

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

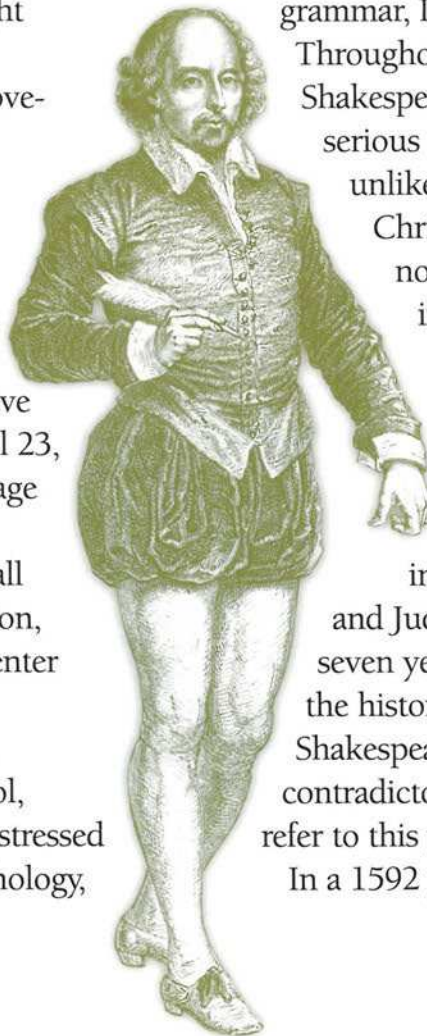
Within the class system of Elizabethan England, William Shakespeare did not seem destined for greatness. He was not born into a family of nobility or significant wealth. He did not continue his formal education at university, nor did he come under the mentorship of a senior artist, nor did he marry into wealth or prestige. His talent as an actor seems to have been modest, since he is not known for starring roles. His success as a playwright depended in part upon royal patronage. Yet in spite of these limitations, Shakespeare is now the most performed and read playwright in the world.

Born to John Shakespeare, a glove-maker and tradesman, and Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent farmer, William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon. At that time, infants were baptized three days after their birth, thus scholars believe that Shakespeare was born on April 23, the same day on which he died at age 52. As the third of eight children, young William grew up in this small town 100 miles northwest of London, far from the cultural and courtly center of England.

Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, King's New School, where the curriculum would have stressed a classical education of Greek mythology,



An 1834 exterior view of Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon.



Roman comedy, ancient history, rhetoric, grammar, Latin, and possibly Greek.

Throughout his childhood, Shakespeare's father struggled with serious financial debt. Therefore,

unlike his fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe, he did not attend university. Rather, in 1582 at age 18, he

married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior and three months pregnant. Their first child, Susanna, was born

in 1583, and twins, Hamnet

and Judith, came in 1585. In the seven years following their birth, the historical record concerning

Shakespeare is incomplete, contradictory, and unreliable; scholars refer to this period as his "lost years."

In a 1592 pamphlet by Robert

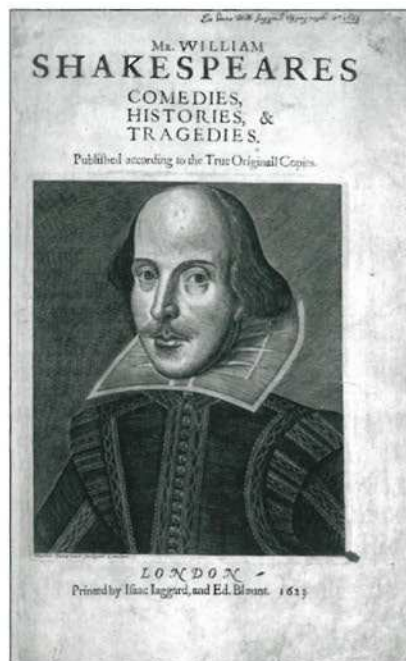
Greene, Shakespeare reappears as an “upstart crow” flapping his poetic wings in London. Evidently, it did not take him long to land on the stage. Between 1590 and 1592, Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* series, *Richard III*, and *The Comedy of Errors* were performed. When the theaters were closed in 1593 because of the plague, the playwright wrote two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and probably began writing his richly textured sonnets. One hundred and fifty-four of his sonnets have survived, ensuring his reputation as a gifted poet. By 1594, he had also written *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

Having established himself as an actor and playwright, in 1594 Shakespeare became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, one of the most popular acting companies in London. He remained a member of this company for the rest of his career, often playing before the court of Queen Elizabeth I. Shakespeare entered one of his most prolific periods around 1595, writing *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. With his newfound success, Shakespeare purchased the second largest home in Stratford in 1597, though he continued to live in London. Two years later, he joined others from the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in

establishing the polygonal Globe Theatre on the outskirts of London. When King James came to the throne in 1603, he issued a royal license to Shakespeare and his fellow players, organizing them as the King’s Men. During King James’ reign, Shakespeare wrote many of his most accomplished plays about courtly power, including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 1609 or 1611, Shakespeare’s sonnets were published, though he did not live to see the *First Folio* of his plays published in 1623.

