arden, Rosalind and Orlando discover what mature love really is: not something simply earthy or entirely ethereal, but rather a total, healthy appreciation of the beloved that allows one to recognize faults but forgive them readily. The



other three pairs of lovers serve as counterpoints to Rosalind and Orlando, representing the various forms of incomplete love. Throughout the play, the lovers are reminded of the tenuous nature of their feelings by the melancholic Jacques, who sees that all human efforts eventually end in death. The fool Touchstone, whose name signifies his role as a judge of

others' actions, also serves to call the other characters "back to earth" in a way, pointing out the irrationality of so much of their behavior when they are spurred on by love.

At the end of the play, however, all four pairs of lovers are married, signifying what for Shakespeare is the proper culmination of sensible courtship. The triumph of love at the end of the drama suggests Jacques's cynical view of life and society can and must be overcome if people are to create a harmonious society. Even Duke Frederick is cured of his greed and reconciled with his brother when he pursues the fugitives into the forest. It is significant, too, that most of those who have come into this magic land of Arden agree to return to the city after the marriage ceremony. There, pre-

sumably, they will live more wisely and fully, having learned the power of love and its role in perpetuating what is best in society.

HAMLET

First produced: c. 1600-1601 (first published, 1603)

Type of work: Play

The prince of Denmark plots to avenge the death of his father but dies tragically in trying to overthrow his uncle.

There is little debate that Shakespeare is the greatest Renaissance tragedian, and that *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608) and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* are the best examples of his work in that genre. Since its first production at the beginning of the seventeenth century, *Hamlet* has been the subject of intense critical inquiry, and the figure of Hamlet has been among the most intensely studied of any of Shakespeare's creations. Intellectual, self-reflective, alienated, and seemingly paralyzed by doubts about both himself and the circumstance in which he is called upon to act as an agent of revenge, Hamlet has come to be considered the quintessential modern hero.

For the subject of his drama, Shakespeare turned to a story already popular in English theaters; at least two earlier productions of the sad tale of the Danish prince had appeared in London playhouses. In many ways, *Hamlet* is typical of a subgenre immensely popular in Shakespeare's time: the revenge play. Most of these were bloody spectacles in which almost every character dies in the final act. The body-strewn stage in act 5 of *Hamlet* continues this tradition, as does the central action of the drama: the need for the young Hamlet to avenge the death of his father, the king, whose ghost informs Hamlet early in the play that he (the king) had been poisoned by Hamlet's Uncle Claudius so Claudius could become king and marry Hamlet's mother, the queen Gertrude.

The central dramatic interest in the play is the character of its hero. Hamlet sees himself as the "scourge and minister" of some higher order, returned from school in Germany to set right the

disorder in his realm caused by his uncle's murderous action. Unfortunately, the sensitive prince is not callous enough to ignore the doubts he has about the exact cause of his father's death. He has been told by his father's ghost that Claudius committed murder; other hints to that effect abound. The prince feels he must delay his revenge, however, until he is certain Claudius is guilty.

Compounding Hamlet's problem is the fact that his mother, whom he loves dearly, has married his uncle soon after the old king has died. It is not at all clear to Hamlet whether his mother has had a hand in the murder, whether she is simply unaware of Claudius's treachery, or whether she believes Claudius is innocent. Much is made of the mother-son relationship; Hamlet spends considerable time trying to convince his mother that she has made a mistake in marrying Claudius. Only when she finally comes to accept his view that the new king is somehow guilty does Hamlet decide to act. His decision is precipitated by several other actions as well, most notably the efforts of his supposed friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have him killed.

Many critics have observed that Hamlet is really too sensitive to effect the revenge that he intends. He is by nature melancholic, possessing a fatalistic disposition that borders on the suicidal. His most famous soliloquy focuses on the virtue of ending his

life. "To be, or not to be," he begins his musings; that is, indeed, a central question for him, since he sees little benefit in continuing to live in a world where injustice reigns. Nevertheless, he decides to act to avenge his father's murder—once he is certain he knows who has been involved in the plot to kill him. Viewing the world as a place where things are seldom as they

seem, he spends a good portion of his time trying to sort appearance from reality. He invents various devices to help illuminate the truth, such as his elaborate arrangement for a dumb show that will re-create the murder of his father in the presence of Claudius to try to make the king reveal his guilt. Hamlet is not

satisfied simply to take vengeance on his uncle clandestinely; he wants Claudius to admit his guilt.

