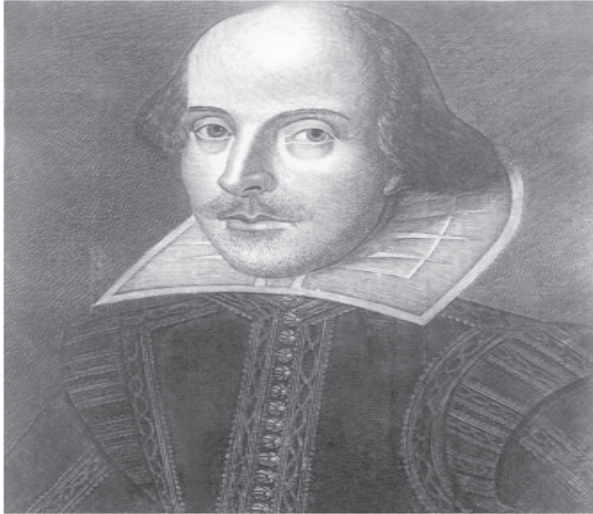


Biography of William Shakespeare



April 23, 1564 - April 23, 1616
(Library of Congress)

More has been written—with less certainty—about the life of William Shakespeare than about any other literary figure. Despite murmurings to the contrary, enough records and references exist to enable scholars to outline with confidence Shakespeare's life and career as poet, playwright, actor, and entrepreneur—but not to expose the inner workings of his genius. The register of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon notes the christening of William Shakespeare on April 26, 1564. Shakespeare's birthday is traditionally celebrated on April 23, the feast day of Saint George, England's patron saint, and the day the dramatist died in 1616.

William was the son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. John worked with leather goods and traded in wool and farm produce. He rose to be the equivalent of mayor of Stratford but suffered reversals and stopped attending council meetings and church. William very likely attended Stratford's free grammar school, where he was drilled in Latin and introduced to Plautus and Terence, Ovid, Plutarch, and Seneca, among other classical sources he would later use.

At age eighteen William hastily married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior and pregnant. Their daughter Susanna was born on May 26, 1583. On February 2, 1585, twins Hamnet and Judith

Shakespeare—named after Stratford friends Hamnet and Judith Sadler—were baptized. The domestic life of the Shakespeare family in Stratford has given rise to much speculation, but we lack evidence to make meaningful observations. All we know is that sometime between 1585 and 1592 Shakespeare became involved in London's theater world.

In 1592 a bitter playwright, Robert Greene, published a deathbed confessional that includes an attack on other dramatists including Shakespeare, whom he calls "an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers." Greene then parodies a line from *Henry VI, Part III* and continues, Shakespeare "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." The *Johannes Factotum* (jack-of-all-trades) reference suggests that Shakespeare was acting as well as writing by 1592. We do not know the circumstances of Shakespeare's shift from Stratford to London, but he kept a residence there as well as in Stratford for the next twenty years.

Within a few years Shakespeare was among the players in the Lord Chamberlain's company. During the period of 1592–94, when the theaters were closed because of the high number of plague deaths, Shakespeare wrote two long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* (simply *Lucrece* on the title page), published with dedications to his patron, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and signed "William Shakespeare." These poems were much admired. When the theaters reopened, Shakespeare continued writing plays and acting. In 1598 Francis Meres writes, "the sweet, witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare: witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugared sonnets among his friends, etc." "His sugared sonnets" were not published until 1609, and then without permission. Meres goes on to list Shakespeare's plays: *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as *Love's Labours Won*—a lost play or alternative title. Meres concludes, "The Muses would speak with Shakespeare's fine-filed [polished] phrase if they would speak English."

