

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616): A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

1. Any biographer of Shakespeare has two sources of information to draw upon: documents and traditions.
2. Traditions are often unreliable, but from the documents available scholars have determined the following about William Shakespeare's life.
3. John Shakespeare, William's father, migrated to Stratford in the middle of the sixteenth century and became a glover, a craft in which hides of deer, horses, goats, sheep, and hounds are prepared and then turned into gloves and other leather goods.
4. At some time between November 1556 and September 1558, John Shakespeare married Mary Arden, the daughter of a prosperous farmer.
5. William, their third child, was christened on April 26, 1564, his birthday traditionally being celebrated on April 23, the feast day of St. George, England's patron saint: infants were often baptized three days after they were born.
6. John was a prominent citizen of Stratford, at one time holding the highest elected office in the town; however, he seems to have fallen upon hard times in 1576 when he stopped attending city council meetings.
7. William probably was educated at the petty school and the Lower and Upper Grammar Schools at Stratford and was also probably withdrawn from school in the late 1570s when his father's fortunes began to decline. Most young boys in this situation would normally become apprentices in some local trade. Although we have no documentary evidence, there is a strong possibility that Shakespeare worked at his father's trade during these years.
8. On November 28, 1582, young William married Anne Hathaway, an heiress, seven or eight years older than he, and pregnant at the time of their marriage – this detail is probably explained by their having a troth-plight, a legal marriage contract, a kind of civil marriage before the church ceremony. [In Elizabethan England, there were two kinds of legal engagements. A *de futuro* spousal signified merely an agreement to marry at some time in the future, while a *de praesenti* spousal created the status of virtual matrimony at the moment. Marriage contracts are prominent in a number of Shakespeare's plays – *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Measure for Measure* to name a few; in fact, in *Romeo and Juliet*, after Lord Capulet gives his approval for the wedding between Paris and Juliet, both he and Paris refer to Juliet as Paris's wife.]
9. William and Anne's first child, Susanna, was baptized on May 26, 1583; two years later Anne gave birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith. [The two daughters survived their father, but Hamnet died in 1596.] From the birth of the twins until 1592, nothing is known of William Shakespeare.
10. However, by the summer of 1592, he had established himself in London as a playwright who was so talented that he was singled out for criticism by the notorious profligate Robert Greene in his *Groatsworth of Wit*.
11. By 1595, Shakespeare was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a dramatic company that upon the accession of James I to his Aunt Elizabeth's throne in 1603 was renamed the King's Men and came under the patronage of King James himself.
12. During his years in London, Shakespeare was a regular visitor to Stratford, enriching himself by real estate transactions in his home town, but he lived for most of dramatic career in London near the theatres until his retirement in about 1610 when he moved back to the country.
13. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, at the relatively young age of 52.
14. He was laid to rest in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, Stratford, near the north wall, under an epitaph he is reported to have written himself:

Good Friends for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blessed be the man that spares these stones
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

15. In his will, Shakespeare, in addition to leaving his wife Anne their second-best bed and furniture, left the bulk of his estate to his eldest daughter Susanna and her husband Dr. John Hall with bequeaths to his daughter Judith, his sister Joan, his granddaughter Elizabeth, and remembrances to many of his friends, including John Heminge and Henry Condell who in 1623 published Shakespeare's complete plays in an edition known as the First Folio.

Shakespeare's Works

Shakespeare's Early Period (before 1595)

- *The Comedy of Errors (Err.)*, based on a Latin comedy by Plautus
- *Titus Andronicus (Tit.)*, a revenge play inspired by Kyd's Spanish Tragedy with elements from Seneca
- *Love's Labors Lost (LLL)*, comedy indebted to John Lily
- *The Henry VI (H6) plays*, *King John (Jn.)*, and *Richard III (R3)*, virtually inaugurated genre known as the history play
- *Two Gentlemen from Verona (TGV)* and *The Taming of the Shrew (Shr.)*, comedies from Italianate romantic comedy
- *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, long narrative poems

Period of Great Histories and Festive Comedies

- *Midsummer Night's Dream (MND)*, *Merchant of Venice (MV)*, *Much Ado About Nothing (Ado)*, *As You Like It (AYL)*, *Twelfth Night (TN)*
- *Richard II (R2)*, *Henry IV (H4) 1 and 2*, *Henry V (H5)*
- Shakespeare wrote virtually no tragedies during the first half of his career, except *Titus Andronicus (Tit.)* and *Romeo and Juliet (Rom.)*

Period of the "Great" Tragedies

- Problem Plays: *All's Well That Ends Well (AWW)*, *Measure for Measure (MM)*, and *Troilus and Cressida (Tro.)*
- The So-Called "Great Tragedies": *Hamlet (Ham.)*, *Othello (Oth.)*, *King Lear (Lr.)*, *Macbeth (Mac.)*
- Roman or Classical Tragedies: *Julius Caesar (JC)*, *Timon of Athens (Tim.)*, *Antony and Cleopatra (Ant.)*, *Coriolanus (Cor.)*

Period of the Late Romances or Tragi-Comedies

- *Pericles (Per.)*, *Cymbeline (Cym.)*, *Winter's Tale (WT)*, *The Tempest (Tmp.)*

and

- *Henry VIII (H8)* and *Two Noble Kinsmen (TNK)*, both with Fletcher)