For centuries, scholars have debated Hamlet's inability to act even when he has the opportunity to do so. Early in the play, his inactivity can be attributed to his lack of assurance that Claudius is guilty. Were he to kill the new king without justification, he would be seen as no better than a murderer himself, and no good would come of his action. Nevertheless, when he does appear to have sufficient evidence of Claudius's role in his father's murder, the prince still seems paralyzed. In a crucial scene after Claudius has seen the dumb show and left the room visibly upset, Hamlet finds his uncle praying in the castle's chapel. It is a perfect chance to slay the king, but Hamlet refrains because he says he does not want to send his uncle's soul to heaven. Such casuistry has been reason for several critics to claim that Shakespeare is simply drawing out the drama until the final catastrophe. By the final act, Hamlet has become totally fatalistic. Having killed Polonius accidentally, he has already bloodied his hands; he accepts the challenge of Polonius's son, Laertes, with resignation, knowing that he will probably be killed himself. In the final scene, all of the principals meet their end—and almost all by some mischance of fate. Despite the resounding encomium pronounced over the body of the slain prince, the bleak ending offers little encouragement for an audience who has witnessed this great tragedy. Surprisingly, however, the ending seems justified, in that order has been restored to the Danish kingdom, although won at a terrible price. Such is the lesson of most great tragedies, and *Hamlet* ranks with the very best examples of the genre.



THE TEMPEST

First produced: 1611 (first published, 1623)

Type of work: Play

Under the guidance of a statesman turned magician, a group of castaways on a Mediterranean island learn what it means to be truly human.

When Shakespeare came to write *The Tempest* in 1610, the recent establishment of English colonies

in the New World spurred interest among the dramatist's contemporaries in the differences among peoples in the two hemispheres. That led to philosophical speculations about human nature itself: Are all people the same, no matter where they live? How much does one's environment affect one's behavior and, more importantly, one's outlook on life? These are the questions that underlie Shakespeare's last drama, a play that transcends the traditional definitions of tragedy or comedy to encompass elements of both.

The action in *The Tempest* is set on a remote island where Prospero, the rightful duke of Milan, has been living in exile with his daughter, Miranda. They are attended by airy spirits and by the subhuman creature Caliban. As the play opens, Prospero creates a storm that causes a shipwreck. The castaways from the ship include the young nobleman, Ferdinand, whose interest in Miranda becomes apparent from the moment he sees her. For her part, Miranda does not know how to respond to Ferdinand's attention. She has never seen a man other than her father, although Caliban, certainly a male, displays some lurid interest in her, and she is appropriately repulsed by him. While the young lovers are working out their relationship, Prospero's brother, Antonio, who had usurped Prospero's throne, arrives at the island in search of Ferdinand. Prospero takes this opportunity to set things right, convincing his brother to give up his claims to the throne. At the play's end, everyone is ready to return to Milan, fortified with what they have learned about virtue while on the island.

More than one critic has pointed out the highly metaphoric nature of this drama and the extensive use of lyrical language throughout. *The Tempest* may be Shakespeare's most poetic play. That is not surprising, since Prospero is the dramatist's most definitive portrait of the artist. Like the poet (the word comes from the Greek, meaning "maker") who creates from nothing an illusion of reality and a commentary on truth, Prospero sustains the world around him on the island largely through his own efforts, and others are dependent on him for their very lives.

Hence, a central theme of this play is the investigation of the nature of reality itself. Throughout, Shakespeare deals with problems of reality and illusion. His central character, Prospero, has the

powers of a magician; he is able to cast spells, affect the elements, and influence action by invoking mystical powers. This master of illusion suggests on more than one occasion that what is real is not always what one perceives, and that life itself is merely an illusion, a fiction grounded in reality but transcending it. In fact, the implication is that what is most valuable about human nature cannot always be explained in realistic terms. Equally important is Shakespeare's contrasting nature with art or artifice. Prospero's world is one that he has constructed (often, it is suggested, with the help of his magic) out of the natural world that he has found on the island. Through this contrast, Shakespeare is able to explore an issue that was becoming of significant concern to his contemporaries: Are individuals better in their natural state, or in the civilized society that they have created? If one assumes Caliban is the playwright's example of "natural man," it is clear on which side of the debate Shakespeare rests. Order, decorum, and artifice are held in high esteem by the admirable characters in this drama—and, by implication, they are the values in which Shakespeare himself believes.

