

Introduction to Shakespeare

Meet William Shakespeare



Chandos Portrait of William Shakespeare (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Who was William Shakespeare? Sadly, we know very little about the man considered one of the best English dramatists ever to have lived, which is all the more astonishing given the fame and fortune he achieved. In this section, we bring him to life by piecing together what we do know about his life and achievements.

By 1600, the man Voltaire described as ‘a drunken savage, with some imagination’ was enjoying the height of his fame and success. He had hit the big time a few years earlier — as part of the hip group of actors, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men — and made enough money to buy the second biggest house in his home town, but now he was also co-owner of the rowdy, successful Globe Theatre, which was attracting huge audiences of over 1 500 paying customers to each performance.

Shakespeare was working hard for his success, though; in addition to acting and directing performances, running the business side of the theatre, commuting between his work in London and his family in the country, he was churning out a brand new play every few months.

Not bad for a high school dropout from a small obscure town who married a scandalously older woman whom he had made pregnant as a penniless, lusty 18-year-old.

Shakespeare seems to have been hungry for success. Around the time of his 21st birthday, he left his wife and three children with his parents and headed to London to seek his fortune.

The movies of their time, plays were rapidly growing in popularity and the theatre was a booming industry — the Hollywood of its day. Whether it was his intention when he left home or not, it’s perhaps not surprising that a young man like Shakespeare should be attracted to such an exciting, vibrant new industry — where fame could be won and vast amounts of money could be made.

It’s likely he spent his first few years in the industry learning his craft by acting and writing for several companies of actors, including Lord Strange’s Men and the Queen’s Men. It didn’t take him long to make his mark, though, and he penned the first of his plays — *Henry VI, Part One* — a couple of years later around 1589, when he was in his mid-twenties.

The play was met with huge acclaim and was the start of a prolific writing career that produced an incredible 37 plays and 154 sonnets before his death in 1616.

While the mystery of Shakespeare’s genius is something we will probably never solve, it seems likely that he must have been writing poems and stories from a young age. It’s slightly improbable to think he could suddenly write something as accomplished and insightful as the three *Henry VI* plays in his early twenties without years of practice beforehand.



WHY DO WE CALL HIM ‘THE BARD’?

Bard is a mediaeval Gaelic/British term for a professional poet. Shakespeare is often called ‘The Bard’ in recognition of his stature and (unofficial) standing as the greatest poet of England.



SAY WHAT?

You may not realise it, but you probably use words and phrases invented by Shakespeare every day as he made up more than 1 500 English words and countless phrases. Feel you 'wear your heart on your sleeve'? Want to 'break the ice' with someone you've just met? Feeling a little 'faint-hearted' or 'heartsick'? Talking about 'your own flesh and blood'? Think it's a 'foregone conclusion'? Well, you have Shakespeare to thank for that.

THINGS WE SAY TODAY WHICH WE OWE TO SHAKESPEARE

- "KNOCK KNOCK! WHO'S THERE?"
- "SET YOUR TEETH ON EDGE"
- "HEART OF GOLD"
- "FAINT HEARTED"
- "SO-SO"
- "GOOD RIDDANCE"
- "FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE"
- "SEEN BETTER DAYS"
- "TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING"
- "SEND HIM PACKING"
- "WEAR YOUR HEART ON YOUR SLEEVE"
- "NOT SLEEP ONE WINK"
- "COME WHAT MAY"
- "THE GAME IS UP"
- "FOR GODNESS' SAKE"
- "BATED BREATH"
- "WHAT'S DONE IS DONE"
- "FULL CIRCLE"
- "GREEN EYED MONSTER"
- "VANISH INTO THIN AIR"
- "BE ALL/END ALL"
- "IN A PICKLE"
- "OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH"
- "DEAD AS A DOORNAIL"
- "BRAVE MAKES YOUR HAIR CURL"
- "FAIR/FOUL"
- "NEW WORLD"
- "STAND ON END"
- "NAKED TRUTH"
- "PLAY/PLAY"
- "THE WORLD IS"
- "WILD GOOSE CHASE"
- "BREAK THE ICE"
- "BREADED MY OYSTER"
- "OFF WITH HIS HEAD"
- "LIE HIS LAST"
- "LOW"
- "LOVE IS BLIND"
- "HEART OF HEARTS"
- "A SORRY SIGHT"
- "A PIECE OF WORK"
- "LAUGHING STOCK"

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The early years

Despite being one of the most popular and widely read English language authors ever to have lived, Shakespeare remains a man shrouded in mystery. He achieved tremendous fame and fortune, frequently performed for both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, and yet we know very little about him and his life.