In 1616, with his health declining, Shakespeare revised his will. Since his only son Hamnet had died in 1596, Shakespeare left the bulk of his estate to his two daughters, with monetary gifts set aside for his sister, theater partners, friends, and the poor of Stratford. A fascinating detail of his will is that he bequeathed the family’s “second best bed” to his wife Anne. He died one month later, on April 23, 1616. To the world, he left a lasting legacy in the form of 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and two narrative poems.

When William Shakespeare died in his birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon, he was recognized as one of the greatest English playwrights of his era. In the four centuries since, he has come to be seen as not only a great English playwright, but the greatest playwright in the English language. Reflecting upon the achievement of his peer and sometimes rival, Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare, “He was not of an age, but for all time.”



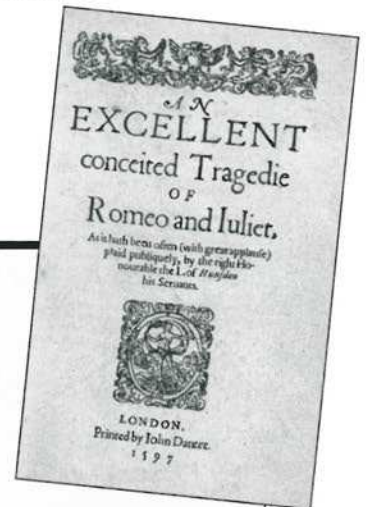
First Folio, 1623.

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

During his lifetime, many of Shakespeare's 38 plays were published in what are known as Quarto editions, often without the playwright's permission. Many were flawed versions, including or deleting entire passages. The first collected edition of his plays, the *First Folio*, was published after his death by two members of his acting company, John Heminges and Henry Condell. Since then the works of Shakespeare have been studied, translated, and enjoyed the world over as masterpieces of the English language.

Establishing the chronology of Shakespeare's plays is a difficult task.

It is impossible to know the exact order of succession because there is no record of the first production date of any of his works. Although dating is conjectural, scholars have decided upon a specific play chronology based upon the following sources of information: 1) historical events and allusions to those events in the plays; 2) the records of performances of the plays — taken from such places as the diaries of contemporaries; 3) the publication dates of sources; and 4) the dates that the plays appear in print (the production of a play immediately followed its composition).



Iambic Pentameter

Shakespeare composed much of his plays in the form of poetry, often in a meter called iambic pentameter. Even today, iambic pentameter is the most common meter used in English-language poetry. A regular line of the meter contains roughly ten syllables, with heavier stresses falling on every other syllable. An *iamb* is a metrical unit, or a "foot" of meter, made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable ("alive," "forget," "a dog"). Pentameter refers to the number of iambs in the line (*penta* is the Greek word for five, as in a pentagon). So there are five iambs in a line of iambic pentameter. *Blank verse* is unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Here are two examples from *Romeo and Juliet*. ('-' means unstressed and '/' means stressed)

- / - / - / - / - /

My grave is like to be my wedding bed.

- / - / - / - / - /

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

Approximate Chronology of Shakespeare's Plays

FIRST PERFORMED	PLAYS	FIRST PRINTED
1590-91	Henry VI, Part II	1594?
1590-91	Henry VI, Part III	1594?
1591-92	Henry VI, Part I	1623
1592-93	Richard III	1597
1592-93	The Comedy of Errors	1623
1593-94	Titus Andronicus	1594
1593-94	The Taming of the Shrew	1623
1594-95	The Two Gentlemen of Verona	1623
1594-95	Love's Labour's Lost	1598?
1594-95	Romeo and Juliet	1597
1595-96	Richard II	1597
1595-96	A Midsummer Night's Dream	1600
1596-97	King John	1623
1596-97	The Merchant of Venice	1600
1597-98	Henry IV, Part I	1598
1597-98	Henry IV, Part II	1600
1598-99	Much Ado About Nothing	1600
1598-99	Henry V	1600
1599-1600	Julius Caesar	1623
1599-1600	As You Like It	1623
1599-1600	Twelfth Night	1623
1600-01	Hamlet	1603
1600-01	The Merry Wives of Windsor	1602
1601-02	Troilus and Cressida	1609
1602-03	All's Well That Ends Well	1623
1604-05	Measure for Measure	1623
1604-05	Othello	1622
1605-06	King Lear	1608
1605-06	Macbeth	1623
1606-07	Antony and Cleopatra	1623
1607-08	Coriolanus	1623
1607-08	Timon of Athens	1623
1608-09	Pericles	1609
1609-10	Cymbeline	1623
1610-11	The Winter's Tale	1623
1611-12	The Tempest	1623
1612-13	Henry VIII	1623
1612-13	The Two Noble Kinsmen*	1634

**The Two Noble Kinsmen* is listed as one of Shakespeare's plays because most scholars believe it to be a collaborative work of Shakespeare and John Fletcher, who was a prominent actor and Shakespeare's close friend. Fletcher succeeded Shakespeare as the foremost dramatist for the King's Men.