SONNETS

First published: 1609

Type of work: Lyric poetry

In a series of 154 poems, Shakespeare tells the story of an older poet captivated by a younger man and simultaneously enthralled by a sensual woman.

To appreciate Shakespeare's accomplishments in creating his sonnets, it is important to understand the history of the genre. Both the form of the individual sonnet and the idea of the sonnet sequence were developed in the fourteenth century by Petrarch, who wrote a series of poems celebrating a beautiful but unattainable woman he called Laura. Petrarch's formula became a model copied by poets throughout Europe during the next two hundred years. Generally the speaker in the poems is a man who explores his feelings for a particular woman and laments the fact that she

will not reciprocate his feelings. These fourteen-line poems are divided into two major sections; usually a problem or argument is presented in the octet, and a resolution provided in the sextet. A tight rhyme scheme binds each section together, making the construction of a sonnet particularly challenging.

By the 1590's, a number of English poets had tried their hands at composing sonnets; among the more notable sequences were those of Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. It is not surprising, then, that Shakespeare took up the challenge of writing a sonnet sequence. Like his contemporaries, he initially circulated his poems in manuscript; the first publication in 1609 may have occurred without his consent. Unlike most other sonneteers, however, Shakespeare modifies the form of the Petrarchan sonnet, substituting for the octet-sextet pattern a format of three quatrains followed by a concluding couplet. Working with his new rhyme scheme, he takes greater liberties in constructing his arguments. Rather than posing a problem in the first eight lines and offering a resolution in the concluding six, he often uses the quatrains to develop a theme or examine a subject from three different perspectives before bringing his argument to a close in the couplet.

Even more importantly, he abandons the convention of having his speaker address his works to an unattainable lady. Instead, he creates a cast of characters whose story is told through the individual poems. His speaker is an older poet who has developed an affection for a younger man. That young man's attentions are also courted by a rival poet and by a sensual woman who is the older poet's mistress. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to the young man; in most of the remaining ones the older poet speaks to or about the woman. This complex dramatic situation allows Shakespeare to explore in his sequence of 154 poems three major themes: the nature of love, the vicissitudes of time, and the permanence of poetry.

While individual sonnets may be understood without reference to their place within the sequence, an appreciation for the tensions created by the overarching structure of the sequence gives added poignancy to particular poems. For example, Sonnet 18 opens with a question, asking "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" The poem is an extended comparison of the young man to a

natural phenomenon. In some ways this sonnet is Petrarchan, in that the first two couplets work together to present an argument, while the final six lines offer an answer to the dilemma posed in the first eight lines. In the first and second quatrains the speaker points out some of the unpleasant aspects of a time of the year often thought of as decidedly pleasurable. The "rough winds" often shake the newly sprung flower buds. The season itself is short. The sun, that "eye of heaven" thought to give gentle warmth and a golden hue to the day, is sometimes too hot, or its aura dimmed by the vagaries of climate. The stress is on the changeability of the natural world. By contrast, in the sextet the poet promises that the young man's "eternal summer"—his beauty and youth—will not fade, because the speaker has the power to make these qualities permanent through his verse. The speaker personifies the concept of death in order to continue his argument, stating "Nor shall death brag" that the young man "wander'st in his shade"—that is, that the young man has died. Of course, the youth may die physically, but he will live on in the "eternal lines" of this poem, since as long as "men can breathe, or eyes can see," this sonnet will keep the youth alive to readers.