We don't know his date of birth, only that he was baptised at the Holy Trinity Church in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 April 1564. As baptisms usually took place a couple of days after a birth, many people like to celebrate his birthday on 23 April, which is also the day on which he died in 1616.

His parents were financially comfortable and lived in a wealthy part of town. His father, John, was a glove-maker and prominent local businessman who performed several public offices, including becoming the town's bailiff (mayor). His mother, Mary, came from an affluent family of landowners.



Portrait of Benjamin Jonson, a rival and friend of Shakespeare's. Although he mocked and scoffed at his friend's work, Jonson praised Shakespeare when he died, observing that he was 'not of an age, but for all time'. (National Portrait Gallery, London)

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- SHAKESPEAREAN LANGUAGE
- BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY
- SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES
- THE MINI ESSAY
- THE PLAY
- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's likely that young William Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, but he might not have been the most devoted student. His good friend and fellow playwright, Ben Jonson, clearly wasn't overly impressed with his schooling as he said that he had 'small Latin and less Greek'.

When he was 14, Shakespeare had to drop out of school and help his father support the family as John had somehow fallen out of favour and into financial difficulties.

We don't know when Shakespeare decided he wanted to be an actor, but it could have been at a young age as the local school put on a classical play at the end of each term and travelling troupes of actors would have visited Stratford-upon-Avon regularly.

Shakespeare in love

On 27 November 1582, Shakespeare hastily married Anne Hathaway, a local woman eight years his senior. She was 26 at the time and would have been considered an 'old maid', past her prime. Anne was three months pregnant on her wedding day and it would have been difficult times for the newlyweds because William was a penniless teenager and his family had fallen on hard times. Some scholars suggest that Shakespeare may have had affairs, but there is no reliable evidence of these and he remained married to Anne until the day he died, 34 years later.

IS SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE A TRUE STORY?

No. It is a work of plausible fiction. There is no historical record of such a love affair ever having taken place. If it happened while he was writing *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595, it's not likely he was short of cash, either, having already written nine plays and being just about to buy one of the largest properties in Stratford-upon-Avon.

FROM STAGE TO SCREEN:

Think Shakespeare's plays are only found on dusty shelves in old libraries? His work has been the basis for many aspects of popular culture. If you've watched films like *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She's the Man*, *Romeo Must Die* and *O*, you've seen stories originally created by The Bard himself.



Portrait of Anne Hathaway, taken from *Shakespeare A Documentary Life*, written by Nathaniel Curzon, 1708

Trials and tribulations

Inadvertently, we know that Shakespeare was an established, successful playwright by 1592 because a rival, Robert Greene, jealously attacked him in one of his pamphlets, calling him an 'upstart crow'. It wasn't all plain sailing for the talented Shakespeare, however; an outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1592 led to the closing of the theatres for two years and this meant that the actors had to take on far less profitable and more gruelling tours around the country to earn money.

Shakespeare would have been terrified of the bubonic plague. Most Elizabethans lived in fear of the illness also known as 'the Black Death'. It was a horrible way to die (see p.16) and Shakespeare had lost brothers and sisters, as well as close friends and fellow actors, to the disease. It broke out again in 1603, killing over 33 000 people in London alone, and, yet once more, in 1608.

His only son, Hamnet, died at the age of 11 in 1596 and the Globe Theatre burnt down in 1613. A cannon was fired to mark the entrance of the king on stage during a performance of his latest play, *Henry VIII*, and a stray spark set the thatched roof alight (see p.23). This would have been even more of a serious financial setback as insurance didn't exist in those days.

Shakespeare would also have had to put up with regular copyright theft as there were no laws recognising or protecting an artist's rights. Rival theatre companies would send their members to watch popular plays and secretly take notes, producing unauthorised copies and performances of them as quickly as possible.



CONSPIRACY THEORY:

For sheer longevity, no conspiracy theory can match the belief that Shakespeare did not write the plays that have been attributed to him. The usual arguments are that his education and social standing weren't good enough to have produced such extraordinary literary works. Almost every prominent Elizabethan has been suggested, at one time or another, as the real author of his plays.