During this period, Shakespeare and his fellow Lord Chamberlain's Men acted in England's first purpose-built theater, called simply the Theatre. The Theatre had been built in 1576 by James Burbage, father of two company members: the entrepreneurial Cuthbert and the chief tragedian Richard. James died in 1597, two months before the lease on the Theatre was to expire, and his heir Cuthbert was unable to negotiate an extension. On a freezing December night in 1598 the Burbages and a dozen other men made the bold move of dismantling the Theatre timber by timber and carrying the wood south across the Thames, where it was used to construct a new theater on the Bankside. To finance this enterprise the Burbages invited a handful of actors to contribute money and become shareholders. The new playhouse was called the Globe Theatre, and William Shakespeare held a ten percent share of the company and its new acting venue. The economic decision to cover the roof with thatch instead of tiles later proved to be unfortunate.

Records show that Shakespeare was taxed on a residence in London, and he also purchased land in and around Stratford. In 1596 the application for a coat of arms that Shakespeare had filed in his father's name was approved, and in the next year he moved his family to New Place, one of the largest houses in town. Now he could display his coat of arms on his door and call himself "gentleman." Yet amid these signs of success and prosperity, there was also personal loss. Shakespeare's son Hamnet died in August 1596, at the age of eleven.

During the last years of Queen Elizabeth I's life, Shakespeare was London's leading dramatist. Responding with patriotic pride to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and then with concern over questions of succession to the throne, playwrights provided audiences with a variety of English history plays. Early in his career, Shakespeare wrote a group of four plays looking at the reign of Lancastrian King Henry VI and the transfer of power to the Yorkist monarchs culminating with the treacherous King Richard III and his defeat by Henry Tudor, the founder of the Tudor dynasty. Shakespeare then wrote another tetralogy providing the earlier history with vivid accounts of the Wars of the Roses: *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part I* and *Part II*; and *Henry V*.

Although perhaps his greatest comic creation, Sir John Falstaff, took life in these history plays, Shakespeare also excelled in comedy, especially romantic and lyric plays suffused with illusion and witty battles between the sexes. To the plays listed by Meres we can add

The Taming of the Shrew, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare's father John died in 1601, an event that may have figured in the composition of the tragedy *Hamlet* at around that time. In March 1603 Queen Elizabeth I died, ending Gloriana's forty-five-year reign as England's Protestant monarch. Almost immediately King James VI of Scotland, estranged son of Mary, Queen of Scots, but himself nominally a Protestant, journeyed to England, where he was crowned King James I. James spoke with a thick Scots accent, had a shuffling walk and awkward appearance, and disliked crowds. Although intelligent, James showed little interest in state affairs unless with handsome young courtiers. Although the king preferred hunting to theater, he authorized the Lord Chamberlain's Men to become the King's Men, and Shakespeare and his fellow shareholders were named Grooms of the Royal Chamber.

Shakespeare responded by writing *Macbeth*, which incorporated James's strong interest in witches and the supernatural and the character of Banquo, from whom James traced his own regal lineage. This was also the period of the composition of the other great tragedies *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare's comedies became darker and more concerned with sexual intrigue, as in *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*.

Since 1576 a small indoor theater had operated on the grounds of a former Dominican monastery within the City of London. The black-robed monks gave the district and the theater its name: Blackfriars. James Burbage, the builder of the Theatre, was interested in this site for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and in 1596 he bought more property and built a larger indoor Blackfriars Theatre. But residents of the area, including the company's patron, petitioned the Privy Council to forbid the Lord Chamberlain's Men to play there. The theater was instead leased to a children's company, the "aerie of children, little eyasses" of which Hamlet complains. Finally, in the summer of 1609, the King's Men were able to lease Blackfriars.

Blackfriars was totally enclosed and artificially lighted. With two galleries, it could hold around six hundred spectators, while the Globe held closer to three thousand. All the Blackfriars patrons were seated; there were no groundlings such as those who paid a penny each to stand in front of the Globe stage. Indeed, the lowest admission to Blackfriars was sixpence. Naturally, Blackfriars attracted a more affluent, aristocratic, and

homogeneous audience than did the Globe, although Shakespeare's company performed plays in both venues.