The poet makes a similar argument in Sonnet 65, in which the ravages of time are compared to a number of tempestuous natural occurrences, asking in a series of four questions how can "beauty" compete against the inevitability of decay and change. The first two quatrains lay out a litany of destruction in which Time is personified as a ravaging, vengeful, and jealous enemy. "Sad mortality" is stronger than the strongest manmade objects ("brass") or natural phenomena ("boundless sea"). There seems no way simple beauty ("summer's honey breath") can withstand the ravages of nature, when "Time decays" even "rocks impregnable" and "gates of steel." In the third quatrain the poet asks how he might protect the young man from what seems to be his inevitable fate. Comparing him to a jewel, the poet wonders how he might lock away this treasure to keep Time from gathering him up. He ponders further how he might keep back the "swift foot" of Time from running off with the young man—that is, stealing away his beauty and eventually his life. Again, the solution presented in the couplet suggests that the "miracle" of immortality lies in the "black ink" of

poetry. Because the poet has written about the young man, the youth will be forever present and forever young in the lines of the sonnet.

Just how far Shakespeare was willing to go in flaunting conventions of the sonnet sequence can be seen in Sonnet 130, in which the older poet describes the woman with whom he is in love. This is the same woman who is angling to seduce the young man who has captured the older poet's affections. Whereas the traditional lady addressed in sonnets is blond, fair-skinned, and ethereal, the "mistress" spoken of in this poem is dark and earthy. Shakespeare uses a series of contrasts to emphasize her qualities, beginning by noting her eyes "are nothing like the sun"—not bright and dazzling. "Coral" is more red than her lips; her breasts are not white like snow, but "dun." He calls her hairs "black wires," and finds her cheeks lack the soft pallor of roses. In one of the more stunning comparisons, he says there is much more delight in perfumes than in his mistress' breath, which "reeks." Nevertheless, although her voice is raspy and unmusical, he loves to hear her speak. Unlike the women praised by other sonneteers who are supposedly akin to goddesses, his mistress "treads on the ground"—that is, she is a real woman whose attractions are likewise commonplace yet substantial. As a result, the poet says his beloved is as "rare" as any woman who has been compared—somewhat ridiculously, in his view—to heavenly objects. This anti-Petrarchan comparison not only gives a touch of humor to Shakespeare's sequence but also suggests that his ideas of sexuality and human relationships are grounded in reality rather than clouded with some form of Platonic idealization.

Since their publication in 1609, Shakespeare's sonnets have generated considerable interest from

both critics and biographers. Many attempts have been made to determine the identities of the people whom Shakespeare immortalizes in his sonnet sequence. For centuries critics attempted to explain away the hints of homosexuality suggested by the older poet's fascination with the young man; more recently those tendencies have been addressed more dispassionately, or even celebrated. The technical mastery of individual poems has been the subject of thousands of commentaries, most noting Shakespeare's exceptional ability to use metaphor both as a means of description and as a vehicle for offering insights into the perennial issues of human love, the nature of mutability, and the function of poetry.

SUMMARY

William Shakespeare's status as an artist is succinctly captured in the opening line of Matthew Arnold's sonnet dedicated to the dramatist: "Others abide our question; thou alone art still." Although eighteenth century writers, critics, and playgoers found his work too artificial, too complicated, and too much given to extravagant wit and wordplay, since the nineteenth century he has been accorded primacy of place among English writers of all genres. Even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when new critical approaches to literature caused serious revision in the reputation of many other writers, Shakespeare remained universally revered as a writer of the first order, able to bring to life fictional creations in situations that teach the reader some of the eternal truths about human nature. To use another of Arnold's phrases, Shakespeare continues to serve as a touchstone against which artistic excellence is measured.

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does William Shakespeare consider the proper relationship between rulers and subjects in society?
- In his sonnet sequence, Shakespeare writes repeatedly about poets and poetry. What does he see as the role for poetry in society?
- What would Shakespeare consider to be the ideal relationship between parents and children?
- How does Shakespeare make use of history in creating the plots of his plays?
- What dramatic use does Shakespeare make of minor characters in his plays, especially characters from the lower classes?
- In portraying women, in what ways is Shakespeare bound by attitudes toward gender relationships common to his own age? Is there evidence that he represents a more modern view regarding such relationships?
- Many of Shakespeare's works deal with matters of romantic love. How does he use conventions from the medieval courtly love tradition, and in what ways does he present more progressive views of romantic relationships?
- How does Shakespeare make use of Renaissance conventions of dramatic tragedy? How does he modify these for specific thematic purposes in plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, or *Julius Caesar*?

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