

William Shakespeare

Europe, 1450 to 1789, 2004

- **Born:** April 23, 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England
- **Died:** April 23, 1616 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England
- **Nationality:** English
- **Occupation:** Playwright

William Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM (1564–1616), English playwright, poet, and actor. Shakespeare is universally recognized as the foremost writer in the English language to date. The thirty-seven plays associated with his name, including the major tragedies Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth, and his romances and comedies, Twelfth Night and A Midsummer Night's Dream among them, have been translated into many languages and have crossed all kinds of cultural divide. His poetry, in particular his intricately woven and fiercely passionate love sonnets, have stirred the senses of reader and critic alike for generations past and will do so for generations to come.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England, and he was probably educated in the 1570s at the free grammar school there known as the King's New School. His father, John Shakespeare, has been described as a glover or whittawer, which means someone who works with animal skins. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, was from a noted local family, the daughter of Robert Arden, John Shakespeare's landlord. At some point, perhaps in 1568 when his father was high bailiff (mayor) of the town and responsible for Stratford's entertainment, Shakespeare must have first seen actors perform as traveling players visiting on tour.

In about 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a rich yeoman's daughter. The marriage was undertaken during a notable downturn in the affairs of Shakespeare's father. Having been a respected and confident town official during Shakespeare's earliest years—initiating an application for gentry status in 1576, for example—during 1586 John Shakespeare's alderman status was withdrawn. Although controversy surrounds the possible reasons for Shakespeare's marriage to a woman who was eight years his senior, three children were produced from the marriage. Susanna was the first-born in 1583 with a pair of twins produced in 1585—a son, Hamnet, who died in childhood, and a daughter, Judith.

LONDON ACTOR, PLAYWRIGHT, AND POET

Whether Shakespeare had to leave Stratford for some reason, or whether he joined a visiting touring company such as the Queen's Men, we first hear of him as a London playhouse personality seven years after the birth of the twins. This is when he is mentioned in a pamphlet called *A Groat's Worth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592) written by a writer and playwright named Robert Greene. This text was written while the writer knew that he was dying,

and in it he urged his fellow well-educated peers, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, and George Peele, to forsake the stage. "For there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers," Greene wrote, "that with his 'Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide' supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you, and [. . .] is in his own conceit the only Shakescene in a country." We know this allusion is directed toward Shakespeare, not only because of the play on his name and profession as a "Shake-scene," but also because of the misquotation from one of his Henry VI plays: "O Tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide!" (Part III, act 1, scene 4, line 138).

By this time, scholars believe that the player Shakespeare had not only embarked on his English history cycle with the three Henry VI plays, but had also presented the highly successful if violent Titus Andronicus as well. In this play a woman is raped, has both her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and a queen unknowingly eats her own children, baked in a pie. However, in a matter of a few years Shakespeare was also provably capable of writing the extraordinarily poised and tragic Romeo and Juliet. Here two young lovers, divided by their families' antagonism to one another, meet, marry, and die while speaking the most beautiful words of love written for the English stage.

By 1595, Shakespeare, as a sharer member of the acting company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was entitled to a portion of the company's takings. This status was acquired through his investment in things for the company like costumes, playbooks, and props. However, there is some evidence to show that Shakespeare wanted to be perceived more as a serious poet than as either an actor or a playwright. In 1593 and 1594 he published his two narrative poems, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, both dedicated to his supposed patron Henry Wrothesley, 3rd earl of Southampton. This period also marks the time when it is believed he had begun his 154 sonnets, published as a collection in 1609, with Southampton a candidate for the "Fair Youth" to whom the first 126 possibly allude. The fourteen-line sonnet, quietly evolving in form since its first emergence in fourteenth-century Italy, had reached England through poet-courtiers such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and the earl of Surrey earlier in the sixteenth century. In the hands of Shakespeare, many sonnet conventions were challenged, questioning the poetic expectation of comparing one's lover to nature, for example. "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" is the bold opening of Number 130, for example. Thus Shakespeare chose to use the sonnet to engage, not only with the passions and intellect of the person to whom the sonnet is addressed, but even with poetry itself. It is interesting that Greene chose to mark out Shakespeare's verse as his primary objection to him as an "upstart." Shakespeare indeed wrote much of his drama in blank verse, the flexible iambic pentameter form of unrhymed poetry, again used by Henry Howard, the earl of Surrey, and taken on by dramatists such as Christopher Marlowe. However, Shakespeare's energy when approaching his plays did not hold back on inventiveness and variety. The blank verse form reached its apotheosis with Shakespeare, but a few of his early plays contain sonnet moments too. The Prologue to Romeo and Juliet, given by the Chorus, is a sonnet, and later in this lovers' play, one is interwoven through the dialogue when the protagonists first speak together (act 1, scene 5, lines 90–113).