The life of the playwright

The public's insatiable appetite for plays meant there was constant demand for new material. As if finding creative inspiration wasn't hard enough, the physical act of writing was slow and laborious as well. Playwrights had only quill and ink, and weak candlelight at night. Working alone, they would be hard pushed to produce more than two plays a year. As a result, most playwrights worked in teams of up to five writers. Solo artists, like Shakespeare, were the exception.

The new theatre industry needed a new breed of playwright and the majority of them wouldn't fit our modern image of poets and intellectuals. Like Shakespeare, most were self-made men from modest backgrounds. (There were no professional female dramatists because few women were educated or allowed to enter such professions in those days (see p.16).)

One of William's best friends and a successful and famous dramatist in his own right, Ben Jonson was a rowdy ex-soldier who killed a fellow actor in a duel and was notoriously thrown out of the royal court in 1603 for 'unruly behaviour'.

Another of Shakespeare's highly successful contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe, was a flamboyant celebrity who had been a spy before he started writing and was killed in an apparent tavern brawl – although some suggest he was assassinated by government agents for his publicly professed atheism and for publishing a pamphlet pointing out inconsistencies in the Bible.



THE SPURS CONNECTION:

Formed in 1882, London football club Tottenham was originally named after Harry Hotspur, a character in *Henry IV*.



SIX TIMES A DAY:

Macbeth is thought to be one of the most produced plays of all time, with a performance beginning somewhere in the world every four hours.

All's well that ends well

In 1605, Shakespeare made another astute property investment in his home town, which doubled in value and earned him a significant annual income. A few years later, his career started drawing to a close. His final solo play, *The Tempest*, was produced in 1611 and, sometime shortly afterwards, he ceased to be a writer for his company. He retired from the theatre and returned to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he enjoyed the last few years of his life as a well-off country gentleman and one of the leading figures of the town.

William died around the time of his fifty-second birthday, on 23 April 1616. We don't know the exact cause of his death, but we know that in the days leading up to it he suffered from a fever. It is comforting to know that he spent the last week or so of his life socialising and celebrating with his good friends Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton (some argue perhaps a little too hard).

In an elegant and neat dénouement of which the great writer himself may have approved, his journey ended where it began, at the Holy Trinity Church in the small town of Stratford-upon-Avon, where he lies buried within the chancel rail.



THE CURSE:

In his epitaph, Shakespeare put a curse on anyone daring to move his body from its final resting place. Even though it was customary to dig up the bones from previous graves to make room for others, Shakespeare's remains are still undisturbed.



WAS SHAKESPEARE ON DRUGS?

South African scientists have analysed fragments of seventeenth century pipes found on the floor of Shakespeare's home and found traces of cannabis, cocaine and hallucinogenic nutmeg extracts high in myristic acid. If he did use any drugs, he wasn't the only literary genius to do so.

Timeline

Please note that this timeline is offered only as a rough guide as the dates of many of the events are only approximate and speculative.

- **1564** born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England (birthday assumed to be 23 April)
- **1582** marries Anne Hathaway on 27 November (aged 18)
- **1583** first child, Susanna, is born
- **1585** twins, Judith and Hamnet, are born
- **1587-88** heads to London (aged 22) and starts his theatrical career
- **1589-92** establishes his career and begins to make a name for himself; writes *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Titus Andronicus*
- **1593** writes *Venus and Adonis*, and begins writing the *Sonnets*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*

- **1594** founding member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (an acting company)
- **1596-97** Hamnet dies; purchases New Place, a large house in Stratford-upon-Avon, and writes *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet*
- **1598-99** writes *As You Like It*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Much Ado About Nothing*
- **1599** Globe Theatre is built (Shakespeare is a shareholder); writes *Troilus & Cressida* and *Twelfth Night*
- **1601** Shakespeare's father dies; writes *Hamlet*
- **1602** writes *All's Well That Ends Well*
- **1603** The Lord Chamberlain's Men become The King's Men and perform regularly at court
- **1604** writes *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*
- **1606** writes *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*
- **1608** Shakespeare's mother dies; The King's Men begin performing at the Blackfriars Theatre; writes *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*
- **1609** the *Sonnets* are published
- **1609-1611** writes *Cymbeline*, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*
- **1612** retires from the theatre (aged 48) and returns to live in Stratford-upon-Avon
- **1612-1616** works on new plays with his friend, John Fletcher. They write *Cardenio*, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*
- **1616** dies on 23 April