The opening of Blackfriars, with its coterie audience, coincided with the growth of importance of the king's court and its attendant courtiers and ladies-in-waiting. James's queen consort, Anne of Denmark, was a lover of theater. She commissioned a series of extravagant entertainments—court masques—with allegorical stories written by Ben Jonson and other playwrights and with elaborate sets and costumes designed by Inigo Jones, whom she had met at the Danish court. Queen Anne and her circle performed these lavish spectacles. Public playwrights, Shakespeare included, began to add masquelike elements to their plays as well (such as Prospero's entertainment for Miranda and Ferdinand in *The Tempest*).

In the first decade of the seventeenth century, writers Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher introduced a new dramatic genre: tragicomedy. Tragicomedy is an amalgam rather than a mixture of comedy and tragedy. Characters undergo the suffering associated with tragedy, but forces in the universe keep humankind from making irreversible mistakes leading to tragic results. Thus everything is resolved at the end of such a play, and the focus is on forgiveness, reunion, regeneration, and renewal. Four of Shakespeare's last plays, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* are written in this genre, and each contains music and dance associated with the spectacle of the court masque.

Although Shakespeare was influential in developing the tragicomedy or romance, he may not have felt comfortable in the genre, as he recycled several plots and devices from his earlier tragedies. It is almost irresistible to see Shakespeare himself in the figure of Prospero taking off his magical robe and burying his magic book to return to the everyday world of his home. Shakespeare's revels were, indeed, almost ended.

The last record we have of Shakespeare the actor is of his performance in Jonson's unsuccessful tragedy *Sejanus* in 1603. By 1610, he appears to have traveled more often to Stratford, where he continued to make investments in property and goods. Shakespeare probably gave up his London lodgings by 1612, although he continued to receive his share of money generated by the King's Men.

Despite his presumed retirement to Stratford, Shakespeare bought a house in the Blackfriars district of London, but there is no indication that he ever lived there. It was probably another sound investment. In 1612 he

provided a deposition in a lawsuit between a master and a servant who married the master's daughter and now averred that his father-in-law had promised a dowry. Shakespeare had lived in the house where these events took place eight years earlier, but he was unable to remember the specifics. This deposition provides some details about his time in London. In 1613 Shakespeare probably attended the Globe Theatre for the opening of his final history play, *Henry VIII*, or *All Is True*, written with John Fletcher, but he was back in Stratford on June 29 when a cannon fired during a performance of that play accidentally ignited the theater's thatched roof, and the Globe burned to the ground. (It was rebuilt the next year with a tile roof).

On March 25, 1616, Shakespeare was concerned enough about his health to call his lawyer to make final provisions in his last will and testament. He included bequests to his daughters, to his sister Joan and her children, to the poor of Stratford, and to various neighbors and fellow actors. Strangely, he added a provision leaving his "second best bed" to his wife, Anne. Anne would naturally inherit a third of his estate, but whether this last-minute addition was an insult or an inside joke eludes us. The signatures on the will are shaky; a month later, William Shakespeare died of unknown causes. It was April 23, 1616, his fifty-second birthday. As Ben Jonson declared, "He was not of an age but for all time."

Barry Gaines

For Further Study

- Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. One of our finest critics looks at the authorship question and the nature of Shakespeare's brilliance.
- Chambers, E. K. *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930. Older but highly respected compendium of information about Shakespeare.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. A bold new historical approach to Shakespeare's life and composition.
- Schoenbaum, S. *Shakespeare's Lives*. 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. A scholarly and witty examination of Shakespeare biography.
- _____. *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. The culmination of Schoenbaum's extensive study of Shakespeare biography.
- _____. *William Shakespeare: Records and Images*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981. A vivid presentation of the surviv-

ing documents related to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 1997. Perhaps the best single-volume collection of Shakespeare's works.

Shapiro, James. *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010. Thoroughly reviews the candidates and arguments presented regarding the supposed writer of Shakespeare's plays, and refutes them with evidence that Shakespeare wrote the works.

_____. 1599: *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. London: Faber & Faber, 2005. A delightful account of the pivotal year in Shakespeare's life.

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