By the turn of the seventeenth century, the Lord Chamberlain's Men had rebuilt their Shoreditch amphitheater (called the "Theater") as the Globe on London's Bankside (the south bank of the Thames). They were now the most well established of the city's playing companies. By this time

Shakespeare had begun to write his heavyweight tragedies for them, beginning with *Hamlet* published in 1603. If *Titus Andronicus* was violent, and *Romeo and Juliet* tragically romantic, *Hamlet* was Shakespeare's play concerned with the human mind. The eponymous prince of Denmark, whose father's ghost tells him how he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, sets out on a course of revenge, while at the same time, as the philosopher prince studying at Wittenburg University, he questions life and death and any decision involving them. Shakespeare is creative with the revenge tragedy form, using the vengeful mindset of the main character to explore highly philosophical questions. 'What a piece of work is man!' (act 2, scene 2, lines 293–300) and 'To be, or not to be, that is the question' (act 3, scene 1, lines 58–90) are two lines from speeches of profound mental depth. *Hamlet* is the most widely quoted and most investigated of Shakespeare's plays, attracting a phenomenal amount of scholarly study, just as much because of the questions it poses as because of the answers it fails to give.

THE JACOBEAN SHAKESPEARE

In 1603, after the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of James I, the company were renamed the King's Men, acquiring royal patronage status. In 1608 they also acquired a new, small, more select playhouse known as the Blackfriars that was to be used alongside the Globe, the public playhouse. Shares in this venture, which company members were given, were very lucrative acquisitions for the actors—including Shakespeare. This period marked the writing of plays such as *Othello*, first performed 1603–1604 and published in the 1620s, *King Lear* of 1606, published in 1608, and *Macbeth*, again c. 1606 but first published in the collected First Folio of Shakespeare's works of 1623. The plot lines and characters of these tragedies continued to demonstrate the extraordinary range of Shakespeare's mind as he dealt with, for example, jealousy and deception in *Othello*; madness, mercy, and true filial love in *King Lear*; and the dangers of encouraged ambition in *Macbeth*. In about 1613, however, at the peak of his writing powers, Shakespeare was to give up his career on London's stage.

SHAKESPEARE THE STRATFORD MAN

By 1616, Shakespeare had returned to Stratford and the substantial home called New Place that he had bought for his family. It was there that he was to die in 1616 of a fever, reputedly after a rowdy visit from his friend and colleague Ben Jonson. He died where he began, therefore, not in London where he made his name, but in the Stratford of his birth. Back in 1596, gentry status had finally been achieved for his family, and the payee for this was likely to have been William. He died, therefore, not only rich, but respected and esteemed in his community, to become later in the minds of many the man most associated with the finest use of poetic English.

In the historical context of his day-to-day existence as an actor and a companyman, Shakespeare's significant output as a dramatic writer can be interpreted as simple good business sense that resulted in his family's bettered status at home. By writing good plays he drew audiences to playhouses in which he had financial interests. Shakespeare's plays did not, in fact, belong to him, but were the property of his company. Despite evidence that Shakespeare was involved in the printing of his poetry, there is no proof of authorial concern with the printed publication of his plays. His dramas were only collected as serious "works" seven years after his death in 1623 for what we now know as Shakespeare's "First Folio," put together by his fellow

actors. A man of extraordinary talent, however, at a time when there were no rulebooks for the English language or its lexicon, his contribution to what we now perceive as beauty through dramatic story and words is inestimable.

EVA GRIFFITH

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